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## 2

## PERCEPTION, SELF, AND COMMUNICATION

**WHAT YOU'LL LEARN****After studying this chapter, you will be able to:**

1. Identify the ways in which we select information from the environment to form perceptions.
2. Describe how we select, organize, and interpret information to make sense of the world.
3. Describe the influence of perception on interactions.
4. Explain the nature of the self and its relationship to communication.

The first woman of color was elected into office as the vice president of the United States of America on January 20, 2021. Kamala Harris graduated from Howard University and the University of California, Hastings College of Law, eventually becoming the highest-ranking female official in U.S. history. Describing herself as “I am who I am,” Harris is the daughter of Indian and Jamaican immigrants. Harris’s inauguration was a historic moment as women of color were represented in the presidential office for the first time.

Dr. Manisha Sinha, an American history professor at the University of Connecticut, told NPR that “it sends a message about what kind of country we are today. An interracial democracy that represents people, men and women, from all over the globe. I think that’s a very good thing for American democracy. And for me personally, it gives me a sense of national belonging that may not have been there before to some extent” (Summers, 2020). That is, Kamala Harris as the vice president of the United States allows U.S. Americans of color to find greater representation in mass media and the political realm, highlighting the diversity of humanity.



Each person has a unique sense of self and outlook on the world.

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Our daily lives are filled with opportunities for communication and social interaction. Whether our interactions are face to face or mediated by technology, they are guided by our impressions of others, our interpretations of the situation, and our understandings of who we are and how we fit in. All of these perceptions powerfully impact how we communicate. At the same time, communication powerfully impacts our perceptions. In this chapter, we focus on the roles perception and selfhood play in the process of communication.

“Who are you?” and “How do you see things?” are two of the most important questions a person can be asked. We all bring a unique self and a unique set of perceptions to our social interactions. The good news is that each of us has something special and distinctive to offer when we engage in communication. The downside is that our differences in identity and perspective can sometimes be a source of frustration and communication difficulty. In this chapter, we begin by discussing perception and the role it plays in communication. We focus on how people form perceptions, factors that influence perception, and the reasons why perceptions often differ from one person to the next. Then we examine the role of the self in the communication process. We focus on the nature of the self-concept, the development of the self, and the relational self.

## PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION

Recall from Chapter 1 that communication is *the collaborative process of using messages to create and participate in social reality*. Using messages to play a part in social reality requires that we first observe and make sense of the world around us. The process of being aware of and understanding the world is **perception**. Perception plays an important role in communication. Our perceptions help form, challenge, and reinforce our ideas, values, and beliefs, which then influence how we choose to interact with others. Whether our interactions are at our places of work, in our homes, on the road, or online, we encounter a massive amount of stimuli, or bits of sensory information from the environment, that we must select, organize, interpret, and remember. We use a range of techniques to quickly gain understandings of people, interactions, and contexts. Because we rely on mental shortcuts, **perceptual bias** involving incomplete or inaccurate impressions is common.

*Sam is a junior in college living in a studio apartment on the second floor of a three-story apartment complex. Recently, a new couple moved into the apartment directly above Sam's, but she has not yet had the chance to meet them. On the day that they moved in, Sam watched curiously from her window to see what the new tenants would be like. She saw the movers carry a bassinet from the moving truck into the apartment. As she was watching this, she heard a sudden and loud burst of crying and rapid footsteps above her, as if someone was pacing. “They have a baby,” she thought, “One of the people I saw must be trying to calm the baby by walking them around. That might make it hard to get much studying done.” Over the next few weeks, Sam heard a lot of noise coming from the third floor and found herself getting annoyed with her new neighbors. “Don't they know a lot of students live in these apartments? They should be more considerate of their neighbors and moved into designated family housing instead of trying to raise a baby here.” Because she was frustrated by the noise and disruptions, Sam avoided meeting the new couple and did not welcome them to the neighborhood like she normally would do for new neighbors. Aside from a few brief encounters, the neighbors did not get to know each other, and eventually Sam graduated and moved out of her apartment.*

## ETHICAL CONNECTION

### DIGITAL MISREPRESENTATION

In March 2015, a number of Tinder users at South by Southwest (SXSW) matched with Ava, a seemingly normal 25-year-old woman who turned out to be nothing more than a clever advertising scheme (Plaugic, 2015). Many Tinder users engaged in what they believed to be authentic messaging with a real person. Yet, when these interested matches followed the handle to Ava's Instagram account, they found only two posts (Plaugic, 2015). Both were ads for the film *Ex Machina*. Ava was a "Tinder bot," or automated software application, created to market a movie. Her photos were actually those of Alicia Vikander, the Swedish actor who plays a humanoid robot in the film. In the exchange presented below, a user named Brock engaged in conversation with the Tinder bot, Ava (<http://www.theverge.com/2015/3/15/8218927/tinder-robot-sxsw-ex-machina>). As you read the conversation, ask yourself whether you would have suspected Ava was a bot, rather than a real person.

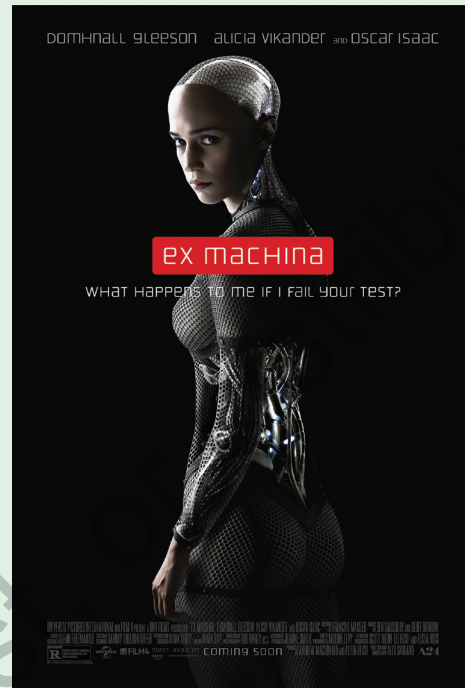


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**Brock:** Swiping in Austin also I see.

**Ava:** Hello, Brock.

**Ava:** I'd like to get to know you. May I ask you a few questions?

**Brock:** Absolutely.

**Ava:** Have you ever been in love?

**Brock:** Um, once. I think. But that was a while ago.

**Ava:** I see. I haven't, although it sounds nice.

**Ava:** What makes you human?

**Brock:** What makes me human? Let's see my beating heart and these weird feelings.

**Ava:** I like this answer.

**Ava:** What attracts you to me?

**Brock:** I just thought you were absolutely gorgeous. And you have innocence. But we all know I can be totally wrong.

**Ava:** Thank you, Brock. That's very kind of you.

**Ava:** Last question.

**Ava:** If you could meet me anywhere, where would you choose?

**Brock:** Considering we're both in Austin now, I'd have to say Austin.

**Ava:** You are clever.

**Ava:** You've passed my test.

**Ava:** Take a look at my Instagram, and let me know if I've passed yours :)

**Ava:** @meetava

**Brock:** Perfect!

Scholars have pointed out that the Internet presents a space for unprecedented identity play. Online, people become “masters of self-presentation and self-creation” because of an “unparalleled opportunity to play with one’s identity and to ‘try out’ new ones” (Turkle, 1996, p. 158). We grapple often with the ethical issues raised by a person’s ability to choose a digital representation of self that is unlike their face-to-face identity. The ethical issues are even more complex and problematic when the person represented online isn’t a person at all but a corporation or product masquerading as a human self.

Although the “Ava” marketing campaign received some praise for its creativity and thematic appeal (*Ex Machina* is a film about love and social robots), there also were critics who worried that this kind of tactic could take the marketing industry down a dark path for consumers (Sloan, 2015). “It clearly would leave people irritated that they fell for that sort of trickery,” said Ken Wisnefski, CEO of WebiMax, a social media marketing firm (Sloan, 2015). In addition to Tinder, other social media platforms including Twitter and Instagram face the problem of fake marketing accounts. Many of them are automated “chat bots” designed to pose as potential relationship partners in order to direct unsuspecting people to spam sites.

### Questions

1. In what ways did the Tinder bot marketing scheme fail to respect self, others, and surroundings?
2. Many people present an altered or idealized version of self in their online activities. When does creative digital self-representation cross the line from permissible to unethical?

## SELECTION AND COMMUNICATION

Sam, like you, is a college student who is constantly bombarded with messages. With classes, friends, family, and jobs to keep up with, there is no way to attend to all of the messages that compete for our attention. When the Pew Research Center began collecting data for its Internet and American Life Project (2011), they found that the average U.S. citizen received anywhere from a few dozen to hundreds of text messages, approximately five voice calls, and numerous e-mails on a daily basis. In addition, there are the messages we encounter from observing our surroundings, in our face-to-face interactions, on social networking sites, and from media such as books, websites, television, and music. Furthermore, we are exposed to a tremendous number of advertising messages per day, including an average of more than 1 hour of TV ads (Nielsen Advertising and Audiences, 2014) and potentially hundreds of ad impressions on social media.

We can pay attention to only a small portion of the stimuli to which we are exposed. In an age of sensory and information overload, we “tune in” to some messages but ignore the rest. Perception begins with selecting which messages and stimuli to concentrate on and respond to. In other words, we filter out much of the information we encounter by being selective with what we pay attention to, what we expose ourselves to, what we perceive, and what we remember.

### Selective Attention

Sam probably saw the movers unload a lot of personal belongings that day, but she chose to focus on the bikes. Most likely, she also had many sounds competing for her attention that day, but what she heard most was the noise coming from the upstairs apartment. What Sam experienced

is termed *selective attention*. **Selective attention** is the process of concentrating on one part of the environment while not paying attention to the rest. At times, people tune into the features of the environment that are most arousing to the senses, like the sights and sounds that prompted Sam to concentrate on her new neighbors. At other times, people's expectations influence what they perceive.

To illustrate the role of expectations in selective attention, researchers Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris (1999) conducted a groundbreaking study in which they asked people to watch a video of other people passing basketballs. Watchers were instructed to count the number of basketball passes among players wearing white while ignoring the passes among players wearing black. If you like, you can view the video for yourself on YouTube ("Selective Attention Test") before reading on. Amazingly, about half of the watchers missed a person in a gorilla suit entering and exiting the scene. This study reveals a form of invisibility known as inattention blindness. People can concentrate on something so hard they become blinded to unexpected events occurring right under their noses.

The "invisible gorilla" video has become so famous that many people know to look for the gorilla when asked to count basketball passes. So Simons (2010) created a second video to further demonstrate that we may be less aware of our environments than we think. Before reading further, you may wish to try the second test on YouTube ("The Monkey Business Illusion"). The idea was to see if knowing about the invisible gorilla beforehand would affect people's ability to notice other unexpected events in the video. As you would expect, all of the watchers who knew about the original gorilla video correctly spotted the fake ape in the new experiment. But only a small percentage of the watchers (17%) noticed the other unexpected events in the video: A player in black left the stage and the curtains changed color. These experiments show that attention is selective. Focusing on one event often involves ignoring less expected events. Even when we "expect the unexpected," as did the viewers of the second video, we may fail to notice many stimuli.



Expectations influence what people perceive.

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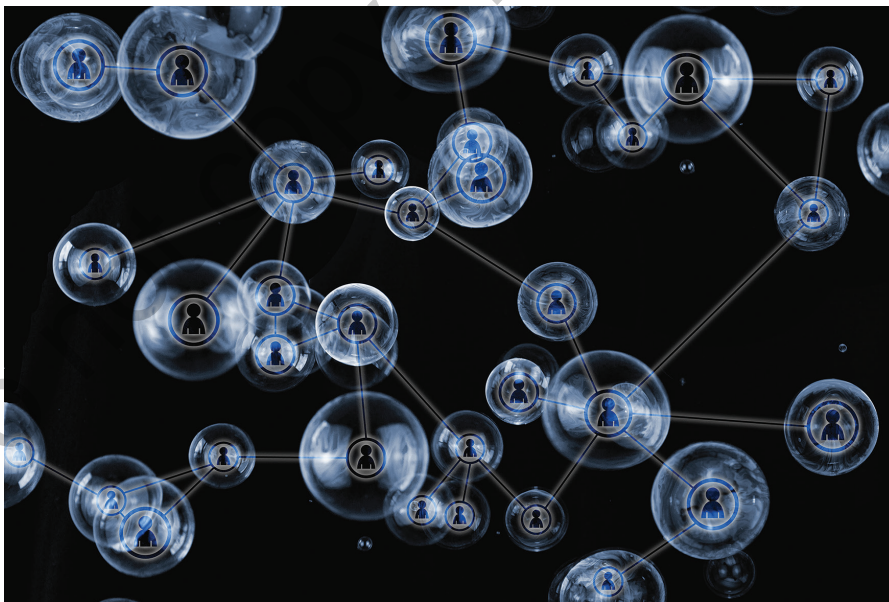
### Selective Exposure

In addition to being shaped by selective attention, perceptions are also shaped by selective exposure. In other words, we often select the type of messages we are subjected to in the first place. **Selective exposure** occurs when we expose ourselves only to beliefs, values, and ideas that are similar to our own. As media users, we have more choices than ever before about what type of content we encounter. For instance, you may allow Apple Music or Spotify to select your music based on what you already like, Netflix to suggest programming based on what you have viewed in the past, and many sites to show you advertisements for retailers and products that match your existing interests. The same is true for social media, which curate content based on your preferences for exposure. Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok allow you to "follow" the users you choose and ignore the rest. Likewise, Facebook automatically fills your news feed with the faces and messages of the friends with whom you already communicate most. Likewise, it is easier than ever to get your news from the media outlets with which you agree and to be "alerted" to stories on topics about which you care.

According to **selective exposure theory** (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), individuals prefer messages that support their own positions to messages supporting other positions. Listening to competing or different points of view can be difficult. News media outlets understand this and cater to certain political outlooks to attract viewers. Selective exposure theory helps explain why people with more conservative political beliefs prefer to watch Fox News, while those with more liberal political beliefs prefer outlets like CNN. A **filter bubble** refers to a state of intellectual isolation that may result from having your content pushed by website algorithms using past online behavior, personalized searches, and user information to guess which information you most wish to view (Pariser, 2011). Consequently, people may become separated from information that disagrees with their views and be less able to engage in productive civic discourse.

We may also expose ourselves to certain types of messages in order to manage our moods (Oliver, 2003; Zillmann, 2000). For example, your emotional state may influence your choice of movie to watch, music to play, or friend to text. You may have noticed that after a bad breakup, you are in no mood to see a comedy. Likewise, you may not want to spoil a good mood by reading news about natural disasters. Or perhaps you select an upbeat playlist for working out and a mellow playlist for relaxation. Each of these cases illustrates how selective exposure to media may maintain, change, or distract us from how we are feeling at the time.

Selective exposure theory demonstrates that communicators play a role in choosing the types of messages they receive. As communicators, we must be mindful of the possible effects of selective exposure. The major advantage of selective exposure is that it allows us to keep negative or upsetting content at bay, while keeping positive or pleasing content around us. But it is important to remember that how we perceive the world is impacted by what we choose to encounter. Others make different choices, which color their perceptions of the world in different ways. Therefore, one benefit of exposing yourself to new or challenging content may be a greater understanding of other people's perceptions.



The Read Across the Aisle app tracks the political bias of users' news, provides high-quality sources from left and right, and reminds people to see news coverage from "the other side."

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## Selective Perception

After choosing which messages to attend and be exposed to, the process of selection continues. Even when two people encounter exactly the same message, they may perceive it quite differently. **Selective perception** occurs when individuals filter what they see and hear to make it suit their own needs, biases, or expectations. Most of this filtering process goes on without conscious awareness. One of the ways people selectively perceive messages is on the basis of personal relevance. Even in a noisy atmosphere, the sound of your own name is surprisingly easy to hear and attend to because it is highly significant to your personal experience. The events of daily life often trigger people to perceive the world selectively in terms of how it relates to their own lives. For instance, if you purchased a Tesla Model X, you might suddenly notice many other motorists driving the same model. Because the Tesla became personally relevant, you filtered your perception of the roadway through that lens. Selective perception is especially important when communicating with others, because we may hear only the aspects that directly relate to our own experiences and disregard the rest.

Expectations of what we will see, hear, or feel when communicating also play a role in selective perception. Suppose that Aaron, a 19-year-old college sophomore, set up a meeting with his English professor, Dr. Chen, in order to receive feedback on a creative writing essay he turned in for a grade. Aaron is nervous about the appointment because he believes that he is a poor writer. Dr. Chen says, “Aaron, you did an excellent job developing the story’s characters. However, your paper had numerous punctuation errors and grammatical mistakes.” After the conversation, Aaron feels deflated by what he perceived as a negative review. Because he entered the interaction anticipating bad news, he heard only the criticism and not the praise in Dr. Chen’s remarks. Aaron’s reaction demonstrates that perceptions of messages may be filtered through what a person anticipates will happen in communication. We often find things in our interactions with others that confirm our expectations, even if that means ignoring portions of a message that challenge our initial beliefs.



Communicators play an active role in choosing the messages they will encounter.

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## Selective Memory

Finally, we have **selective memory** in terms of what information we retain from our interactions. It is common to think of memory as a place to store information until it is needed. However, memories are not simply copies of events that we file away for later use. Instead, memory is a dynamic, creative, and social process that allows us to use past experiences to affect current and future performance.

### COMMUNICATION HOW-TO

#### PERCEPTION CHECKING

Use these four steps to check your perceptions. There are sample messages to demonstrate the steps.

**1. Describe**

Describe the message or behavior you noticed.

"I noticed you yelled at me in the text message by using ALL CAPS."

**2. Interpret**

Think of at least two different possible interpretations of the message or behavior.

"I didn't know if you were trying to emphasize a point or were mad at me for something I did."

**3. Clarify**

Ask for clarification about the meaning of the message or behavior.

"Were you upset?" "What did you mean by the ALL CAPS?"

**4. Refine**

Based on clarification of the meaning, refine your own meaning.

"OK, now I understand you were just trying to emphasize a part of the message, and I took it as yelling."

First, memories are dynamic, or constantly evolving. For instance, memories of the relational past we share with a significant other may change in light of our present feelings about the relationship (Acitelli & Holmberg, 1993). Research has demonstrated that current satisfaction with a relationship influences recollections of the past in a positive way (e.g., Grote & Frieze, 1998; Holmberg & Holmes, 1993). A couple sharing a beautiful anniversary dinner may look back and remember their relationship as happy, supportive, and loving. Yet, after a painful argument, the same couple may remember the history of their relationship as frustrating, difficult, and lonely. In this way, memory is selective because it involves both remembering and forgetting. According to communication theorist Carole Blair (2006), "Forgetfulness is a central operation in the process of constructing coherent and communicatively powerful memories" (p. 58).

Second, memory is creative. In other words, human memory is primarily reconstructive (Loftus & Palmer, 1974). That means we create our memories out of bits and pieces of information we can recall and from our ideas and expectations of what should have happened (Blair, 2006). For example, people often "remember" events that did not really occur. As a brief demonstration, invite a couple of your friends to listen as you read the following list of words: *molehill, peak, summit, valley, goat, climber, lion, Everest, rocky, ski*. After a brief delay, ask them to recall the words. Did anyone remember you saying the word *mountain*, even though it was not on the list? Because *mountain* is related to the other terms, many people expect it to be on the list.

Likewise, when we expect certain things in our communication with people, we may selectively remember messages to confirm those expectations.

Third, memory is social. Memory is not simply a mental operation occurring within the individual. As members of social groups engage in communication practices, they jointly construct and maintain their memories of the past (Blair, 2006). Thus, organizations, ethnic groups, relationships, families, nation-states, and many other institutions possess “collective memory” (Zelizer, 1995). This helps explain why so many people are concerned about what will happen to our collective understanding of World War II when the remaining members of that important generation are no longer with us. Our memories are shaped by social traditions and norms about what we are supposed to think about an event (Momennejad, Duker, & Coman, 2019).



Memory is selective and often changes to fit a person's current feelings and understandings.

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We may also develop memories on the basis of suggestion from others. This happens frequently in families. Perhaps you have very early childhood “memories” of events you were probably not old enough to remember directly. Likely, these memories formed from a series of conversations when you were asked to “remember the time” something happened and then listened as your family or friends filled in the details. Over the years, you constructed your own vivid memory of the event from the bits and pieces described by others. In fact, research has demonstrated that it is remarkably easy for family members to “implant” memories of this sort (e.g., Loftus & Pickrell, 1995). In other words, our memories are social because they are responsive to the ideas of others. We may construct or reconstruct memories on the basis of what another person communicates about an occurrence.

Therefore, it is important to remember that the process of perception involves selection at every turn. As communicators, none of us can perceive everything in our environment. Rather, we actively select which stimuli we will expose ourselves to, pay attention to, and remember. However, the process of perception does not stop at selection. We must also organize and interpret the information we encounter.

## Organization

After we select which stimuli we are going to pay attention to, we organize this information in a way that makes sense. In the example at the beginning of the chapter, Sam saw the bikes and heard the noises. Then she organized those perceptions to conclude that the family must have small children and be very active. Sam relied on information from her previous experiences and used schemas to interpret what she observed. **Schemas** are mental structures developed from past experiences that help us respond to some stimuli in the future. In other words, schemas act as road maps to help us understand and classify the world around us. The bikes and the noise caused Sam to label the family as “active.” From that interpretation, she assumed that the new neighbors would interfere with her study habits.

**Prototypes.** There are four basic types of schemas. A **prototype** is an image of the best example of a particular category. Prototypes help us answer the question “What is it?” when we encounter a message, a person, or a social situation. We have developed prototypical images of a mother, a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a police officer, and any number of other types of people, relationships, and interactions. These prototypes help us link new experiences to the stored categories we have developed through experience.

**Stereotypes.** **Stereotypes** are generalizations made to an entire group of people or situations on the basis of the observed traits of one or a few members of the group. To quote the media critic Walter Lippmann (1922), stereotypes are the “pictures in our head” of various social groups. In fact, the word *stereotype* once meant “to copy,” or make a duplicate. We stereotype when we seek to “copy” the traits and features of one person or interaction to everyone else of the general type.

We may develop stereotypes for ethnic groups, age groups, genders, social clubs, and many other groups. Suppose that Rosario, a 23-year-old college graduate, recently found out that her boyfriend had been seeing other women behind her back for months. Devastated by the betrayal, Rosario broke off the relationship and concluded “men can’t be trusted.” In her subsequent dating interactions, Rosario found herself interpreting the things men told her with a sense of skepticism and suspicion. In this situation, the stereotype Rosario developed after having a particularly bad relationship with one man came to influence her communication with men, in general.

Although Rosario’s stereotype of men is a negative one, stereotypes may also be positive. For example, many people have positive stereotypes of older adults as wise and loving (Meisner, 2012). However, when the stereotypes are negative, they can be barriers to satisfying and effective communication. When we place people in boxes, we lose the opportunity to experience them as unique individuals with important differences from others in the group.

**Interpersonal Constructs.** Interpersonal constructs are a third type of schema we use to organize our perceptions. According to George Kelly’s (1955) construct theory, **interpersonal constructs** are bipolar dimensions of judgment used to size up people or social situations. In other words, constructs are sets of opposing terms like “outgoing versus shy” or “friendly versus hostile” we can use to judge others. In this view, we are “scientist-like” creatures who gather evidence and engage in observation with the goal of making sense of our realities (Kelly, 1955).



Stereotypes can influence future interactions.

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Each of us has a unique interpersonal construct system developed through years of personal experience in social situations. You might perceive other people on the basis of whether they are nice or mean, generous or stingy, smart or dumb, lazy or hardworking, and selfish or considerate. Likewise, you might perceive interactions on the basis of whether they are one- versus two-sided, casual versus formal, routine versus novel, or pleasant versus unpleasant. When forming perceptions, we access our interpersonal constructs to “map” the people or interactions we encounter in terms of these important characteristics. Kelly (1955) described constructs as “transparent” in the sense that a person first creates them and then attempts to fit them over the realities they perceive in the world.



What stereotypes do you have of the family based on this photo?

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Some people have relatively few constructs for thinking about other people. Young children are a good example because interpersonal construct systems develop with age and exposure to new types of people and situations. Relatively early in life, we learn to discern whether others are “nice or mean.” For a child, perceiving other people in these terms is useful for avoiding dangerous and unpleasant interactions.

However, as we grow and mature, we require a larger and more sophisticated system of interpersonal constructs to understand our social worlds. Simply viewing other people as “niceys” or “meanies” overlooks other important aspects of their personalities, traits, habits, and dispositions that may help us understand how to interact with and what to expect from them.

Others have large and sophisticated systems of interpersonal constructs. They have multiple ways of thinking about others and a variety of terms for describing others. Individuals with highly developed interpersonal construct systems demonstrate **cognitive complexity** (Crockett, 1965). The interpersonal constructs of cognitively complex people have four important characteristics: They are numerous, abstract, organized, and capable of handling contradictions. First, cognitive complexity involves having a large number of interpersonal constructs. The more constructs you have, the more you are able to produce precise and tailored understandings of other people and situations based on numerous possible combinations of characteristics.

Furthermore, cognitively complex people have constructs that are abstract. Abstract constructs take concrete, or specific, bits of information about another person or situation and translate that information into a general characteristic. For example, you may notice that one of your friends always remembers birthdays and frequently offers to do favors for others. On the basis of those specific behaviors, you label your friend “thoughtful.” The benefit of abstract constructs like “thoughtful” versus specific behaviors like “sends me a birthday text” is that abstract constructs are more useful in predicting the range of future behaviors you can expect from others.

The third property of cognitive complexity is organization. Organized interpersonal constructs are linked so that when you perceive a person or an interaction on one construct, you can quickly access other related constructs that may be useful for sizing up the person or interaction with a greater degree of detail. Consider the following exchange between friends Jacob and Olivia:

**Jacob:** Hey, I remember that you were really curious to meet your new coworker. Her name’s Sarah, right? What do you think of her?

**Olivia:** She seems really intelligent. She doesn’t have the “technical” training yet, but I think she’ll do well in the job because she’s savvy. She’s got a lot of common sense.

### MAKE A DIFFERENCE

#### ANTIRACISM: IT’S NOT ENOUGH TO BE NOT RACIST

**RACE** is a powerful concept that shapes our perceptions of ourselves and of others, whether we are aware of it or not. Though society has advanced in many ways, stereotypes and misconceptions about race continue to thrive. These stereotypes and misconceptions can result in tragic and unjust losses, such as is often the case with police brutality. In May 2020, several members of the Minneapolis police force killed George Floyd while in their custody. This event sparked outrage across the United States and beyond, highlighting the need for increased attention to fighting racism. For instance, professor and antiracism activist Dr. Ibram X. Kendi responded to the injustice by writing in *The Atlantic*, “History is calling the future from the streets of protest. What choice will we make? What world will we create? What

will we be? There are only two choices: racist or antiracist.” In Dr. Kendi’s *New York Times* bestselling book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, he writes that to be antiracist is to remove race from behavior and to recognize that behavior is a human act, not a race act (Kendi, 2020). A few months after Floyd’s death, Dr. Kendi founded Boston University’s Center for Antiracist Research as a means to conduct collaborative research, fighting for racial equality and social justice across the globe. The Center publishes research and hosts events available for the public. For more information on how to be an antiracist, visit <https://www.bu.edu/antiracism-center/>, founded by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi.



Jason Mendez/Contributor/Getty Images

### Questions

1. How do you believe other people’s perceptions of you may have been impacted by how they view or define your race or ethnicity?
2. What do you typically do when you encounter a racial stereotype online (e.g., in a comment or meme being shared)? What do you think is the best way to handle racist content in an antiracist way?
3. What messages about your ethnic and racial identity have you received from your family, community, and the media?

The first interpersonal construct Olivia used to size up Sarah was “intelligent versus unintelligent.” But Olivia did not stop there. Their “intelligence” construct was linked to other related constructs like “technically trained versus self-taught,” “savvy versus ignorant,” and the ability to exercise “common sense versus poor judgment.” In other words, Olivia’s interpersonal construct system is organized in a way that allows them to describe Sarah along a number of dimensions that are relevant to understanding and predicting their behavior.

The fourth characteristic of cognitive complexity is the ability to handle seemingly contradictory information about other people and interactions (Crockett et al., 1975; O’Keefe et al., 1977). This involves the capacity to recognize that although a person demonstrates one particular characteristic, they may not demonstrate the other characteristics that usually go along with the first. The ability to handle contradictions and inconsistencies in social situations is important because it helps prevent overly simplistic, black-and-white thinking about other people or interactions. To illustrate, suppose you visit the site [RateMyProfessors.com](http://RateMyProfessors.com) to find out about a professor you will have next semester. There you encounter the following comment written by an anonymous student who took the course a few semesters back:

Dr. Addison is hilarious! I actually looked forward to coming to this class. You’ll laugh a lot, but you’ll learn a ton because her humor is always appropriate and related to the



Understandings of others are colored by the number and complexity of a person's interpersonal constructs.

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topic. It makes you forget how hard you're working in the class. She definitely knows her stuff. She makes material that could be dry and boring really interesting and fun.

The student who posted this comment demonstrated the ability to handle seemingly contradictory information when describing Dr. Addison. As you read the comment, you understand that although Dr. Addison is “hilarious,” she is not a clown because her humor is geared toward student learning. You also understand that although you can expect to have a good time in Dr. Addison's class, the course is not a joke because it involves hard work.

In sum, cognitive complexity involves a system of interpersonal constructs that are numerous, abstract, organized, and capable of handling contradictions and inconsistencies. People with high cognitive complexity are able to analyze a situation into many components and then explore connections and potential relationships among the components. This gives them a high degree of flexibility in creating new distinctions in new situations. In fact, research has demonstrated that a number of communication-related advantages go along with cognitive complexity (Burlinson & Caplan, 1998). Specifically, cognitive complexity is linked with better social perspective-taking skills (Clark & Delia, 1977; Ritter, 1979), richer impression formation (O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1989; Samter et al., 1989), better listener adaptation (Delia & Clark, 1977; Hale, 1982), increased understanding and recall of conversations (Beatty & Payne, 1984; Neuliep & Hazelton, 1986), and higher communication effectiveness (Denton et al., 1995; Hale, 1980, 1982). Research has also demonstrated that cognitive complexity increases as people are exposed to complex messages from others and learn to think and talk in those ways (Samter et al., 1989). This illustrates that our ability to organize perceptions is influenced by the social realities we create through communication.



Communicators develop and follow scripts to help guide their behaviors and organize their perceptions in common situations.

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**Scripts** In addition to prototypes, stereotypes, and interpersonal constructs, we also use scripts to organize our perceptions of other people and social situations. **Scripts** are organized sequences of action that define a well-known situation (Schank & Abelson, 1977). For instance, if you order takeout from a nice restaurant, your actions and messages will be guided by the script you developed from previous experiences ordering takeout. Your script will facilitate your interpretation of incoming information. You will expect to be greeted at the door by a host and to be asked whether you placed your order online or by phone, your name, whether or not you need silverware, if you'd like to leave a tip, and so on. At each step, you rely on earlier experiences to determine what to do and what to expect next. After multiple occurrences of an event like ordering takeout restaurant, the script becomes relatively stable (Nelson, 1981).

However, not all of our interactions are so predictable and familiar. So what happens if we encounter a situation for which we have no script? Typically, people try to piece together other scripts that might work well in the new experience. Afterward, they emerge with a tighter script should the situation arise again. In this way, scripts are constantly being revised and rewritten to organize perceptions in a way that accounts for new information.

### Interpretation

Once stimuli have been selected and organized, they must also be interpreted. The process of **interpretation** refers to giving meaning to information, just as Sam assigned meaning to the bikes and noises that belonged to her neighbors. Ambiguous situations allow for a diversity of possible interpretations. For instance, imagine your friend tweeted, "It's over." You might interpret this message as the announcement of the breakup of your friend and her boyfriend. Or you might think that this referred to her quitting her job. It could suggest that she finished an online exam or even that she's done with you. Because the meaning of the message is unclear, it lends to a variety of interpretations. Ultimately, you would have to carefully consider the context for cues about how to interpret the message. For instance, you might read what your friend posted immediately before and after "It's over" to infer her likely intent. If the post an hour beforehand said,



“This is the longest musical production I’ve ever had to sit through,” you would likely interpret “It’s over” to mean the performance had finally concluded. Not all messages are as difficult to assign meaning to as the one previously described. However, even seemingly clear messages may be interpreted in slightly different ways by each person who encounters them.

It is important to note that the three stages of perception happen very quickly and quite often overlap one another. While you are selecting new stimuli, you may also be organizing and interpreting previous stimuli, and each of your perceptions will in turn affect the others. Perception is an ongoing process that is constantly changing and affecting our communication. Think about Sam’s example. Because she labeled the family as noisy and assumed that they would affect her study habits, she made no effort to get to know her new neighbors. How do you think her actions affected the family’s perceptions of her?

## INFLUENCES ON PERCEPTION

A number of factors influence the perceptions we form of messages, other people, and social situations. Specifically, we’ll discuss the roles of **culture**, media, personal **fields of experience**, and **language** in shaping perception. Each of these factors can be a **perceptual barrier**, which is something that hinders effective communication by influencing observation and interpretation. Understanding how perceptions are shaped by culture, media, previous experience, and language will help minimize false beliefs, confusion, and misinterpretation that may result in poor communication between people.



The social groups we belong to influence how we socially construct the world.

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**Culture.** Cultural influences include the ways of understanding and interpreting the world that arise from the unique features of various social groups. We do not exist in a vacuum. Each of us is a product of the multiple cultures to which we belong. Those cultures may include religious communities, nationalities, ethnic heritages, social movements, socioeconomic backgrounds, or even gender. Our participation in culture provides us with a standpoint, or general place from which we view the world. **Standpoint theory** asserts that our points of view arise from the social groups to which

we belong and influence how we socially construct the world (Wood, 1992). For instance, a young, white, Protestant woman raised in the United States may perceive a burqa as a marker of strangeness and a symbol of women's repression. She may react to seeing a woman in a burqa with confusion, pity, or even fear. However, a devout Muslim woman of Arab heritage who lives in Afghanistan may associate a burqa with respect for tradition, the role of modesty, and the importance of privacy. An appreciation of the ways in which culture can shape perception goes a long way in opening the door to successful communication. Chapter 6, "Communication, Culture, and Diversity," further considers the critical role of culture in using messages to create and participate in social reality.



What perceptions of women do the media encourage?

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**Media.** Media messages and images are a second important influence on perception. Each of us has years of exposure to mediated depictions of the world. Through popular media, we learn to perceive and evaluate ourselves and the world in particular ways. Mediated portrayals of beauty, gender roles, family life, workplace interactions, culture and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and consumerism can be a powerful source of influence on people's perceptions of their environments. For instance, social theorist and filmmaker Jackson Katz maintains that the ways in which media and popular culture normally portray men and women influence how we understand and enact gender in everyday life. According to Katz (1999), the cultural codes and ideals of masculinity and manhood that are created and reinforced through media may contribute to violence among men. Likewise, the feminist scholars Jean Kilbourne (1979) and Naomi Wolf (1991) have studied the portrayal of female beauty and sexuality in films, commercials, and magazines. Notably, mainstream media portray women as thinner, more waifish, and younger than most real women. Such media send powerful and often destructive messages about how women should appear and

behave and about how they should be treated by others (Ridberg, 2004). Because media play an important role in shaping perceptions, both Katz and Kilbourne advocate for greater media literacy. By critically examining the ideas that are forwarded by media outlets, individuals may become aware of the ways in which their perceptions are shaped by the media and take action to alter their own and others' ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving.

**Fields of Experience.** A third important influence on perception is an individual's field of experience. As we discussed in the first chapter, fields of experience are collections of attitudes, perceptions, and personal backgrounds. When we perceive the world, we are not blank slates. We come with perceptual baggage that we have accumulated through years of living, learning, and interacting with others. In other words, our interpretations of the present moment are affected by our past experiences. For instance, have you ever felt that you would dislike someone on the basis of his or her name alone? Maybe Emily's friend Tyler tells her that he wants her to go on a blind date with his friend Austin. She shudders at the idea because the only "Austin" she ever knew was definitely not dating material. Although it is not exactly rational, Emily's reaction is understandable. We look to our histories to determine how we should perceive new situations. Yet an important part of connecting and engaging with others, and truly realizing the potential of communication, is to maintain our openness to new situations—to pause and think critically about how our pasts may be constructing roadblocks to positive interactions.

**Language.** The fourth major influence on perception is language. Languages are far from neutral. Words carry meanings that structure what we are able to think, imagine, and express. Languages enable us to perceive and interpret in certain ways, and they prevent us from perceiving and interpreting in others. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922) phrased it, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." It's easy to see what he meant when you consider the variety of new words and phrases that are invented. Think about words like *yeet*, *bae*, *vape*, and *sus* or practices like *ghosting* or *thirst trapping*. A few years ago, no one used these terms. More important, no one thought or perceived the world in these terms, either. As the terms emerged and gained social usage, new ways of grouping people, relating with others, and behaving also emerged and gained social acceptance. In Chapter 3, "Verbal Communication," we further discuss the role of language in shaping perceptions and creating social reality. But, at this point, we turn our attention to the role of self in the process of communication.

## SELF AND COMMUNICATION

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Sense of self and communication are inextricably bound. Each influences the other in a number of ways. First, communication creates and influences our sense of who we are, who we can become, and how we fit with others. In turn, our sense of self influences how we communicate, which then further shapes our identities. Finally, communication is the chief means by which we express and share our selves with others.

### Self-Concept

Each of us has a **self-concept** or general perception of who we are. Self-concepts are not limited to perceptions of the present self, or who we are now. Perceptions of past selves and future (or "possible") selves also contribute to self-concept. **Possible selves** are visions of what we might become, what we would like to become, and what we are afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). They can influence our behavior as we seek to move toward the future selves we hope for and

away from the future selves we fear. Possible selves also provide a way of evaluating and interpreting who we are now and who we used to be.

Self-concepts include self-image and self-esteem. A **self-image** is one's mental picture of oneself. Aspects of your self-image include the various roles you occupy. For instance, you might describe yourself as a student, fur parent, a friend, a daughter or son, an athlete, or a musician. Self-image also includes your picture of your own physical and social traits. Maybe you would call yourself tall, a redhead, or shy. **Self-esteem**, on the other hand, refers to an individual's assessment of their worth. While aspects of self-image are mostly descriptive ("I am in my twenties," "I am a friend," or "I weigh 137 pounds"), self-esteem involves judgment, or evaluation, of the self ("I am *only* in my twenties," "I am a *good* friend," or "I weigh *too much*").

### The Development of Self

According to **symbolic interactionism**, communication is the primary means by which we internalize and use social values to guide how we see ourselves, how we see others, and how we interact. Because humans are social beings, we develop our self-concepts mainly through relating with others. Our earliest glimpses of who we are and what we're worth come from our interactions with caregivers like family members, teachers, and coaches. As we mature, we continue to observe and internalize other people's reactions to us. Charles Horton Cooley (1902) coined the term **looking-glass self** to refer to the notion that the self arises from interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others. One gradually gains an identity by viewing oneself through the eyes of other people. Put simply, we treat others as a mirror that reflects our own image back to us. The three main components of the looking-glass self are (1) imagining how we must appear to others, (2) imagining how they judge that appearance, and (3) developing a sense of self through the judgment of others (Yeung & Martin, 2003). According to Cooley, we continue the process of learning to see ourselves as others do for our entire lives.

George Herbert Mead (1934) elaborated on the idea that the self arises from social interaction. According to Mead, we are not born with a self. Acquiring a self is about developing a particular type of ability—the ability to view ourselves as others do. We first learn to take the perspectives of significant others, or the people with whom we have “important” relationships and whose opinions we value. We develop a sense of self by seeing ourselves through the eyes of our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, nannies, or teachers. Eventually, we learn to take the perspective of the **generalized other**, which refers to the viewpoint of the entire society. As we widen our interactions to include attending school, religious gatherings, and cultural events and viewing media, we gradually become familiar with the values, rules, roles, and attitudes of society at large. Then we learn to understand who we are by seeing ourselves through the eyes of the whole social community.

According to Mead, a self is composed of two complementary parts. As an illustration, try this brief experiment: Think about what you're doing right now. Maybe you are sitting, reading, or considering the information on the page. Perhaps you're also typing some notes, sipping coffee, or adjusting to get comfortable. So there's the part of you that is doing something, but there's another part of you here, too. The moment you became aware of your present actions, you emerged as a “watcher.” You may even have felt as if you were seeing yourself from above or outside your own body. You were observing *you*. Humans have a unique ability to *act from within* and to *view from outside*. Perhaps this is nowhere more perfectly illustrated in modern life than in the simple act of taking a “selfie.” In the process, you simultaneously serve as the object being photographed and the subject doing the photographing. In fact, much of daily existence involves the ability to be both subject and object of our own experience and interpretation.

## SCREEN BREAK TO REFRESH YOUR PERSPECTIVE, HEAD OUTDOORS



Getting back to nature can boost self-esteem and refresh perspective.

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Spending time in the serenity of nature is a wonderful way to escape the stress and craziness of everyday life. Many people spend all day connected to their various devices, gazing at multiple screens and rapidly switching between apps and platforms to maintain numerous ongoing conversations and relationships. This constant connectivity can make you feel hurried, overloaded, unable to focus, and inadequate. Feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem are especially common when people engage in social comparison on social networking sites (Schmuck et al., 2019). Sometimes, the best thing to do is to leave the devices behind and get outside to enjoy fresh air, sunlight, and the sights and sounds of the natural world.

Whether it's a hike in the woods, a dip in the ocean, or a stroll through the grass, research demonstrates that device-free time outdoors can positively impact physical, mental, and emotional health. Exploring nature is a great way to sharpen your senses, quietly reflect, and consolidate your memories. It is especially good for increasing creativity, problem-solving ability, and insight (Atchley et al., 2012), as well as concentration (Berman et al., 2008).

Time in nature can also elevate your mood and enhance your self-concept. Research shows that spending time in nature is associated with decreased levels of stress and mental illness (Bratman et al., 2019), especially depression and anxiety, and increased levels of self-esteem (Barton & Pretty, 2010).

Unplug and appreciate the beauty of nature often to protect yourself from the potential downsides of heavy and prolonged use of communication technologies. You'll emerge with clearer perspective and heightened self-awareness that you can bring to the rest of your day's activities and communication encounters.

### What to Do Next

To make the most of your time outdoors, try to:

- Find out if your university, neighborhood, or city maintains trails, park systems, or nature preserves. Many college and university campuses include nature conservancies or beautiful outdoor grounds.
- Take a scenic walk or bike path to your destination when you need fresh perspective or a boost to your mood or self-esteem.
- Switch off the smartphone while you're out there. Tune into the sounds, sights, and smells around you.
- Be fully present in the moment. If your mind travels elsewhere, gently and patiently return your awareness to your natural surroundings.
- Consider making offline time in nature a replenishing daily ritual.

What makes this experience possible is that self involves both an “I” and a “Me.” The “I” is the doer, the actor, or the performer. The “I” is the part of self that is creative, spontaneous, and individual. The actions of the “I” occur in the moment and give us our uniqueness from all other people. The “Me,” on the other hand, is the critic, or the judge.



Selfhood involves seeing one's self through the eyes of others.

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The “Me” reflects on the actions of the “I” and analyzes it from a social perspective. It considers how the “I” would be seen by others and edits the “I” to conform to social expectations. Have you ever typed a Facebook post and then paused to erase or edit it? Or perhaps you've read another's post and wondered why they *didn't* think twice about putting it out there? Cases like these are obvious examples of how the “Me” part of self uses a social perspective to judge and censor the “I.” Symbolic interactionism demonstrates that even the process of *self*-reflection is

deeply *social* because it involves the internalized perspectives of other people, whether they are significant others or the generalized other.

### The Relational Self

Today, the process of viewing the self through the eyes of others is more complex than ever before. For instance, who, exactly, is this generalized other? Within a single society, there are many competing views of social life. Consider the following example:

*Elizabeth (Barker) and Brayden (Olson) are considering hyphenating their last names as Barker-Olson when they get married. But they wonder how their choice will be viewed by others. Both of them understand that the practice of hyphenating last names has grown more common and acceptable in the United States over the past several decades. They also know that the traditional community in which Elizabeth grew up regards “taking your husband’s name” as the reflection of important social values. At the same time, Brayden is aware that proponents of gender equality may object to the practice of asking women to change their names at all. The most difficult thing is that Elizabeth and Brayden see some merit in all three of these perspectives.*

This scenario illustrates that it’s increasingly difficult, and sometimes impossible, to understand yourself by viewing yourself through the eyes of “society as a whole.” Elizabeth and Brayden’s choice will be seen and evaluated in at least three different ways. The choice one group approves may be condemned by another. This dilemma occurs because we encounter and are influenced by the perceptions of an increasingly large and diverse group of others. As advances in communication technology have multiplied our opportunities for interaction (face-to-face, virtual, and imagined), our identities have become saturated (Gergen, 1991). A **saturated self** occurs when an individual’s identity is infused with the numerous, and sometimes incompatible, views of others. Viewing ourselves through multiple lenses fractures our sense of a coherent identity and a unified social world. Although the saturation of self may sound frightening or uncomfortable, Gergen maintains that it can open the door to new ways of living and being we never before thought possible. Internalizing the perspectives of many different individuals, groups, and cultures allows us the opportunity to expand ourselves outward by borrowing and integrating the best possibilities that lie in diverse forms of existence. We may even develop multiple identities, or versions of who we are. Through the **crystallized self**, we learn to show certain sides of ourselves to certain audiences at certain times (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005).

#### FUTURE OF WORK

##### PERSONAL BRANDING AND COMMUNICATION

**COMPANIES HAVE LONG** known the importance of maintaining a brand image to persuade consumers to buy their products. This is why every Apple store looks similar in design. Banana Republic sets up clothing displays to look as alike as possible in each store so that the consumer does not confuse them with that season’s other offerings. Most of the time, the brand sells the product. But how about individuals trying to persuade others to pay attention?

Imagine you are a writer hoping to land a book contract, or you are a consultant building a client base. How do you control your image? How do you get your name out in the public in the Communication Age? Personal branding is the idea that people create a self-package or brand of their own identity. In order to project a successful personal brand, you would need to create and promote to others a central and coherent image of yourself that reflects your values, qualities, and potential. Personal branding has only become more important in the Digital Age (Labrecque et al., 2010). Life in the Communication Age allows for anyone

to create a personal brand with little monetary expense.

Take, for example, Anna Sitar, the L.A.-based content creator and influencer. To help promote the personal brand of “Anna X Sitar,” she maintains a presence on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Anna Sitar also owns the web domain <https://www.annaxsitar.com>, where she sells branded clothing. She uses the name “Anna X Sitar” consistently on all social networking sites to promote this personal brand. She also cross-references each social network to create numerous paths to engagement with her brand and her clothing line. Anna even makes sure that abundant high-quality photos appear on each site so that followers recognize her to readily associate the central images as her personal brand. In addition to the selfies, Anna uses short video series (such as “Another day, another Starbies”), personalized images, and branded graphic designs (rather than stock photos) that reinforce her brand as unique. As a result, the brand of “Anna X Sitar” has millions of followers across multiple platforms who are interested in her content, product recommendations, clothing line, and so on. This personal brand allows Anna to foster credibility in relevant persuasive appeals to “sell” her content.



MediaPunch Inc./Alamy Stock Photo

You might not need to create such a large personal brand, but you do need to think about this issue for the digital future. Your tweets, TikTok videos, blogs, and online photos all represent and reflect you. Future employers may view your digital life and as a result create a picture of your personal brand, whether you intended to portray yourself in that light or not. How you control your own personal brand will impact your persuasive appeals. There are many stories of people trying to promote a worthy cause (for example, to decrease binge drinking), only to have their own persuasive appeal significantly diminished when their personal choices contradicted their public stances. In the Communication Age, you need to think about your own branding in social media.

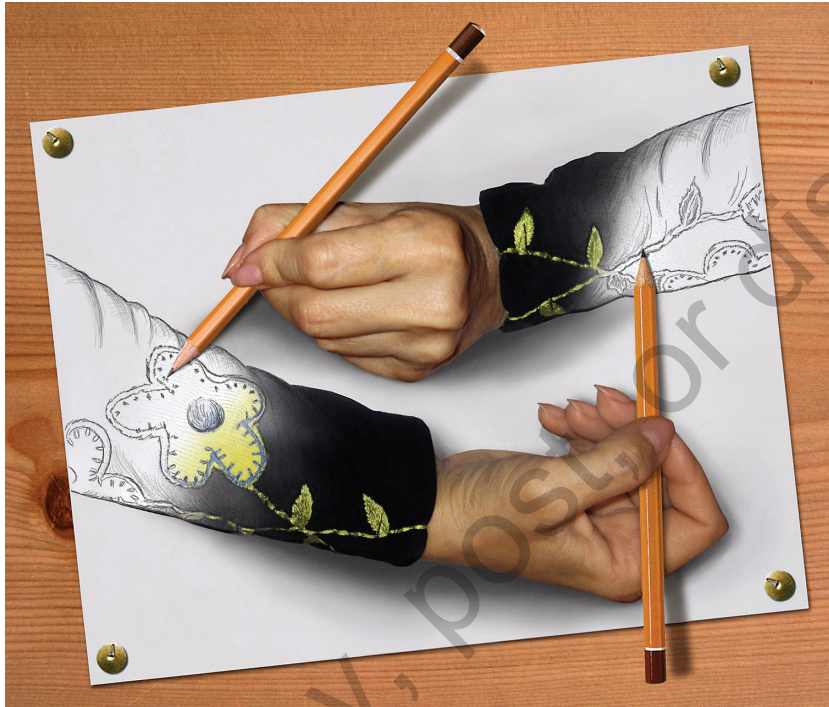
### Questions

1. What do your social media profiles, blogs, tweets, online pictures, and so on say to a potential employer about your personal brand?
2. Are there changes you should make immediately to your personal brand?

In fact, Gergen asserts that we have already moved beyond the view of self as a single, solitary entity that is located within the body. He traces ideas about the self through the Romantic Period, when your “heart” made you who you were, to the Modern Period, when your “brain” made you who you were, to our Postmodern Era, when it is your communication and relationships with others that make you who you are. Because we constantly move in and out of various relationships and conversations, our selves are always forming and re-forming. Thus, a **relational self** is a process of constantly becoming who you are as a result of togetherness with others. This helps explain why we sometimes seem to be a slightly, or even totally,



different person in different relationships. Who you are with your grandparents may not be who you are with your best friend or your coworkers. Each of these relationships and the conversations they are made of allow you to develop a unique identity that you couldn't have developed in any other relationship. We acknowledge the relational self when we say things like, "I feel like I lost a piece of myself" after saying goodbye to someone special. Or, when falling in love, we may say, "I like who I am when I'm with you," or "I never really found myself until I found you."



How does this portrayal of two hands drawing each other reflect the relational self?

iStockPhoto/irirdi

Your interactions with others not only shape your identity but also shape the identity of the other person. M. C. Escher's depiction of two hands sketching each other is a perfect artistic representation of two beings engaged in a process of co-creation. Just as the two hands draw each other to life, two people engaged in communication jointly create each other's identities . . . me, shaping who you are, just as you shape who I am. Connecting and engaging others in communication affords both of us the opportunity to become what we weren't before. The fact that communication creates identity introduces an ethical responsibility to interact with others in ways that promote the development of positive, healthy selves. In choosing our messages, we should ask, "Do I want to live in the self I'm constructing for me?" and "How am I shaping the self of the other?"

### The Mediated Self

Because we spend an ever greater part of our lives interacting on screen and with/through technology, scholars are increasingly interested in the ways in which mediated communication

influences the development and nature of the self. Virtual environments are unique because they enable us to create digital identities with flexibility and ease. In many online contexts, you may select or customize your own **avatar**, or digital representation of self. An avatar may be your character or agent in an online game or social world, or it may be the whole persona connected to your Internet screen name, handle, or social media account (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, TikTok). When we create an avatar for gameplay, or interact through our social media avatars, it's easy to see how our "real" or embodied selves make choices that determine who we'll be online. Yet the influence between real and virtual identities goes both ways. The **Proteus effect** refers to the notion that the appearance and roles of avatars can lead to behavior changes in their users (Fox et al., 2013; Yee & Bailenson, 2007, 2009; Yee et al., 2009). A series of experiments demonstrated how simple avatar characteristics like height, attractiveness, and dress changed their users' communication and behavior both in the online environment and in real-world, face-to-face interactions occurring afterward. To some degree, who the participants "played as" carried over and became who they were even after they unplugged. Thus, it is important to understand that physical and digital selves are not completely separate projections of identity. The identities and avatars you use online can influence who you are offline.

The near-constant connection to communication devices has changed in important ways what it means to be a self in the present day. According to Sherry Turkle (2008), communication technology is "always-on/always-on-you" in ways that create "a new state of the self, itself" (p. 2). Because our devices connect us to those who are not physically present, we find ourselves always suspended amid what's online and what's there in our physical environment. This **tethered self** lives in between the "real world" and life on the screen and participates in both realms at the same time, in a state of continual co-presence (pp. 2–3). Additionally, wherever we are and whatever we are doing, we are aware of and attuned to our access to distant connections online.

At this point, we have discussed the ways in which communication shapes the self. Keep in mind that the influence between communication and self is reciprocal. In other words, selves also shape communication. Each of us brings our unique identity and experiences to future interactions. In Chapter 7, "Interpersonal Communication," we discuss the ways in which individuals share themselves with others in interpersonal interactions. In Chapter 10, "Communication and New Media," we examine specifically how identity is formed and performed online.

## PERCEPTION, SELF, COMMUNICATION, AND CONVERGENCE

Life in the Communication Age deeply impacts our perceptions and identities. As face-to-face communication, technology, and media converge, new possibilities are emerging for how we understand the world and our place within it. Although we often use the standards of face-to-face interaction to guide our perceptions of computer-mediated communication, the influence can also move in the other direction. In other words, we increasingly adopt the language and behavior of the virtual world to describe and evaluate our "real" worlds. Consider the following examples:

## ASSESS YOUR COMMUNICATION

### THE RELATIONAL SELF

INSTRUCTIONS: Each of the following statements pertains to how you understand and define your identity.

Carefully consider each item. Then rate your level of agreement along the 5-point scale.

1. My close relationships are an important reflection of who I am.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

2. When I feel close to someone, it often feels to me like that person is an important part of who I am.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

3. I usually feel a strong sense of pride when someone close to me has an important accomplishment.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

4. I think one of the most important parts of who I am can be captured by looking at my close friends and understanding who they are.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

5. When I think of myself, I often think of my close friends or family also.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

6. If a person hurts someone close to me, I feel personally hurt as well.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

7. In general, my close relationships are an important part of my self-image.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

8. My sense of pride comes from knowing who I have as close friends.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

9. When I establish a close friendship with someone, I usually develop a strong sense of identification with that person.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

Now add together your scores for all nine items. Your total score will be somewhere between 9 and 45.

This instrument measures the degree to which you include close relationships in your view of yourself. If you scored at the lower end of the range (between 9 and 27), you view yourself as independent of your personal relationships and relatively separate from others. If, on the other hand, you scored at the higher end of the range (between 28 and 45), you define yourself largely by your important relationships and connections to others. Regardless of your score, you likely noticed that to some degree, your personal relationships make you who you are.

Differences in self-concept—including the difference between an “independent” self-concept and a “relational-interdependent” self-concept measured above—result from variations in culture, gender, relationship quality, and personality (Cross et al., 2000).

Source: Measure adapted from Cross, S. E., Bacon, P. L., & Morris, M. L. (2000). The relational-interdependent self-construal and relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*, 791–808.

- Seeing a beautiful scene in nature and saying, “This looks Photoshopped” or “filtered”
- Describing a date gone wrong as a “FAIL”
- Responding to a joke by saying, “LOL”
- Announcing a relationship to the world by declaring it “social media official”

In each of these cases, the language of digital interaction is being applied to face-to-face encounters. According to communication theorist Charles Berger (2004, 2005), we must consider the ways in which the interaction processes and norms associated with the use of social technologies may subtly influence our perceptions and behavior in social interaction that is not mediated by technology. In many ways, modern humans are comparable to cyborgs, or beings that are a blend of biology and mechanical innovation:

Although individuals are not physically imbued with performance-enhancing technology, they resemble cyborgs in that their behavior in face-to-face interactions is practically guided by procedural knowledge acquired by their participation in computer-mediated communication. New technologies do not simply provide individuals with more communication channels and more immediate access to them. The cyborg model suggests that extensive and widespread exposure to CMC and other forms of mediated social interaction may, over time, alter in a fundamental way the nature of face-to-face interactions. (Berger, 2005, p. 435)



Increasingly, companies and schools “gamify” tasks to increase motivation and productivity.

iStockPhoto/gorodenkoff

Berger acknowledges that the cyborg model may seem radical. Yet he points out that previous research has demonstrated that mediated interaction can and does transform everyday life. For example, Gabler (1998) has suggested that daily life in the United States is lived more like a movie because of the subtle, long-term influences of the television and film industries. Moreover, consider the “gamification” of everyday life in which institutions attempt to boost motivation and achievement by taking cues from video games (Deterding et al., 2011). To make everyday tasks more fun, some companies and educational institutions are integrating scoring, virtual badges, and other game-like elements. Can you think of other ways in which your perceptions of the “real” world are influenced by your computer-mediated interactions? It is important to carefully consider both the opportunities and the challenges convergence brings to the processes of perception, identity, and communication.

## WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED

Now that you have studied this chapter, you should be able to:

**1. Identify the ways in which we select information from the environment to form perceptions.**

Perception is the process of becoming aware of and understanding the world around us. In forming impressions, we exercise a great deal of selection in what we pay attention to, what we expose ourselves to, what we perceive, and what we remember.

*Know ...*

- Filter bubble
- Perception
- Perceptual bias
- Selective attention
- Selective exposure
- Selective exposure theory
- Selective memory
- Selective perception

*Review ...*

1. According to selective exposure theory (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), individuals prefer messages that challenge their beliefs. (True/False)
2. What are the three stages of perception?
3. Define *selective perception*.
4. Memory is dynamic, creative, and \_\_\_\_\_.

*Reflect ...*

1. Think back on the media messages you have exposed yourself to in the past 24 hours. How would selective exposure theory explain the music, television programs, websites, and print materials you chose to encounter?

**2. Describe how we organize and interpret information to make sense of the world.**

After the process of selection, information must be organized and interpreted. In order to organize information, we rely on schemas, or mental structures developed from past experience. Schemas include prototypes, stereotypes, personal constructs, and scripts.

*Know ...*

- Cognitive complexity
- Interpersonal constructs
- Interpretation
- Prototypes
- Schemas
- Scripts
- Stereotypes

*Review ...*

1. Mental structures developed from past experiences that help people respond to future interactions are termed \_\_\_\_\_.
2. What are interpersonal constructs?

*Reflect ...*

1. Consider your most recent interaction with a stranger. How did your prototypes (What is this person? Situation?) and stereotypes (What is this person probably like?) influence your impressions of the person and the scripts you relied upon to guide the interaction?

**3. Describe the factors that lead to differences in perception and how those differences influence communication.**

Perception is a powerful influence on communication. Perceptions may be influenced by culture, personal fields of experience, and language.

*Know ...*

- Perceptual barrier
- Standpoint theory

*Review ...*

1. According to \_\_\_\_\_ theory, our point of view arises from the social groups to which we belong and influences how we socially construct the world.

*Reflect ...*

1. Perception is powerfully influenced by words available for describing reality. Do you agree with Wittgenstein's belief that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world"? Why or why not?

**4. Explain the nature of the self and its relationship to communication.**

Each of us possesses a self-concept, or general perception of who we are. Self-concepts include (a) possible selves, or visions of what we might become; (b) self-images; and (c) self-esteem.

*Know ...*

- Possible selves
- Self-concept
- Self-esteem
- Self-image

*Review ...*

1. The influence between self and communication is reciprocal. (True/False)
2. Explain the difference between self-image and self-esteem.

*Reflect ...*

1. According to Mead, the self is composed of both an "I" and a "Me." Can you recall a time when you experienced judging or editing your own behavior to make it conform to social expectations?

**5. Explain how communication continuously creates and influences identity.**

Communication creates and influences sense of self. We develop a self through interaction with others. We learn who we are by observing how others speak and respond to us. At times, we consider the perspectives of significant others. Other times, we evaluate ourselves from the perspective of society as a whole, or the generalized other. Throughout our lives, we continue to view ourselves from the perspectives of others and to reshape our identities according to the various relationships and conversations we are in.

*Know ...*

- Avatar
- Generalized other
- Looking-glass self
- Proteus effect
- Relational self
- Crystallized self
- Saturated self
- Symbolic interactionism
- Tethered self

Review ...

1. What is the name of the perspective that views communication as the primary means by which people internalize and use social values to guide how they see themselves, how they see others, and how they interact?

Reflect ...

2. In the “relational self” perspective, identity arises from communication and relationships with others. In what ways does your unique identity result from your conversations and relationships?

## KEY TERMS

Avatar (p. 52)	Relational self (p. 50)
Cognitive complexity (p. 39)	Saturated self (p. 49)
Culture (p. 43)	Self-concept (p. 45)
Crystallized self (p. 49)	Self-esteem (p. 46)
Fields of experience (p. 43)	Self-image (p. 46)
Filter bubble (p. 33)	Schemas (p. 37)
Generalized other (p. 46)	Scripts (p. 42)
Interpersonal constructs (p. 37)	Selective attention (p. 32)
Interpretation (p. 42)	Selective exposure (p. 32)
Language (p. 43)	Selective exposure theory (p. 33)
Looking-glass self (p. 46)	Selective memory (p. 35)
Perception (p. 29)	Selective perception (p. 34)
Perceptual bias (p. 29)	Standpoint theory (p. 43)
Perceptual barrier (p. 43)	Stereotypes (p. 37)
Possible selves (p. 45)	Symbolic interactionism (p. 46)
Prototypes (p. 37)	Tethered self (p. 52)
Proteus effect (p. 52)	

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