

RONALD B. ADLER | RUSSELL F. PROCTOR II

Interplay

THE PROCESS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

SIXTEENTH EDITION



OXFORD

Contents

Preface

Part 1 Foundations of Interpersonal Communication

1 Interpersonal Process

1.1 Why We Communicate

Physical Needs

Identity Needs

Social Needs

Practical Needs

1.2 The Communication Process

Early Models of Communication

Insights from the Transactional Communication Model

Communication Principles

Communication Misconceptions

1.3 What Makes Communication Interpersonal?

Defining Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal and Impersonal Communication: A Matter of Balance

1.4 Communication Competence

Principles of Communication Competence

Characteristics of Competent Communication

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ **Features**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Going It Alone”**

- **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: The Epidemic of Loneliness**
- **AT WORK: Office Versus Home: Communication Considerations**
- **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Super Bowl 2015: Always Ad”**
- **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: A Better Understanding of Misunderstandings**
- **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Building Relationships Before Doing Business**
- **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Struggles of Having a Friend with No Filter”**

2 Mediated Interpersonal Communication

2.1 Mediated Communication: Pros and Cons

Alienating or Connecting?

Superficial or Meaningful?

Unhealthy or Healthy?

The Bottom Line

2.2 Mediated Interpersonal Versus Masspersonal Communication

Hallmarks of Mediated Interpersonal Communication

Hallmarks of Masspersonal Communication

2.3 Competence in Mediated Communication

Consider the Channel(s)

Be Careful What You Post

Consider the Communicators and the Environment

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ **Features**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “I Forgot My Phone”**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Maintaining Long-Distance Romances Through Texting**

■ **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: The Effects of Smartphone Use Among Teens**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Social Media Detox**

■ **AT WORK: Communicating Professionally via Video**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Women in Sports ‘Face’ Harassment”**

3 Culture and Interpersonal Communication

3.1 Culture and Communication

Culture and Co-Culture

Intercultural Communication

Interpersonal and Intercultural Dimensions of Communication

Intercultural Differences as Generalizations

3.2 Cultural Values and Norms

High Versus Low Context

Individualism Versus Collectivism

Power Distance

Uncertainty Avoidance

Achievement Versus Nurturing

3.3 Co-Cultures and Communication

Race and Ethnicity

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Age and Generation

(Dis)abilities

Socioeconomic Status

3.4 Codes and Culture

Verbal Codes

Nonverbal Codes

Microaggressions

3.5 Developing Intercultural Communication Competence

Motivation and Attitude

Tolerance for Ambiguity

Open-Mindedness

Knowledge and Skill

Patience and Perseverance

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ **Features**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Co-Cultural Strategies Among Latinx Students**

■ **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: Why Cultural Appropriation is Inappropriate**

■ **AT WORK: Organizations Are Cultures**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “P&G: The Look”**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Momondo: The DNA Journey”**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Using Your Voice to Confront Racism**

4 Interpersonal Communication and the Self

4.1 Communication and the Self-Concept

How the Self-Concept Develops

Characteristics of the Self-Concept

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Communication

4.2 Presenting the Self

Public Self and Private Self

Characteristics of Impression Management

Face-to-Face Impression Management

Impression Management in Mediated Communication

Impression Management and Honesty

4.3 Disclosing the Self

The Nature of Self-Disclosure

Models of Self-Disclosure

Benefits and Risks of Self-Disclosure

Guidelines for Self-Disclosure

Alternatives to Self-Disclosure

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ **Features**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Reverse Selfie: Have #TheSelfieTalk”**

■ **AT WORK: Impression Management in the Workplace**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Managing Impressions of Motherhood**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Tattoos: Reveal or Conceal?**

■ **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: Talking Frankly About STDs**

Part 2 Creating and Responding to Messages

5 Perceiving Others

5.1 The Perception Process

Selection

Organization

Interpretation

Negotiation

5.2 Influences on Perception

Access to Information

Physiological Influences

Social Influences

Cultural Influences

5.3 Common Tendencies in Perception

We Make Snap Judgments

We Cling to First Impressions

We Judge Ourselves More Charitably Than We Judge Others

We Are Influenced by Our Expectations

We Are Influenced by the Obvious

We Assume Others Are Like Us

5.4 Synchronizing Our Perceptions

Perception Checking

Building Empathy

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ Features

■ WATCH AND DISCUSS: “All That We Share”

■ AT WORK: Sexual Harassment and Perception

■ DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: Implicit Bias and Its Effects

■ FOCUS ON RESEARCH: You, Not I, Have a Social Media Problem

■ WATCH AND DISCUSS: “The Importance of Empathy”

■ FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Want to Understand Someone’s Perspective? Ask.

6 Language

6.1 The Nature of Language

Language Is Symbolic

Language Is Rule-Governed

Language Is Subjective

Language and Worldview

6.2 The Impact of Language

Naming and Identity

Affiliation

Power and Politeness

Sexism and Racism

Precision and Vagueness

6.3 The Language of Responsibility

Accountable Language

“I,” “You,” and “We” Language

The Language of Choice

6.4 Gender and Language

Extent of Gender Differences

Non-Gender Influences on Language Use

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ Features

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Girl vs. Woman: Why Language Matters”**

■ **AT WORK: Swearing on the Job**

■ **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: Sorry, Not Sorry**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Vague Facebook Posts—Congressional Hearings”**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: “You” Language and Interpersonal Support**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Communication in Transition**

7 Nonverbal Communication

7.1 Nonverbal Communication Defined

7.2 Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal Communication Is Always Occurring

Nonverbal Communication Is Primarily Relational

Nonverbal Communication Is Ambiguous

Nonverbal Communication Occurs Even in Mediated Messages

Nonverbal Communication Is Influenced by Culture and Gender

7.3 Functions of Nonverbal Communication

Creating and Maintaining Relationships

Regulating Interaction

Influencing Others

Influencing Ourselves

Concealing/Deceiving

Managing Impressions

7.4 Types of Nonverbal Communication

Body Movement

Touch

Voice

Distance

Territoriality

Time

Physical Attractiveness

Clothing

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ Features

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: The Power of Periods. In Texting.**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Verbal Planning Helps Nonverbal Delivery**

■ **AT WORK: Let Your Voice Be Heard**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Who Sounds Gay?”**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Invading Personal Space in Public”**

■ **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: The Inequality of “Lookism”**

8 Listening: Receiving and Responding

8.1 The Nature of Listening

The Importance of Listening

Listening Defined

Listening Styles

8.2 The Challenge of Listening

Recognizing Barriers to Listening

Avoiding Poor Listening Habits

8.3 Components of Listening

Hearing

Attending

Understanding

Remembering

Responding

8.4 Types of Listening Responses

Silent Listening

Questioning

Paraphrasing

Empathizing

Supporting

Analyzing

Evaluating

Advising

Which Response Type to Use?

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ Features

■ AT WORK: Listening Is Good Business

■ DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: The Myth of Multitasking

■ WATCH AND DISCUSS: “The Listener: The Stories of Craigslist Confessional”

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Brené Brown on Empathy”**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Responding Supportively to Those in Need**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Chatbots Soften Advice with Empathy**

Part 3 Dimensions of Interpersonal Relationships

9 Emotions

9.1 What Are Emotions?

Physiological Changes

Nonverbal Behavior

Cognitive Interpretations

Verbal Expression

9.2 Influences on Emotional Expression

Culture

Gender

Social Conventions and Roles

Mediated Communication

Emotional Contagion

9.3 Expressing Emotions Effectively

Recognize Your Feelings

Choose the Best Language

Share Multiple Feelings

Recognize the Difference Between Feeling and Acting

Accept Responsibility for Your Feelings

Choose the Best Time and Place to Express Your Feelings

9.4 Managing Emotions

Facilitative and Debilitative Emotions

Thoughts Cause Feelings

Irrational Thinking and Debilitative Emotions

Minimizing Debilitative Emotions

Maximizing Facilitative Emotions

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ **Features**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “How to Turn Anxiety into Excitement”**

■ **AT WORK: Emotional Labor on the Job**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “When Emotions Are Contagious”**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Use Your Words**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Regulating Your Emotions Interpersonally**

■ **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: Toxic Positivity: Too Much of a Good Thing**

10 Dynamics of Interpersonal Relationships

10.1 Why We Form Relationships

Appearance

Similarity

Complementarity

Rewards

Competency

Proximity

Disclosure

10.2 Models of Relational Dynamics

Stages of Relational Development

Dialectical Tensions

10.3 Communicating About Relationships

Content and Relational Messages

Maintaining and Supporting Relationships

Repairing Damaged Relationships

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ Features

■ **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: The Anguish of Abusive Relationships**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: The Value of Online Profiles for First Dates**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Couples Swap Phones and Go Through Each Other’s History”**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Metacommunication in Online Discussions**

■ **AT WORK: Relational Repair on the Job**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “The Power of Forgiveness”**

11 Communication in Close Relationships: Friends, Family, and Romantic Partners

11.1 Communication in Friendships

Types of Friendships

Communication in Successful Friendships

11.2 Communication in the Family

Creating the Family Through Communication

Patterns of Family Communication

Effective Communication in Families

11.3 Communication in Romantic Relationships

Characteristics of Romantic Relationships

Effective Communication in Romantic Relationships

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ Features

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Making and Developing Friendships**

- **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Can Men and Women Be Just Friends?”**
- **AT WORK: Social Media Friendships with Coworkers**
- **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Affectionate Communication: It’s (Even) Better to Give Than Receive**
- **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Love Languages”**
- **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: Pornography and Relational Quality**

12 Managing Conflict

12.1 What Is Conflict?

- Expressed Struggle
- Interdependence
- Perceived Incompatible Goals
- Perceived Scarce Resources
- Inevitability

12.2 Conflict Styles

- Avoidance (Lose-Lose)
- Accommodation (Lose-Win)
- Competition (Win-Lose)
- Compromise
- Collaboration (Win-Win)
- Which Style to Use?

12.3 Conflict in Relational Systems

- Complementary and Symmetrical Conflict
- Serial Arguments
- Toxic Conflict: The “Four Horsemen”
- Conflict Rituals

12.4 Conflict Management in Practice

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ **Features**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: The Dangers of Mind-Reading Expectations**

■ **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: Ghosting: The Ultimate Silent Treatment**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Signs You’re the Passive Aggressive Friend”**

■ **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”**

■ **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Taking Conflict Personally**

■ **AT WORK: Managing Conflict via Email**

13 Communication Climate

13.1 What Is a Communication Climate?

13.2 How Communication Climates Develop

Levels of Message Confirmation

Causes and Effects of Defensiveness

13.3 Creating Supportive Climates

Evaluation Versus Description

Control Versus Problem Orientation

Strategy Versus Spontaneity

Neutrality Versus Empathy

Superiority Versus Equality

Certainty Versus Provisionalism

13.4 Conversation: From Monologue to Dialogue

Casual Conversation

Civil Dialogue

Check your Understanding

Activities

■ **Features**

■ **DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: Cyberbullying: Inflicting Pain Online**

- **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “Have You Heard About Phubbing?”**
- **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: When Defensiveness Thwarts Support**
- **FOCUS ON RESEARCH: Maintaining a Supportive Classroom Climate**
- **AT WORK: Telling STAR Stories in Job Interviews**
- **WATCH AND DISCUSS: “What Do You Do When Someone Just Doesn’t Like You?”**

Glossary

References

Credits

Author Index

Subject Index

Preface

Ronald B. Adler

Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II

Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh

Arizona State University

The nature of interpersonal communication has changed dramatically in recent years. Technology has transformed how many personal relationships evolve and operate. The COVID-19 pandemic affected how we connect and interact in ways no one could have anticipated. Cultural trends and gender identity have become increasingly prominent.

This new edition of *Interplay* reflects communication as it operates in today's world. At the same time, it emphasizes enduring principles and skills that are as important now as ever. It builds on the approach that has served students and professors well over four decades. Its accessible writing style presents concepts in a straightforward way. Thought-provoking features highlight their relevance. A host of skills give students tools for improving their own interpersonal communication. Research and theory aren't presented for their own sake, but rather to explain how the process of interpersonal communication operates in everyday life. Material is grounded in

scholarship: *Interplay* cites more than 1,500 sources, nearly a third of which are new to this edition. These citations have a strong communication focus, as we continue to spotlight scholarship from our field.

New in This Edition

For long-time users, a quick scan of this edition will reveal some significant changes:

Enhanced photo program Dozens of fresh pop culture and evocative photos illustrate principles in the text. Movies featured in captioned photos include *The Hate U Give*, *Can You Keep a Secret?*, *The King of Staten Island*, *No Way Home*, *Moxie*, *Free Guy*, and *CODA*. Series include *We Are Lady Parts*, *Squid Game*, *The Afterparty*, *Abbott Elementary*, *The Dropout*, *Ozark*, *In Treatment*, *Ted Lasso*, *Emily in Paris*, *Succession*, and *Inventing Anna*. Featured pop culture figures include NFL receiver A.J. Brown, musical artist Billie Eilish, actor Asia Kate Dillon, skier Lindsey Vonn, and tennis star Naomi Osaka.

New sidebars and features There are more than a dozen new *Focus on Research*, *At Work*, and *Dark Side of Communication* sidebars in this edition. These describe studies about maintaining long-distance romances through texting, using one's voice to confront racism, the choice to reveal or conceal tattoos, the value of online profiles for first dates, the benefits of expressing affection, the pros

and cons of working from home, communicating professionally via video, and how too much positive communication can become toxic. There are also six new *Watch and Discuss* video features in this edition illustrating the damaging effects of enhancing beauty online, invading personal space in public, and the disconfirming impact of “phubbing.”

Revised and expanded sections include enhanced coverage of gender identity in [Chapter 3](#); a new introduction to [Chapter 6](#) (based on the powerful story of a college valedictorian with nonspeaking autism); new material and research on why we form relationships in [Chapter 10](#); a new table elaborating Knapp’s relational stages in [Chapter 10](#); a more inclusive rendering of friendship, gender, and communication in [Chapter 11](#); a new section on fostering intimacy in [Chapter 11](#); and an expanded section on civil dialogue in [Chapter 13](#). There are also more than 450 new research citations in this edition, with up-to-date scholarship embedded throughout every chapter.

Activities Every chapter in this edition of *Interplay* ends with four new activities: *Build Your Skill*, *Ethical Challenge*, *Reflection*, and *Self-Appraisal*. These activities are referenced in the body of the chapter, with links to the activities in the ebook. Each chapter concludes with an *Assessing Your Communication* quiz.

Digital Resources

Whether you have taught with *Interplay* for many years or are encountering it for the first time, you'll discover a toolkit of material that makes teaching more efficient and learning more effective.

Optimize Student Learning with Oxford Insight

Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication is available with Oxford Insight. **Oxford Insight** delivers the trusted and student-friendly content of *Interplay* within a powerful, data-driven learning experience designed to increase student success. A guided and curated learning environment—delivered either via LMS/VLE integration or as a standalone resource—**Oxford Insight** provides access to the e-book, multimedia resources, assignable/gradable activities and exercises, and analytics on student achievement and progress.

Developed with applied social, motivational and personalized learning research, **Oxford Insight** enables instructors to deliver an immersive experience that empowers students by actively engaging them with assigned reading. This approach, paired with real-time actionable data about student performance, helps instructors ensure that all students are best supported along their unique learning paths.

With Oxford Insight, instructors can:

Assign auto-score multiple-choice, fill-in, and other machine-gradable questions

Score specific items (including open-ended questions) with feedback

Set personalized paths for students based on learner-specific performance


Export grades and change grading points

Establish a course roster and add/drop students

Share courses and resources with students and faculty

Sync real-time assignments with gradebooks

Author and/or customize content within the courseware

For more information on how *Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication* powered by Oxford Insight can enrich the teaching and learning experience in your course, please visit  oxfordinsight.oup.com or contact your Oxford University Press representative.

Oxford Learning Link

Oxford Learning Link is your central hub for a wealth of engaging instructor resources. Material hosted there includes the instructor's manual, test bank, Lecture PowerPoints, and Image PowerPoints.

Acknowledgments

The book you are reading wouldn't have been possible without the help of many talented people. We are grateful to the many colleagues whose suggestions have helped make this book a far better one:

Emily Abellon

University of Denver

Jessica Fabbricatore

University of Georgia

Stacy Fitzpatrick

North Hennepin Community College

Brooke Hanniff

Cerritos College

Brittany Hochstaetter

Wake Tech Community College

Julie Mayberry

North Carolina State University

Selena Pang

University of Georgia

Karri Pearson

Normandale Community College

Interplay continues to benefit from the contributions of these colleagues who helped shape previous editions:

Julie Allee

Ivy Tech Community College

Marcanne Andersen

Tidewater Community College

Angie M. S. Anderson

Anoka-Ramsey Community College

Marie Arcidiacono

Los Medanos College–Brentwood Campus

Aurora Auter

University of Southwestern Louisiana

Diane M. Badzinski

Colorado Christian University

Margaret Baker

Kalamazoo Valley Community College

Nancy Bandiera

LaGuardia Community College

Sharon Beal

Long Beach City College/Chapman University

Constance Berman

Berkshire Community College

Heather Bixler

College of the Sequoias

Ellen Bland

Central Carolina Community College

Sandra Bodin-Lerner

Kean University

Jennifer Bone

Front Range Community College

Mark Bottita

Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana

Colleen Butcher

University of Florida

Chantele S. Carr

Estrella Mountain College

Leeva Chung

University of San Diego

Kathleen Czech

Point Loma Nazarene University

Andrea M. Davis

University of South Carolina Upstate

Audrey Deterding

Northern Arizona University

Patricia Dobson

Eastern New Mexico University

Liz Edgecomb

Xavier University of Louisiana

Sarah Ellis

Mitchell Technical Institute

Katrina Eicher

Elizabethtown Community College

Vanessa Ferguson

Mott Community College

Susan Fletcher

Hocking College

Karyn Friesen

Lone Star College—Montgomery

Kristin K. Froemling

Radford University

Darlene J. Geiger

Portland State University

Denise Gilmer-Knudson

College of Southern Maryland

Debra Gonsher

Bronx Community College

Michelle Graber

Mitchell Technical Institute

Em Griffin

Wheaton College

Edna Grover-Bisker

Missouri University of Science and Technology

Lowell Habel

Chapman University

Gail Hankins

Wake Technical College

Debra Harper-LeBlanc

Lone Star College–North Harris

Meredith Harrigan

SUNY Geneseo

Kristin Haun

University of Tennessee

Lisa C. Hebert

Louisiana State University

Brittany W. Hochstaetter

Wake Technical Community College

Shaorong Huang

Raymond Walters College—University of Cincinnati

Daniel Johnson

Southwestern Michigan College

Joy A. Jones

Atlantic Cape Community College

Beverly Merrill Kelley

California Lutheran University

Betty Kennan

Radford University

Cheryl Knowles-Harrigan

Atlantic Cape Community College

Jessica Kratzer

Northern Kentucky University

Anastasia Kurylo

Marymount Manhattan College

Andrea Lambert South

Northern Kentucky University

Deborah Layton

Cowley College

Shyla Lefever

Old Dominion University

Phil Martin

North Central State College

Julie Mayberry

North Carolina State University

Bonnie McCracken

SUNY Geneseo

Cynara M. Medina

Western Nevada College

Lucas Messer

Scottsdale Community College

Tim Moreland

Catawba College

Mark Morman

Baylor University

Kelly Morrison

Michigan State University

Candice Munoz

Mott Community College

Donell Murray

Morehead State University

Johance F. Murray

Hostos Community College/CUNY

Noreen Mysyk

North Central College

Gretchen R. Norling

University of West Florida

Jennifer Ott

Kalamazoo Valley Community College

Craig Parmley

Ivy Tech Community College

Karri Pearson

Normandale Community College

Joey Pogue

Pittsburg State University

Tracey Powers

Central Arizona College

Laurie Pratt

Chaffey College

Narissra Punyanunt-Carter

Texas Tech University

Rasha I. Ramzy

Georgia State University

Leighann Rehtin

Ivy Tech Community College

Rachel Reznik

Elmhurst College

Elizabeth Ribarsky

University of Illinois—Springfield

Gregory Rickert

Bluegrass Community & Technical College

Jennifer Riggs Smith

Ivy Tech Community College

Lori Roe

Ivy Tech Community College

Jennifer A. Samp

University of Georgia

Heidi Schara

Riverland Community College

Julie Simanski

Des Moines Area Community College

Debbie Sonandre

Tacoma Community College

Renee Strom

Saint Cloud State University

Dennis Sutton

Grand Rapids Community College

Lindsay Timmerman

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

Samantha Valencia

Moreno Valley College

Anita Vangelisti

University of Texas at Austin

Judith Vogel

Des Moines Area Community College

Rebecca Wells-Gonzalez

Ivy Tech Community College

Emanuelle Wessels

Missouri State University

Stacie Williams

Portland Community College

Michael Witt

Waukesha County Technical College

Gordon Young

Kingsborough Community College

Our sincere thanks also go to Mary Ann McHugh, who served as Contributing Editor on this edition. Mary Ann took primary responsibility for revising six chapters and also contributed citations and photo ideas throughout the book. She did so with an energy and good spirit that made the process enjoyable for everyone on the *Interplay* team. We look forward to working with Mary Ann on future editions.

We salute the team of talented and congenial professionals at Oxford University Press, led and inspired by Petra Recter. We thank Jaime Burns and Steve Helba, Acquisitions Editors; Maeve O'Brien, Content Development Editor; Mia Cirillo, Editorial Operations Assistant; Michele Laseau, Art Director; Keith Faivre, Senior Production Editor; Theresa Stockton, Content Operations Manager; Laura Ewen, Marketing Manager; Kaylee Williams, Marketing Assistant. As always, our Senior Development Editor, Lauren Mine, deserves special acknowledgment for previous editions: A full account of her contributions would require a book of its own. Our thanks also go to Tara Tovell for her copyediting talents and to Arc Indexing, Inc., for crafting the useful indexes. Sean Hynd of OUP Canada tracked down image permissions, while Sherri Adler chose the evocative photos that help make *Interplay* unique.

About the Authors

Ronald B. Adler

Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II

Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh

Arizona State University

Ronald B. Adler is Professor Emeritus of Communication at Santa Barbara City College. He is coauthor of *Understanding Human Communication* (OUP, 2024); *Essential Communication* (OUP, 2022); *Looking Out, Looking In* (2023); and *Communicating at Work: Principles and Practices for Business and the Professions* (2023). Beyond his professional life, Ron tries to give back to his community. He also enjoys cycling, hiking, traveling, and spending time with his family.

Russell F. Proctor II is Professor Emeritus of Communication at Northern Kentucky University. He won NKU's Outstanding Professor Award in 1997 and has also received recognition for his teaching from the National Communication Association, the Central States Communication Association, and the Kentucky Communication Association. Russ joined the *Interplay* team in the mid-1990s and was the lead author on this edition of the book. He loves sports, music, binge-watching TV series, and traveling with family and friends.

1

Interpersonal Process

Ronald B. Adler

Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II

Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh

Arizona State University




LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Outline the needs that communication satisfies.**
- 1.2 Explain the interpersonal communication process, from its transactional nature to governing principles.**
- 1.3 Describe the characteristics of interpersonal versus impersonal communication.**
- 1.4 Identify characteristics of effective communication and competent communicators.**

EVERYONE COMMUNICATES. Students and professors, parents and children, employers and employees, friends, strangers, and enemies—all communicate. We have been communicating with others from earliest childhood and will almost certainly keep doing so until we die.

Why study an activity you've done your entire life? First, studying interpersonal communication will give you a new look at a familiar topic. For instance, you may not have realized that you can't *not* communicate or that more communication doesn't always improve relationships—topics you'll read about in a few pages. In this sense, exploring human communication is like studying anatomy or botany—everyday objects and processes take on new meaning.

A second, more compelling reason is that we all could stand to be more effective communicators. Surveys show that communication problems are at the root of most relational breakups, ahead of factors such as money, sex, or other conflict issues ([Entwistle et al., 2021](#); [Gravningen et al., 2017](#)). Ineffective communication is also a major problem in the workplace, leading to stress, failure to complete projects, and a loss of sales ([Tishma, 2019](#)). In other words, poor communication isn't just a symptom of strained personal or professional relationships; it's often the cause.



Pause now to make a mental list of communication problems you have encountered. You'll probably see that no matter how successful your relationships are at home, with friends, at school, and at work, there's plenty of room for improvement in your everyday life. The information that follows will help you communicate better with some of the people who matter most to you.

1.1 Why We Communicate

Research demonstrating the importance of communication has been around longer than you might think. Frederick II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 1220 to 1250, reportedly carried out experiments on language deprivation. A medieval historian described a dramatically inhumane one, in which Frederick forbade foster mothers and nurses from talking to babies and children:

He bade foster mothers and nurses to suckle the children, to bathe and wash them, but in no way to prattle with them, for he wanted to learn whether they would speak the Hebrew language, which was the oldest, or Greek, or Latin, or Arabic, or perhaps the language of their parents, of whom they had been born. But he labored in vain because all the children died. For they could not live without the petting and joyful faces and loving words of their foster mothers. ([Ross & McLaughlin, 1949](#))

Social scientists have found less barbaric ways to investigate the importance of communication. In one classic study of isolation, five volunteers were paid to remain alone in a locked room. One lasted for 8 days. Three held out for 2 days, one commenting, “Never again.” The fifth participant lasted only 2 hours ([Schachter, 1959](#)). Based on findings like this, psychologists have since concluded that solitary confinement is a form of torture ([Muller, 2018](#)).

The costs of social isolation became prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of people around the world were forced to isolate—some for months—without physical contact with anyone outside their household. Experts found that this separation took a toll on people’s

mental and physical well-being ([Clair et al., 2021](#)). And more than a third of surveyed Americans said that socializing and going out became less enticing after the pandemic ([Sharpe & Spencer, 2022](#)). It may be years before there's a full reckoning of the impact of the pandemic on personal and relational health. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for a related reflection exercise.)

It's true that everybody needs alone time, often more than we get (more on that later in this chapter). On the other hand, there's a point beyond which solitude becomes loneliness. In other words, we all need people. We all need to communicate.

1.1.1 Physical Needs

Communication is so important that its presence or absence affects health. People who process a negative experience by putting their feelings into words report improved life satisfaction, as well as enhanced mental and physical health, compared with those who only think privately about it ([Torre & Lieberman, 2018](#)). Research conducted with police officers found that being able to talk easily with colleagues and supervisors about work-related trauma was linked to greater physical and mental health ([Stephens & Long, 2000](#)). And a broader study of over 3,500 adults revealed that as little as 10 minutes of talking a day, face to face or by phone, improves memory and boosts intellectual function ([Ybarra et al., 2008](#)).

Watch and Discuss 1.1: "Going It Alone"

[Please note: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. How long do you think you could last without interpersonal communication? What effects would this loss have on you?
2. Discuss the relationship between loneliness and communication.

Note: This video previews topics covered extensively in later chapters, including social media ([Chapter 2](#)), social comparison ([Chapter 4](#)), listening ([Chapter 8](#)), and interpersonal relationships ([Chapters 10](#) and [11](#)).

In extreme cases, communication can even become a matter of life or death. As a navy pilot, the late U.S. Senator John McCain was shot down over North Vietnam and held as a prisoner of war (POW) for more than 5 years, often in solitary confinement. POWs in his camp set up codes to send messages by tapping on walls, laboriously spelling out words. McCain described the importance of maintaining contact with one another despite serious risks:

The punishment for communicating could be severe, and a few POWs, having been caught and beaten for their efforts, had their spirits broken as their bodies were battered. Terrified of a return trip to the punishment room, they would lie still in their cells when their comrades tried to tap them up on the wall. Very few would remain uncommunicative for long. To suffer all this alone was less tolerable than torture. Withdrawing in silence from the fellowship of other Americans ... was to us the approach of death. ([McCain, 1999](#))

Communication isn't a necessity just for POWs. Evidence gathered by a host of researchers (e.g., [Dunbar, 2021](#); [Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015](#); [Yang et al., 2016](#)) has shown that interpersonal relationships are vital among civilians as well. For example:

- Socially connected people—those with strong networks of family and friends—live an average of 3.7 years longer than those who are socially isolated.
- People with strong relationships have significantly lower risks of coronary disease, hypertension, and excess weight than do people with less social integration.
- Divorced, separated, or widowed people are 5 to 10 times more likely to need hospitalization for mental illnesses than their married counterparts. Happily married people also have lower incidences of pneumonia, surgery, and cancer than single people. (It's important to note that the *quality* of the relationship is more important than the institution of marriage in these studies.)



After spending a year alone in space, astronaut Scott Kelly described his biggest challenge: “I think the hardest part is being isolated in a physical sense from people on the ground that are important to you.” *How satisfied are you with the amount and quality of personal contact in your life? What would be the ideal amount of contact?* [View larger image](#)

1.1.2 Identity Needs

Communication does more than enable us to survive. It’s the primary way we learn who we are ([Harwood, 2005](#)). As you’ll read in [Chapter 4](#), our sense of identity comes from the ways we interact with other people. Do you consider yourself smart or foolish, attractive or unattractive, skillful or inept? The answers to these questions don’t

come from looking in the mirror. The reactions of others shape identity.

Consider the case of the famous “Wild Boy of Aveyron,” who appeared to have spent his early childhood without human contact. The boy was discovered in January 1800 while digging for vegetables in a French village garden. He could not speak, and he showed no behaviors one would expect in a social human. More significant was his lack of any identity as a human being. As author [Roger Shattuck \(1980\)](#) put it, “The boy had no human sense of being in the world. He had no sense of himself as a person related to other persons.” Only after the influence of a loving foster mother did the boy begin to behave as a human.

Contemporary accounts support the essential role communication plays in shaping identity. In some cases, children who have been raised with limited or no human contact have demonstrated communication patterns similar to those of animals they grew up around ([Newton, 2002](#)). They do not appear to have developed a sense of themselves as humans before interacting with other people. Similarly, *Dani’s Story* ([Lierow, 2011](#)) tells of an abandoned child who was rescued by a loving family and taught to communicate. After considerable time and investment, she was ultimately able to say of herself, “I pretty.”

Each of us enters the world with little or no sense of identity. You gain an idea of who you are from the way others define you. As [Chapter 4](#) explains, the messages each of us receives in early childhood are the strongest identity shapers, although the influence of others continues throughout life.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

The Epidemic of Loneliness

“Ah, look at all the lonely people,” sang the Beatles in the 1960s. Little did they know that in the following decades, loneliness would become an even greater social issue. A 2018 study revealed that roughly 20 percent of Americans always or often feel lonely or socially isolated ([DiJulio et al., 2018](#)). A more recent survey nearly tripled those estimates ([Minemyer, 2022](#)). Both studies show that loneliness takes a toll on one’s physical, mental, and relational wellbeing—so much so that the U.S. Surgeon General identified loneliness as a health epidemic ([Caron, 2023](#)).

For years, loneliness research focused on older people, who were likely to have experienced retirement, relocation, or the death of loved ones. But recent studies show that loneliness is also rampant among younger people ([Richardson, 2019](#)). Many have blamed technology, as you’ll read in [Chapter 2](#). Ironically, the same digital devices that can enable communication might bear some responsibility for new levels of loneliness ([Davis et al., 2019](#)).

Experts believe one solution is to engage in the cognitive reappraisal process described in [Chapter 9](#) ([Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018](#)). Changing your self-talk (“I want to be with others; others want to be with me”) is the starting point for changing your feelings and consequent behavior. Another recommendation is volunteer service, where you’re likely to

communicate with likeminded people and feel positive about contributing to a larger cause ([Caron, 2021](#)).

All of this research points to the fact that communicating with and relating to others are basic to human health.

1.1.3 Social Needs

Because interpersonal relationships are vital, some theorists argue that communicating with others is the primary goal of human existence, foundational to life satisfaction ([Rohrer et al, 2018](#)). One anthropologist ([Goldschmidt, 1990](#)) calls the drive for meeting social needs through communication “the human career.”

There’s a strong link between the quality of communication and the success of relationships. For example, children who grow up in strong conversation-oriented families report having more satisfying friendships when they become adults ([Ledbetter, 2009](#)). Perhaps that’s why parents identify communication as the most important skill set their children need to succeed in life, both personally and professionally ([Goo, 2015](#)).

Despite knowing that communication is crucial to social satisfaction, evidence suggests that many people aren’t very successful at managing their interpersonal relationships. For example, one-third of Americans say they’ve never interacted with their neighbors, up from one-fifth who said the same just a few decades ago ([Poon, 2015](#)). Of greater concern is that most Americans report having fewer close friends than

they once did ([Cox, 2021](#)). They talk with those friends more infrequently and rely on them less for social support.

But ongoing relationships aren't the only way to meet social needs. Making small talk with strangers—a friendly cashier, a fellow dog owner at the park, a person standing with you in a line—generally raises happiness levels for all parties involved ([Nicolaus, 2019](#)). One study paired strangers in get-to-know-you video chats ([Reece et al., 2023](#)). Before and after these 1,656 conversations, researchers asked how the participants were feeling. The results were surprising:

Remarkably, people in every age group reported feeling significantly better after a conversation with a stranger compared to how they felt before they began the call.

They didn't feel just a *little bit* happier; the mood boost they got from these conversations was astonishing, comparable in size to proven happiness boosters like exercising or expressing gratitude. ([Carter et al., 2023](#))

This doesn't mean you need to chat with every person you meet or share personal information with strangers. What it suggests is that human beings are social creatures who benefit from making interpersonal connections—even small ones.

1.1.4 Practical Needs

Along with satisfying physical, identity, and social needs, communication is essential in dealing with more practical matters. It's how we tell the hairstylist to take just a little off the sides, ask for directions, or inform the plumber the broken pipe needs attention *now!*

Beyond these simple types of needs, a wealth of research demonstrates that communication is an essential ingredient for success in virtually every career ([Coffelt et al., 2016](#); [Mitchell et al., 2022](#)) That’s why a broad survey ([Schaffhauser, 2019](#)) showed that employers are looking foremost for these “uniquely human skills” in new hires, regardless of field:

- The ability to listen
- Attentiveness and attention to detail
- Effective communication
- Critical thinking
- Strong interpersonal abilities

@WORK

Office Versus Home: Communication Considerations

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, job and home were separate domains for most people. Then suddenly millions of employers shut down on-site operations. Platforms like Zoom, Teams, and Meet became the new workspace. You couldn’t come to the office even if you wanted to.

After almost two years, working onsite became an option again. Some employers encouraged—even demanded—that personnel return to the office. “We don’t invent rockets that land themselves by people working on Zoom calls once a week,” said one Silicon Valley executive ([Goldberg, 2022b](#)). “We have to get together in a room and get on whiteboards.” Others embraced the idea of continuing remote work. “We’re operating in a virtual

environment” said another CEO, “and we’re not going to change that” ([Telford, 2022](#)).

Employee reaction was varied. Some workers welcomed the chance to reconnect with colleagues and clients in person. Others had become attached to the flexibility of working remotely. And for some, working from home removed stresses that can come from office life, such as social exclusion because of a personal identity ([Goldberg, 2022a](#)). As one Black woman observed about workplace interaction, “The side conversations, the pre-meeting conversations, the post-meeting conversations, the inside jokes—they all subtly add up to tell you that you don’t quite fit.”

As you look for a rewarding job, consider your communication preferences. If you’re energized by face-to-face collaboration and socializing with the team, look for an organization that encourages in-person interaction. If your personal needs and work style favor independence and flexibility, you’ll be happier in a company that fits this model. And perhaps a hybrid home–office approach will be the best match of all.

On-the-job communication skills can even make the difference between life and death for doctors, nurses, and other medical practitioners. Researchers discovered that “communication failures” in hospitals and doctors’ offices were linked to more than 1,700 U.S. deaths in a recent 5-year period ([Bailey, 2016](#)). Studies also show a significant difference between the communication skills of physicians who had no malpractice claims against them and doctors with previous claims ([Carroll, 2015](#)).

Communication is just as important outside of work. This book will introduce you to a variety of practical skills—such as perception-checking, active listening, responsible language use, win–win conflict management—that will enhance your success in the personal relationships described in [Chapters 10](#) and [11](#).

Psychologist [Abraham Maslow \(1968\)](#) suggested that human needs fall into five categories, which must be satisfied in order. As you read about each need, think about the role of communication. The most basic needs are *physical*: sufficient air, water, food, and rest and the ability to reproduce as a species. The second category of Maslow’s needs involves *safety*: protection from threats to our well-being. Beyond physical and safety concerns are the *social* needs described earlier. Next, Maslow suggests that each of us has the need for *self-esteem*: the desire to believe we are worthwhile, valuable people. The final category of needs involves *self-actualization*: the desire to develop our potential to the maximum, to become the best person we can be.

1.2 The Communication Process

So far, we have talked about communication as if its meaning were perfectly clear. In fact, scholars have debated the definition of communication for years ([Littlejohn et al., 2021](#)). Despite their many disagreements, most would concur that at its essence, **communication** is about using messages to generate meanings ([Korn et al., 2000](#)). Notice how this basic definition holds true across a variety of contexts—public speaking, small groups, mass media, and so forth. The goal of this section is to explain how messages and meanings are created in interpersonal communication and to describe the many factors involved in this complex process.

1.2.1 Early Models of Communication

As the old saying goes, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” With that principle in mind, social scientists of the 1950s created models of the communication process. These early, simplistic models characterized communication as a one-way, linear event—something a sender “does” by encoding a message and delivering it to a passive receiver who decodes it. This one-way process resembles an archer (the sender) shooting an arrow (the message) at a target (the receiver). For some examples of communication, a linear model can be fitting. If

you labor over a thank-you note to get the tone just right before sending it, your message is primarily a one-way effort.

Later models represented communication as more of a tennis game, in which players hit balls (send messages) to receivers who then respond. This **feedback**, or response to a previous message, can be verbal or nonverbal. A back-and-forth chain of text messages seems to fit this description pretty well.

Yet those models fail to capture the complexity of the human beings involved in the process. Over time, communication theorists developed increasingly sophisticated versions in an attempt to depict all the factors that affect human interaction.

1.2.2 Insights from the Transactional Communication Model

No model can completely represent the process of communication any more than a map can capture everything about the neighborhood where you live. Still, [Figure 1.1](#) reflects a number of important characteristics of **transactional communication**, the dynamic process in which communicators create meaning together through interaction.

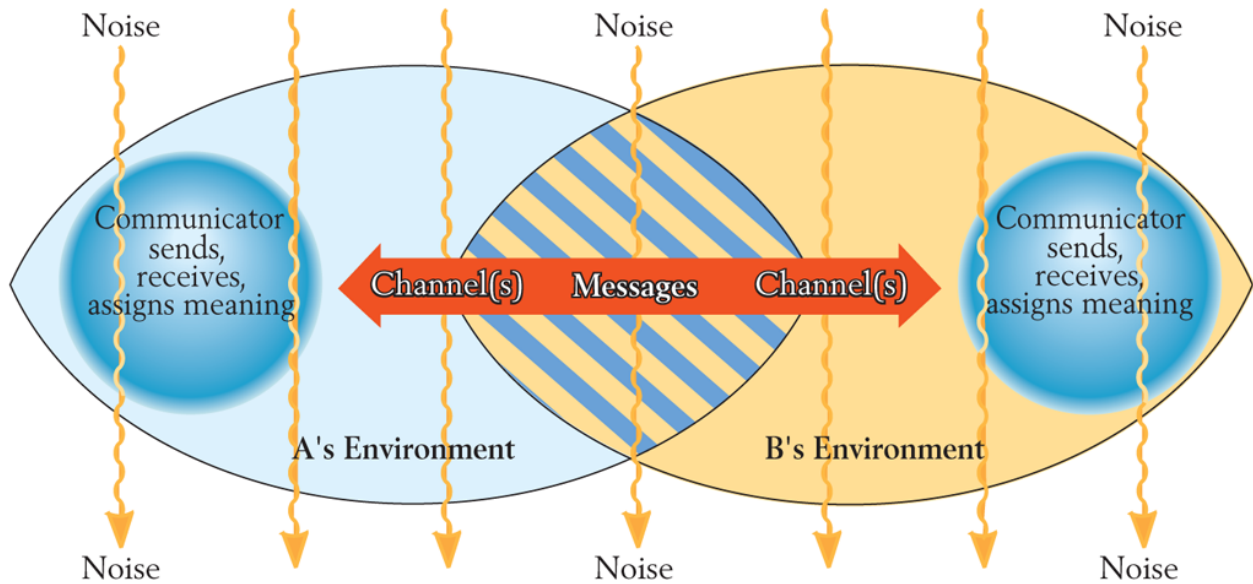


FIGURE 1.1 Transactional Communication Model [View larger image](#)

Sending and Receiving Are Usually Simultaneous

Some forms of communication, such as email, social media posts, voice messages, or “snail mail” letters, are asynchronous: There’s a delay between when they are sent and received. But in face-to-face interaction, it’s hard to distinguish sender and receiver. Consider a few examples:

- A teacher explaining a difficult concept to a student after class
- A parent lecturing a teenager about the family’s curfew rules
- A salesperson giving a customer information about a product

The impulse is to identify the teacher, parent, and salesperson as senders, whereas the student, teenager, and customer are receivers. Now imagine a confused look on the student’s face; the teenager interrupting defensively; the customer blankly staring into the

distance. It's easy to see that these verbal and nonverbal responses are messages being sent, even while the other person is talking. Because it's often impossible to distinguish sender from receiver, our communication model replaces these roles with the more accurate term *communicator*. This term reflects the fact that—at least in face-to-face situations—people are simultaneously senders and receivers who exchange multiple messages.

Meanings Exist in and Among People

A time-honored axiom among communication scholars is that “meanings are in people.” A word, phrase, or gesture doesn't have meaning until you give it meaning. Perhaps you can think of a comment someone meant as an insult but you took positively. Likewise, you may interpret someone's compliment (“You're pretty smart”) as a backhanded jab (think of ways you could construe that phrase negatively). The same is true with nonverbal cues. You might see a furrowed brow as a signal to stop talking, when the person was trying to communicate genuine interest. It's important to realize that you assign meaning to words and gestures in unique ways—and that your interpretations might not match others' intentions.

1. How do you interpret the phrase “like a girl”? Has that changed for you over the years?
2. Discuss how this video illustrates the notion that *meanings exist in and among people*.

But meanings aren't assigned in a vacuum. Each of us is shaped by the environment in which we live (more on this in the following section). You learn and create meanings with others, which is why meaning is also *among* people. In the United States, a raised middle finger is a gesture of contempt, while “thumbs up” is positive. You'll read in [Chapter 7](#) that nonverbal signals like these have different meanings in other cultures. As long as you're in the U.S., however, you need to follow societal rules for using these gestures (don't “flip the bird” to a judge and then explain that it means “Have a nice day” to you). Similarly, we decide with others which words are “good” and “bad”—and those meanings can shift over time and within co-cultures. Consider how “wicked” and “sick” are high compliments in some settings.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

A Better Understanding of Misunderstandings

It never feels good to be misunderstood. A team led by Renee Edwards surveyed 400 undergraduate students about misunderstandings in interpersonal relationships. Their findings offer helpful previews of topics covered in this textbook. Here are some of their conclusions:

- *Misunderstandings occur more often in mediated communication than in the face-to-face variety.* One respondent described how the simple text response “k” can be interpreted—or misinterpreted—in a host of ways. See [Chapter 2](#) for more on mediated communication, and [Section 7.2.4](#) on the challenges of decoding text-based messages.

- *Relational satisfaction leads to fewer misunderstandings and more open communication.* The state of your relationship affects the quality of your communication. See [Chapter 10](#) for information on building and maintaining satisfying interpersonal relationships.
- *Misunderstandings between romantic partners are rated as more serious than those with friends.* [Chapter 11](#) takes a close look at communication in friendships, families, and romantic relationships.

It's challenging to share meaning with others, even in our closest relationships. This textbook offers a variety of concepts and skills to help communicators reach mutual understanding.

Edwards, R., Frost, J., Harvey, A. J., Navarro, M., & Adams, B. T. (2020). Relationships among misunderstanding, relationship type, channel, and relational satisfaction. *Communication Research Reports*, 37, 298–308.

Environment and Noise Affect Communication

Problems often arise because communicators occupy different **environments** (sometimes called *contexts*): fields of experience that help them make sense of others' behavior. In communication terminology, *environment* refers not only to a physical location but also to the personal experiences and cultural background that participants bring to a conversation. You can appreciate the influence of environments by considering your beliefs about an important topic such as work, marriage, or government policies. How might your beliefs be different if your personal history were different?

Notice how the model in [Figure 1.1](#) shows that the environments of **A** and **B** overlap. This intersecting area represents the background the communicators have in common. If this overlap didn't exist, communication would be difficult, if not impossible.

Whereas similar environments often facilitate communication, different backgrounds can make effective communication more challenging. Consider just some of the factors that might contribute to different environments, and to communication challenges as a result:

- **A** might belong to one ethnic group and **B** to another.
- **A** might have a lot of money and **B** have relatively little.
- **A** might be rushed and **B** have nowhere to go.
- **A** might have lived a long, eventful life, and **B** could be young and inexperienced.
- **A** might be passionately concerned with the subject and **B** indifferent to it.

Another factor in the environment that makes communication difficult is what communication scholars call **noise**: anything that interferes with the transmission and reception of a message. Three types of noise can disrupt communication. *External noise* includes factors outside the receiver that make it difficult to hear, as well as many other kinds of distractions. For instance, loud music in a bar or a jackhammer grinding in the street might make it hard for you to pay attention to another person. *Physiological noise* involves biological factors in the receiver that interfere with accurate reception: hearing loss, lack of vision, illness, and so on. *Psychological noise* refers to cognitive

factors that make communication less effective. For instance, a woman who is called “girl” may become so irritated that she has trouble listening to the rest of a speaker’s message.

Channels Make a Difference

Communication scholars use the term **channel** to describe the medium through which messages are exchanged ([Lee, 2022](#)). Along with face-to-face interaction, you have the option of using mediated channels such as texting, email, phone calls, and social media. The communication channel can affect the way you respond to a message. For example, a string of texted emojis probably won’t have the same effect as a handwritten expression of affection, and being fired from a job in person would likely feel different from getting the bad news in an email.

Even small channel differences can affect the messages you create. For instance, you’re more likely to send negative Twitter posts from a mobile device than you would from a computer ([Murthy et al., 2015](#)). Mobile-sent tweets also tend to be more egocentric, using first-person pronouns such as *I, me, my, mine*. In other words, the phrase “I’m mad” is more typical of a tweet posted from a phone than from a computer. That’s because mobile devices encourage more spontaneous communication—for better or for worse. In the next chapter, you’ll read much more about choosing the best channel for the situation.

1.2.3 Communication Principles

Beyond communication models, several principles explain the nature of communication. Communication is transactional—created through interaction; it can be intentional or unintentional; it is irreversible; it is unrepeatable; and it involves both content and relationship dimensions.

Communication Is Transactional

The transactional model suggests that communicators create meaning through their interaction with one another. Perhaps the most important consequence of communication's transactional nature is mutual influence. To put it simply, communication isn't something we do *to* others; rather, it is an activity we do *with* them.

In this sense, communication is like dancing with a partner: No matter how skilled you are, success depends on the other person's behavior as well as your own. In communication and in dancing, the partners must adapt to and coordinate with each other. Further, relational communication—like dancing—is a unique creation that arises from how the partners interact. The way you dance probably varies from one partner to another because of its cooperative, transactional nature. Likewise, the way you communicate almost certainly varies with different partners. That's why competent communicators score high in adaptability, as you'll read later in this chapter.

Psychologist [Kenneth Gergen \(1991\)](#) expresses the transactional nature of communication well when he points out how our success depends on interaction with others. As he says, “one cannot be ‘attractive’ without others who are attracted, a ‘leader’ without others

willing to follow, or a ‘loving person’ without others to affirm with appreciation.”



Communication Can Be Intentional or Unintentional

Some communication is clearly deliberate: You probably plan your words carefully before asking the boss for a raise or offering constructive criticism. A minority of scholars (e.g., [Motley, 1990](#)) argue that only intentional messages like these qualify as communication. However, others (e.g., [Buck & VanLear, 2002](#)) suggest that even unintentional behavior is communicative. Suppose,

for instance, that a friend overhears you muttering complaints to yourself. Even though you didn't intend for your friend to hear your remarks, they certainly did carry a message. In addition to these slips of the tongue, we unintentionally send many nonverbal messages. You might not be aware of your sour expression, impatient shifting, or sighs of boredom, but others read into them nonetheless.

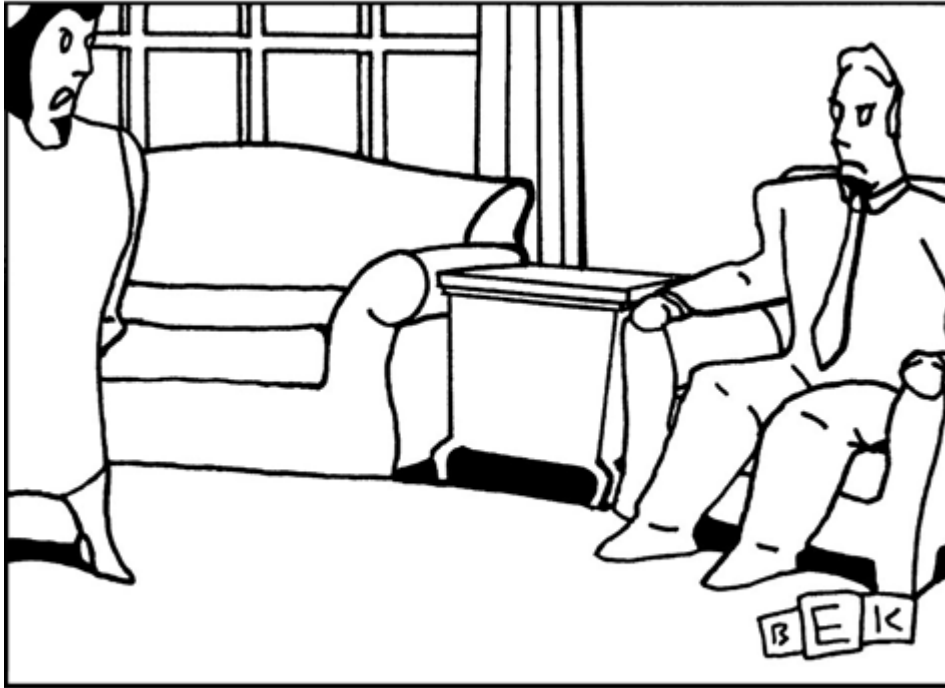
Even the seeming absence of a behavior has communicative value. Recall times when you sent a text or left a voice message and received no reply. You probably assigned some meaning to the nonresponse. Was the other person angry? Indifferent? Too busy to reply? Whether your hunch was correct, the point remains: All behavior has communicative value. “Nothing” never happens.

Interplay assumes the communicative value of both intentional and unintentional behavior. This book takes the position that whatever you do—whether you speak or remain silent, confront or avoid, show emotion or keep a poker face—you provide information to others about your thoughts and feelings. In this sense, we are like transmitters that can't be shut off. We cannot *not* communicate ([Watzlawick et al., 1967](#); see also [Bavelas, 2021](#)).

Communication Is Irreversible

At times, you probably wish you could erase your words or actions. Unfortunately, you can't undo communication. Sometimes, further explanation can clear up confusion, or an apology can mollify hurt feelings, but other times nothing can change the impression you have created. It is no more possible to “unsend” a message—including most

digital messages—than to “unsqueeze” a tube of toothpaste. Words said, messages sent, and deeds done are irretrievable.



“Let’s stop this before we both say a lot of things we mean.”

Communication Is Unrepeatable

Because communication is an ongoing process, an event cannot be repeated. The friendly smile you gave a stranger last week may not succeed with the person you encounter tomorrow. Even with the same person, it’s impossible to recreate an event. Why? Because both you and the other person have changed. You’ve both lived longer, and your feelings about each other may have changed. What may seem like the same words and behavior are different each time they are spoken or performed.

Communication Has a Content Dimension and a Relational Dimension

Virtually all exchanges have content and relational dimensions. The **content dimension** involves the information being explicitly discussed: “Please pass the salt”; “Not now, I’m tired”; “You forgot to check your messages.” All messages also have a **relational dimension** ([Watzlawick et al., 1967](#); [Bavelas, 2021](#)), which expresses how you feel about the other person. For instance, something in your tone might reflect whether you like or dislike the other person, feel in control or subordinate, or feel comfortable or anxious. Consider saying “Thanks a lot” in different ways depending on the relational dimension.

Sometimes the content dimension of a message is all that matters. For example, you may not care how the barista feels about you as long as you get your coffee. In a qualitative sense, however, the relational dimension of a message is often more important than the content under discussion. This point explains why disputes over apparently trivial subjects become so important. In such cases, we’re not really arguing over whose turn it is to take out the trash or whether to stay home or go out. Instead, we’re disputing the nature of the relationship: who’s in control, and how important we are to each other. [Chapter 10](#) explores several key relational issues in detail.

1.2.4 Communication Misconceptions

Now that you've learned what communication *is*, it's time to identify some things it *isn't*. Avoiding these common misconceptions (adapted from [McCroskey & Richmond, 1996](#)) can save you a great deal of trouble in your personal life.

Not All Communication Seeks Understanding

You might assume that the goal of all communication is to maximize understanding between communicators. But although some understanding is necessary to coordinate our interactions, there are some types of communication in which understanding, as we usually conceive it, isn't the primary goal ([Smith et al., 2010](#)). Consider, for example, the following:

- *Social rituals we enact every day.* “How’s it going?” you ask. “Great,” the other person replies, even if it isn’t actually going great. The primary goal in exchanges like these is mutual acknowledgment. The unstated message is “I consider you important enough to notice.” There’s obviously no serious attempt to exchange information.
- *Attempts to influence others.* Most television commercials are aimed at persuading viewers to buy products, not helping viewers understand the content of the ad. In the same way, many of our attempts at persuading others don’t involve a desire for understanding, just for compliance with our wishes.
- *Deliberate ambiguity and deception.* When you decline an unwanted invitation by saying, “I can’t make it,” you probably want to create the impression that the decision is really

beyond your control. (If your goal were to be perfectly clear, you might say, “I don’t want to get together. In fact, I’d rather do almost anything than accept your invitation.”) As we explain in detail in [Chapter 4](#), people often lie or hedge their remarks precisely because they want to obscure their true thoughts and feelings.

More Communication Isn’t Always Better

Whereas failure to communicate effectively and often enough can certainly cause problems, excessive communication also can be a mistake. Sometimes it is simply unproductive, as when people go over the same ground again and again. Parental lectures may be tuned out by teens whose only thought is, “Are you done yet?”

There are times when talking too much actually aggravates a problem ([Pinola, 2014](#)). As two communication pioneers put it, “More and more negative communication merely leads to more and more negative results” ([McCroskey & Wheeless, 1976](#)). When people are angry, they may say hurtful things they will later regret. In such cases it’s probably best to spend time cooling off, thinking about what to say and how to say it. [Chapter 9](#) will help you decide when and how to share feelings.



Communication Will Not Solve All Problems

Sometimes even the best planned, best timed communication won't solve a problem. For example, imagine that you ask an instructor to explain why you received a poor grade on a project you believe deserved top marks. The professor clearly outlines the reasons why you received the low grade and sticks to that position after listening thoughtfully to your protests. Has communication solved the problem? Hardly.

Sometimes clear communication is even the cause of problems. Suppose, for example, that a friend asks you for an honest opinion of a colorful new outfit. Your clear and sincere answer, "I think it makes you look like a clown," might do more harm than good. Deciding when and how to self-disclose isn't always easy. See [Chapter 4](#) for suggestions.

Effective Communication Is Not a Natural Ability

Most people assume that communication is like breathing—that it's something people can do without training. Although nearly everyone does manage to function passably without much formal communication training, most people operate at a level of effectiveness far below their potential. In fact, communication skills are closer to an athletic or artistic ability. Even the most inept of us can learn to be more effective with training and practice, and even the most talented need to work to maintain and develop their skills.

1.3 What Makes Communication Interpersonal?

So far you've read about characteristics of communication in general. Now it's time to look at what makes some types of communication interpersonal versus impersonal.

1.3.1 Defining Interpersonal Communication

Which of the following are examples of interpersonal communication?

- A. A customer asking a salesclerk for information about a product.
- B. A physician encouraging a patient to adopt a healthier lifestyle.
- C. A group of old friends reminiscing about good times.

If you suspect there's no simple answer here, you're correct. A good response would be, "It depends on what you mean by *interpersonal*." There are two ways to think about what makes some communication interpersonal: (1) the *number* of people interacting and (2) the *quality* of the interaction.

A *quantitative approach* defines interpersonal communication by the number of communicators. By this yardstick, any two-person exchange fits the definition: ordering a double espresso at the coffee bar, asking a stranger for directions, or online chatting with a customer service agent. Social scientists call two persons interacting a *dyad* and use the adjective *dyadic* to describe this type of communication ([Guntzviller et al., 2017](#)). In this sense, Situations A and B in the preceding list would count as interpersonal since they involve dyads; Situation C would not.

But asking questions of a salesclerk hardly seems the same as catching up with an old friend. Some scholars argue that the quality of interaction, not the quantity of people interacting, distinguishes interpersonal communication ([Jian & Dalisay, 2018](#)). From a *qualitative approach*, interpersonal communication means treating one another as unique individuals. In this sense, Situation C in the preceding list would certainly count as interpersonal. Situation B might also fit if the physician and patient had a longstanding relationship or even a single conversation that was personal and heartfelt. Situation A is more impersonal than interpersonal, qualitatively speaking. A qualitative approach defines the opposite of interpersonal as *impersonal* interaction. You can picture a continuum between these two extremes (see [Figure 1.2](#)).



FIGURE 1.2 Impersonal–Interpersonal Communication Continuum [View larger image](#)

Four features distinguish highly interpersonal versus impersonal communication:

- *Uniqueness.* No two high-quality interpersonal relationships are the same. With one friend you might exchange good-natured insults, whereas with another you are careful never to offend. In one, you might express your affection freely; in another it might be an unspoken foundation of the relationship. Each relationship is defined by its own specific language, customs, and rituals—what communication scholars call a *relational culture* ([Farrell et al., 2014](#)).
- *Interdependence.* In highly interpersonal communication exchanges, the fate of the partners is connected. You might be able to brush off a stranger’s anger, sadness, or excitement. But in a qualitatively interpersonal relationship, the other’s life affects you. Your life would be significantly different without each other.
- *Self-disclosure.* In impersonal exchanges, you probably reveal little about yourself. By contrast, in interpersonal exchanges

you're more likely to share important thoughts and feelings, reflecting your comfort with the other person. This doesn't mean that all highly interpersonal relationships are warm and caring or that all self-disclosure is positive. It's possible to reveal negative personal information: "I really hate when you do that!" But note you'd probably say that only to someone with whom you have an interpersonal relationship.

- *Intrinsic rewards.* In impersonal exchanges you probably seek extrinsic rewards—payoffs that have little to do with the people involved. You listen to professors in class or talk to potential buyers of your used car in order to reach goals other than developing personal relationships. By contrast, in close relationships the best payoff is likely being with the other person. It doesn't matter what you talk about—developing the relationship is what's important.

With these characteristics in mind, this book adopts a qualitative approach and defines **interpersonal communication** as interaction distinguished by the qualities of uniqueness, interdependence, self-disclosure, and intrinsic rewards. (See the Assessing Your Communication quiz at the end of the chapter to analyze how interpersonal your relationships are.)

1.3.2 Interpersonal and Impersonal Communication: A Matter of Balance

Life without interpersonal relationships would be lonesome at best, and more likely bleak. That doesn't mean *all* communication should be interpersonal, or that constant communication is the ideal. Like a nutritious diet, the healthiest communication is a mixture—in this case between time together and time apart, and between deeper and more superficial interaction ([Hall & Merolla, 2020](#)).

Alone Time

High-quality interpersonal communication is important, but it takes a lot of energy. Even good times in a close relationship can leave you tired, and the drain is greater when you're discussing difficult issues ([Hall, 2018](#)). Time away from others—even the people who matter most—can be a way of recharging your emotional batteries and gaining perspective on the relationship. Whether it's practicing meditation, taking a solo road trip, or spending an evening with just you and the TV, it's good to carve out time for yourself.

Personal and Impersonal Communication

Most relationships are neither highly interpersonal nor entirely impersonal. Rather, they are likely to fall somewhere between these two extremes. There's often a personal element in even the most impersonal situations. You might appreciate the unique sense of humor of a store clerk or spend a few moments sharing private thoughts with the person cutting your hair. And even the most tyrannical, demanding, by-the-book boss might show an occasional flash of humanity.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Building Relationships Before Doing Business

You've been assigned to a virtual work project with colleagues from around the globe. When you open the first Slack message from one of your new teammates, which of these introductions would you prefer?

1. "Hi team! We will be working on the project together in the coming month. I assume you all have the instruction manual, but just for the record, our first due date is two weeks from today."
2. "Hello, I am Genia from Ukraine. You can call me Anna as all my friends and family do. I am looking forward to working with you. Apart from studying I love to travel, read, and hike."

These are examples of (1) task-oriented and (2) relational-oriented opening messages that were exchanged in a study involving MBA students from schools around the world.

Researchers analyzed the students' messages and found that when the opening lines were relationally oriented (as in the second example), teammates would respond in kind with personal introductions. Groups that started this way were more likely to develop a psychologically safe communication climate, which in turn led to improved team performance.

When you have a task to complete with others, it may be tempting to get down to business right away. This research suggests that taking time at the front end to create an

interpersonal bond will make the job go easier and better. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a related self-appraisal.)

Glikson, E., & Erez, M. (2020). The emergence of a communication climate in global virtual teams. *Journal of World Business*, 55, 101001.

Just as there's a personal element in many impersonal settings, there's also an impersonal side to even the most important relationships. In fact, most communication in close relationships is comfortably mundane ([Laliker & Lannutti, 2014](#)). There are occasions when you almost certainly don't want to be personal: when you're distracted, tired, busy, or just not interested. Interpersonal communication is like rich food in that too much can make you uncomfortable. In fact, the scarcity of interpersonal communication contributes to its value ([Mehl et al., 2010](#)). Like precious and one-of-a-kind artwork, qualitatively interpersonal communication is special because it's rare.

1.4 Communication Competence

“What does it take to communicate better?” is probably the most important question to ask as you read this book. Answering it has been one of the leading challenges for communication scholars. Research has identified a good deal of important and useful information about communication competence.

1.4.1 Principles of Communication Competence

Most scholars agree that **communication competence** is the ability to achieve goals in a manner that is both *effective* and *appropriate* ([Mikkelsen et al., 2021](#)). To understand these two dimensions, consider how you might handle everyday communication challenges such as declining an unwanted invitation or asking a friend to stop an annoying behavior. In cases such as these, *effective* communication would get the results you want. *Appropriate* communication would do so in a way that, in most cases, avoids damaging the relationship in which it occurs.

You can appreciate the importance of both appropriateness and effectiveness by imagining approaches that would satisfy one of these criteria but not the other. Yelling at your restaurant server may get

your meal to come quickly, but you probably wouldn't be welcome back (and you might want to check your food before eating it). Likewise, saying "That's fine" to your roommate when things *aren't* fine might maintain the relationship on the surface but leave you frustrated. With the goal of encouraging a balance between effectiveness and appropriateness, the following paragraphs outline several important principles of communication competence. (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter for a related skill builder.)



On the TV series *Hell's Kitchen*, chef Gordon Ramsay gets the job done—but often treats his staff poorly in the process. On *MasterChef Junior*, he is much more appropriate as a cooking coach while remaining effective. ***Is your communication generally both appropriate and effective? Why or why not?*** [View larger image](#)

There's No Single "Ideal" or "Effective" Way to Communicate

Your own experience shows that a variety of communication styles can be effective. Some very successful communicators are serious, whereas others use humor; some are gregarious, others are quieter; and some are more straightforward while others hint diplomatically.

Furthermore, a type of communication that is competent in one setting might be a colossal blunder in another. The joking insults you routinely trade with a friend might offend a sensitive family member, and Saturday night's romantic approach would be out of place at work on Monday morning. No list of rules or tips will guarantee your success as a communicator.

Flexibility is especially important when members of different cultures meet. For instance, the definition of appropriate communication in a given situation varies considerably from one culture to another ([Arasaratnam, 2007](#)). Customs such as belching after a meal or appearing nude in public might be appropriate in some parts of the world but outrageous in others. There are also subtler differences in competent communication. For example, qualities such as self-disclosure and straight talk may be valued in the United States but considered overly aggressive and insensitive in many Asian cultures ([Zhang, 2015](#)). You'll read more about the many dimensions of intercultural competence in [Chapter 3](#).

Competence Is Situational

Because competent communication varies so much from one situation and person to another, it's a mistake to think of it as a trait that a person either possesses or lacks. It's more accurate to talk about degrees or areas of competence.

You and the people you know are probably quite competent in some areas and less so in others. For example, you might deal quite skillfully with peers while feeling clumsy interacting with people much older or younger, or who are more or less accomplished than you. In fact, your competence may vary from situation to situation. It's an overgeneralization to say, in a moment of distress, "I'm a terrible communicator!" It's more accurate to say, "I didn't handle this situation very well, but I'm better in others."

Competence Can Be Learned

To some degree, biology is destiny when it comes to communication competence ([Teven et al., 2010](#)). Research suggests that certain personality traits predispose people toward particular competence skills ([Hullman et al., 2010](#)). For instance, those who are agreeable and conscientious by nature find it easier to be appropriate and harder to be (and become) assertive and effective.

Fortunately, biology isn't the only factor that shapes how we communicate. Communication competence is, to a great degree, a set of skills that anyone can learn. For instance, people with communication anxiety often benefit from courses and training ([Hunter et al., 2014](#)). Skills instruction has also been shown to help communicators in a variety of professional fields ([Hynes, 2012](#); [Dorough et al., 2021](#)). Even without systematic training, it's possible to develop communication skills through the processes of observation and trial and error. We learn from our own successes and failures, as well as from observing other models—both positive and negative. And,

of course, the hope is that you will become a more competent communicator by putting the information in this book to work.

1.4.2 Characteristics of Competent Communication

Although competent communication varies from one situation to another, scholars have identified several common denominators that characterize it in most contexts. These include a large repertoire of skills, adaptability, the ability to perform, empathy, cognitive complexity, and self-monitoring.

A Large Repertoire of Skills

As you've already seen, good communicators don't use the same approach in every situation. They know that sometimes it's best to be blunt and sometimes tactful; that there is a time to speak up and a time to be quiet.

The chances of reaching your personal and relational goals increase with the number of options you have about how to communicate ([Janke & Dumlao, 2019](#)). For example, consider the many ways you could start a conversation with a stranger ([Cuncic, 2022](#)). You might get the ball rolling simply by introducing yourself. In other cases, seeking assistance might work well: "I've just moved here. What kind of neighborhood is the Eastside?" A third strategy is to ask a question about the situation: "I've never heard this band before. Do you know anything about them?" You could also offer a sincere compliment and

follow it up with a question: “Great shoes! Where did you get them?” Just as a chef draws from a wide range of herbs and spices, a competent communicator can draw from a large array of potential behaviors. (You’ll learn more about starting and holding conversations in [Section 13.4.1](#).)



Adaptability

To extend this metaphor, a chef must know when to use garlic, chili, or sugar. Likewise, a competent communicator needs *adaptability*, selecting appropriate responses for each situation—and for each recipient. Adaptability is so important that competence researchers call it “the hallmark of interpersonal communication skills” ([Hullman, 2015](#)). Your language, tone, and style in a job interview, for example, should be different from what you’d use with your pals.

One study found that professors negatively appraised students who sent emails that included casual text language (such as “4” instead of “for” or “RU” instead of “are you”) ([Stephens et al., 2009](#)). These students didn’t adapt their message to an appropriate level of professional communication ([Kemp & Clayton, 2017](#)). Linguists note that competent communicators are careful to “code-switch” when moving between casual and formal modes of texting ([Collister, 2018](#)). (You’ll find more on the skill of *code-switching* in [Section 3.4](#)).

Adaptability becomes especially challenging when communicating online. When you post on social media, for instance, it’s likely you have multiple audiences in mind as you craft your message ([Marder et al., 2016](#)). If you’ve edited an update before posting because you knew how some followers would react, you’ve practiced adaptability—along with impression management, as described in [Section 4.2](#).

Ability to Perform Skillfully

Once you have chosen the appropriate way to communicate, you have to perform that behavior effectively ([Reich et al., 2022](#)). In communication, as in other activities, practice is the key to skillful performance. Much of the information in *Interplay* will introduce you to new tools for communicating, and the activities at the end of each chapter will help you practice them.

Empathy/Perspective Taking

We develop the most effective messages when we understand and empathize with the other person’s point of view ([Nelson et al., 2017](#)). Empathy, or perspective taking (explained in [Section 5.4](#)), is an

essential skill partly because others may not express their thoughts and feelings clearly. And of course, it's not enough just to imagine another's perspective; it's vital to *communicate* that understanding through verbal and nonverbal responses ([Kellas et al., 2021](#)).

Cognitive Complexity

Cognitive complexity is the ability to construct a variety of different frameworks for viewing an issue ([Dai, 2021](#)). Imagine that a longtime friend never responded to a message from you, but you expected a response. It's possible your friend is offended by something you've done. Another possibility is that something upsetting has happened in another part of your friend's life. Or perhaps nothing at all is wrong, and you're just being overly sensitive.

Researchers have found that a large number of constructs for interpreting the behavior of others leads to greater “conversational sensitivity,” increasing the chances of acting in ways that will produce satisfying results ([MacGeorge & Wilkum, 2012](#)). Not surprisingly, research also shows a connection between cognitive complexity and empathy ([Youngvorst & Jones, 2017](#)). This makes sense: The more ways you have to understand others and interpret their behaviors, the more likely you are to see and communicate about the world from their perspective.

Watch and Discuss 1.2: “Struggles of Having a Friend with No Filter”

[Please note: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Identify a friend who seems to have “no filter” when it comes to self-monitoring.
How would you evaluate that person’s communication competence?
2. Are there times when having a filter hurts interpersonal communication? Discuss the pros and cons of self-monitoring. (See Activity 4 at the end of the chapter to explore ethical dimensions of self-monitoring.)

Self-Monitoring

Psychologists use the term **self-monitoring** to describe the process of paying close attention to one’s own behavior and using these observations to shape it. Self-monitors can consider their behavior from a detached viewpoint, allowing for observations such as:

“I’m making a fool out of myself.”

“I’d better speak up now.”

“This approach is working well. I’ll keep it up.”

It’s no surprise that self-monitoring generally increases one’s effectiveness as a communicator ([Day et al., 2002](#)). The ability to ask, “How am I doing?”—and to change your behavior if the answer isn’t positive—is a tremendous asset for communicators both in person ([Wang et al., 2015](#)) and online ([Hall et al., 2018](#)). And you probably know what it looks like *not* to self-monitor. [Watch and Discuss 1.2](#) takes a humorous look at communicators who have “no filter.”

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 1.1 **Outline the needs that communication satisfies.**

Communication is important for a variety of reasons. Besides satisfying practical needs, meaningful communication contributes to physical health, plays a major role in defining our identity, and forms the basis for our social relationships.

- Q: Considering a representative 2-day period, identify some of the physical, identity, social, and practical needs you try to satisfy by communicating. How could you better meet those needs by improving your communication skills?

Objective 1.2 **Explain the interpersonal communication process, from its transactional nature to governing principles.**

Interpersonal communication is a complex process. The transactional model presented in this chapter shows that meanings are determined by the people who exchange messages, not in the messages themselves. Interpersonal communicators usually send and receive messages simultaneously, particularly in face-to-face exchanges.

Environment and noise affect the nature of interaction, as do the channels used to exchange messages.

Communication follows several principles. For instance, it is transactional, irreversible, and unrepeatable, and it can be intentional or unintentional. Messages also have both content and relational dimensions.

To understand the communication process, it is important to recognize and avoid several common misconceptions. More communication is not always better. Sometimes total understanding isn't as important as we might think. Even at its best, communication is not a panacea that will solve every problem. Effective communication is not a natural ability. Although some people have greater aptitude at communicating, everyone can learn to interact with others more competently.

Q: Apply the transactional model to a situation that illustrates the principles described in [Section 1.2.3](#).

Objective 1.3 Describe the characteristics of interpersonal versus impersonal communication.

Interpersonal communication can be defined by the number of people interacting, or by the quality of interaction. In terms of quality, communication in interpersonal relationships is distinguished by uniqueness, interdependence, disclosure, and intrinsic rewards. Interpersonal communication is best understood in contrast to impersonal communication. Even close

interpersonal relationships have a mixture of deep, personal communication and mundane, impersonal interaction.

Q: In what ways are some of your interpersonal relationships impersonal, and vice versa?

Objective 1.4 Identify characteristics of effective communication and competent communicators.

Communication competency is the ability to be both effective and appropriate. There is no single ideal way to communicate. Flexibility and adaptability are characteristics of competent communicators, as are skill at performing behaviors, empathy and perspective taking, cognitive complexity, and self-monitoring. The good news is that communication competency can be learned.

Q: Identify interpersonal situations in which you communicate competently and those in which your competence is less than satisfactory. Based on these observations, identify goals for improving your interpersonal communication skills.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Reflection:** Since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, working and learning remotely have become facts of life for many people. And as noted in the text, going out and socializing has become less of a priority for many Americans ([Section 1.1](#)). Take a moment to consider if and how reduced face-to-face communication has affected your ability to meet your physical, identity, social, and practical needs.
2. **Self-Appraisal:** Review the Focus on Research sidebar, “Building Relationships Before Doing Business” (in [Section 1.3.2](#)). When there’s a job to be done, do you tend to be more task-oriented like the first example or relational-oriented like the second example? How is your patience for people with a different orientation? After you’ve made your self-appraisal, seek feedback from several people who are familiar with your work style. Consider whether their feedback points to something you want to work on (i.e., becoming more or less task-oriented in interpersonal interactions).
3. **Build Your Skill:** This chapter defines competent communication as *effective* and *appropriate* ([Section 1.4.1](#)). For each of the following scenarios, create a response that is both effective (helps you achieve your

goal) and appropriate (maintains the relationship and interpersonal goodwill).

- a. You're waiting at your favorite restaurant for your to-go order to be completed. They're clearly short-staffed, but your order was supposed to be ready ten minutes ago and you're in a hurry. The manager says, "Sorry for the delay."
- b. You would like to get together with two of your closest friends more often. The last few times you raised the issue, they said their calendar was awfully full.
- c. One of your family members tagged you on a social media post that you found embarrassing. This isn't the first time it's happened.

4. **Ethical Challenge:** Self-monitoring is a feature of communication competence ([Section 1.4.2](#))—but can it be overdone? High self-monitoring sometimes leads to less-than-authentic communication that impedes relational intimacy ([Wright et al., 2007](#)). On the other hand, people who don't self-monitor are often "honest to a fault" and injure relationships. What is the ethical happy medium when it comes to self-monitoring?

Assessing Your Communication: How Interpersonal Are Your Relationships? (Personal Practice)

[Please note: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

[channel](#)

[Cognitive complexity](#)

[communication](#)

[communication competence](#)

[content dimension](#)

[environments](#)

[feedback](#)

[interpersonal communication](#)

[noise](#)

[relational dimension](#)

[self-monitoring](#)

[transactional communication](#)

CHAPTER 1 Flashcards

[Please note: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

2

Mediated Interpersonal Communication

Ronald B. Adler

Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II

Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh

Arizona State University



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Identify the benefits and drawbacks of mediated communication.**
- 2.2 Distinguish between mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication, and use each appropriately.**
- 2.3 Apply the principles of competence to your mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication.**

FOR MOST OF HISTORY, face-to-face communication was the foundation of interpersonal relationships. A medieval peasant knew only the small number of people who lived within a day's walk ([Manchester, 1992](#)). Centuries later, proximity still defined most relationships. As one historian noted, "You could not get too picky when you might meet only a handful of potential marriage partners in your entire life" ([Coontz, 2005](#)).

Proximity is still a powerful predictor of relationship formation and maintenance ([Habinek et al., 2015](#)). But technology can overcome spatial limitations in ways that earlier generations could have barely imagined. On your laptop or phone, you can chat across continents. At work, geographically distributed teams tackle jobs that would have been impossible to coordinate in earlier times. Romantic relationships often begin online, and partners keep them going even when separated by long distances.

Think of how many times you've texted, posted, messaged, blogged, emailed, tweeted, or video chatted during the past few days. These are all forms of **mediated communication**—any type of communication occurring via a technological channel ([Sherblom, 2020](#)). **Social media** are a subset within this category: websites and applications that enable individual users to network and share content. Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn are examples of social media platforms (Facebook is still the industry giant with nearly

3 billion active users each month). Email and texting are mediated communication channels, but not social media because they don't involve networking and content sharing.

This chapter will give you a clear notion of how mediated communication operates in your relationships. In addition, it will discuss ways to use mediated channels to best accomplish your personal and relational goals.



*"Goodnight Twitter.
Goodnight Instagram.
Goodnight Snapchat.
Goodnight Reddit.
Goodnight Tinder.
Goodnight Pinterest.
Goodnight Facebook..."*

2.1 Mediated Communication: Pros and Cons

Dire predictions related to communication technologies have arisen throughout history. Almost 2,500 years ago, the philosopher Socrates declared that writing was inferior to speech. He warned that a written record “will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories” ([Konnikova, 2012](#)). Warnings were also sounded in the 19th century, soon after the invention of the telegraph. One critic’s prediction resembles criticisms you might hear today about Twitter: “The constant diffusion of statements in snippets, the constant excitements of feeling unjustified by fact, the constant formation of hasty or erroneous opinions must ... deteriorate the intelligence of all” ([Phalen, 2015](#)). Other worries emerged when telephones were a new technology. Would they replace in-person conversations? Wasn’t it rude and intrusive to call and interrupt someone without warning? Holding a strange device to your head also seemed physically risky ([LaFrance, 2015](#)): Could it hurt your brain, or even explode during use?

Today those worries about commonplace technologies sound comical. But similar concerns arise with every innovation. Fortunately, scholarship sheds light on both the true costs and benefits of using various forms of communication technology.

2.1.1 Alienating or Connecting?

One of the most important debates regarding mediated communication is whether it's a source of alienation or connection. Does it create social distance or bring people together? There's evidence for both arguments.

Alienating Factors

As you read in [Chapter 1](#), loneliness is one of today's greatest health threats. A comprehensive review showed that people lacking social connections are at a 29 percent higher risk for premature mortality ([Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015](#)). Excessive media use and loneliness often go hand in hand ([Hunt et al., 2018](#)).

Technology is most alienating when it's used as a substitute for face-to-face communication. There's a correlation between loneliness and what social scientists call a *preference for online social interaction* ([Chen, 2019](#)). Some people rely on online interaction because they don't have to respond in real time or manage the complexities of sending and interpreting nonverbal cues ([Lundy & Drouin, 2016](#)). Many teens would rather communicate with friends online than in person, and that has some parents concerned ([Morris, 2018](#)).

Frequent users of social media may become caught in a vicious cycle of alienation. Their preference for online interaction can lead to withdrawal from meaningful offline interaction, which leaves them feeling even more isolated ([Phu & Gow, 2019](#)). This negative spiral can create problems in offline relationships at school and work, as unhappy communicators withdraw further from in-person

relationships ([Caplan, 2018](#)). It's hard to say whether loneliness leads to a preference for online social interaction or vice versa ([Tokunaga, 2016](#)). Either way, the problem is potentially serious.

Watch and Discuss 2.1: "I Forgot My Phone"

[Please note: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. How do the smartphone intrusions in this video resemble those in your life?
2. How do these intrusions affect the quality of your relationships?

Connecting Factors

Steve Jobs, the late cofounder of Apple Inc., suggested that personal computers be renamed "*interpersonal* computers." He had a point: Research shows that mediated communication can enhance relationships.

This claim doesn't necessarily contradict the alienating factors described in the preceding section. In most cases, mediated communication isn't so much a *replacement* for face-to-face as a *supplement*. Consider how mediated communication helps you stay in touch with friends and family members—many of whom would be outside your social orbit if it weren't for social media ([Carvalho et al., 2015](#)). Participants in one study said texting had given them an increased sense of connection with family members ([Crosswhite et al., 2014](#)). Social networking sites also make it possible to reconnect with

old contacts ([Ramirez et al., 2017](#)). Trying to get back in touch with a former neighbor, a high school classmate, or a long-lost relative? With a little research, you can potentially track them down in ways that wouldn't have been possible for previous generations.



The value of digital communication became dramatically clear during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, when millions of people were physically isolated for months on end ([Shufford et al., 2021](#)). One college student described how technology kept her connected while sheltering at home:

... being on social media has made me feel like the world isn't so small. When I tweet about being sad or depressed, people send messages telling me that they're available to talk and that I'm not alone. I told a friend I know only through Twitter that I wanted to try planting. A week later, several packets of seeds and a card with instructions arrived in the mail. ([Garrett, 2020](#))

Connecting digitally was transformed during the pandemic from a tool of convenience to a virtual lifeline ([Juvonen et al., 2021](#)). Many younger people taught older adults in their lives how to use social media and video chatting services, bridging the digital divide that had separated generations ([Conger & Griffith, 2020](#)). In so doing, those who were tech-savvy helped stave off feelings of loneliness and isolation for those who were quarantined. Video platforms like Zoom also kept many a business afloat during the pandemic, ushering in a “new normal” for working remotely ([Parker et al., 2022](#)). (See the At Work sidebar later in this chapter for tips on professional videoconferencing.)

Besides helping maintain existing relationships, mediated communication can make it easier to create new ones. Nearly two-thirds of teens say they have made new friends online ([Lenhart, 2016](#)). Many people who engage with online groups or gaming systems find themselves making friends with other users. This is particularly true for shy people, who find online communication less intimidating ([Hammick & Lee, 2014](#)). And in the business world, sites like LinkedIn connect candidates to job opportunities and encourage professional networking ([Stern, 2022](#)).

Mediated communication has also revolutionized the world of courtship and dating. Finding a compatible partner can be challenging, and online dating has many advantages ([Vogels, 2020](#)). Online dating services expand your dating pool beyond your offline network and help identify prospective partners with similar backgrounds and interests. Skeptics initially questioned whether relationships that started online could be successful in person. Research has largely put these concerns to rest ([Rosenfeld, 2017](#)). In

one survey, more than one-third of the 19,000 married respondents said they had met their partners online ([Cacioppo et al., 2013](#)). Couples who meet online stay together about as much as those who meet in person, and those who stay together transition to marriage more quickly, and on average, report happier marriages.

2.1.2 Superficial or Meaningful?

Are relationships that are created or sustained only via social media necessarily superficial? Some users would dispute this view, claiming that mediated communication can contribute to meaningful relationships. Which is true?



"It says no one really knows who he is, but that he's got 400,000 followers on Twitter."

Mediated Communication as Superficial

Social scientists have argued that it's possible to sustain only about 150 relationships at a time ([Dunbar, 2021](#)). That figure has been termed "Dunbar's number" in recognition of the Oxford University anthropologist who established it. If you're lucky, you have an inner circle of about five "core" people and an additional layer of 10 to 15 close friends and family members ([Bryant & Marmo, 2012](#)). Beyond that lies a circle of roughly 35 reasonably strong contacts. That leaves about 100 more people to round out your group of meaningful connections. You almost certainly don't have the time or energy to actively sustain relationships with many more people than that.

Dunbar's number is much smaller than the number of "friends" many people claim on social networking sites. One study compared the online exchanges of people with thousands of social media friends to those who identified smaller numbers of online relationships ([Dunbar, 2012](#)). The conclusion: regardless of how many online friends users claimed, they only actively maintained relationships with the same number of people—roughly 15. You may have a large number of acquaintances online, but it's probably a stretch to consider them close friends. Some scholars have suggested that seeking an unrealistically large number of social media friends might be compensation for low self-esteem ([Lee et al., 2012](#)). Moreover, having too many social media friends can backfire because people tend to befriend those who have fewer online friends than they do ([Si et al., 2021](#)).

Over-reliance on brief mediated messages can lead to superficial connections, even among true friends. MIT professor [Sherry Turkle \(2015\)](#) put it this way:

I was taken aback when Stephen Colbert asked me a profound question during an appearance on his show. He said, "Don't all those little tweets, these little sips of online communication, add up to one big gulp of real conversation?" My answer was no. Many sips of connection don't add up to a gulp of conversation.

Respondents in one poll said that online connections "are becoming increasingly superficial" and that social media "is getting in the way of real-life friendships" ([Knight, 2019](#)). They regard less than a quarter of their Facebook friendships as genuine, which may explain why a third of them wish they had more close friends.

Mediated Communication as Meaningful

Nobody would dispute that mediated communication can sometimes feel superficial. But that doesn't mean *all* of it is. In fact, online connections can have immense value.

Communication technologies can provide a meaningful way to connect with likeminded people. Discussion boards, blogs, and online forums may create a sense of virtual community among strangers ([Pendry & Salvatore, 2015](#)). Whether you're a follower of Premier League soccer, an avid environmentalist, or a devotee of punk rock, you can find kindred spirits online. What begins as a series of brief online exchanges with strangers can sometimes lead to valuable friendships. One sports fan offered this description:

I've participated in a variety of blog sites for my favorite major league baseball team. One particular forum was small and welcoming, and over time we began to talk about our other hobbies and interests. Soon we were exchanging quips about our jobs and families (between innings, of course), and several of us decided to meet up at a game. I'm now connected to a dozen of these people on social networking sites and consider them good friends.

Mediated communication can also strengthen existing relationships by supplementing face-to-face interaction ([Dainton & Myers, 2020](#)). The theory of *media multiplexity* asserts that people enhance their close relationships by using a greater number of channels ([Ledbetter, 2015](#)). The stronger the bond, the more mediated channels you'll likely use in a relationship ([Taylor & Bazarova, 2018](#)). Think of your inner circle: you likely stay connected with them via text, phone, video chat, email, and several social media platforms.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Maintaining Long-Distance Romances Through Texting

If you've been in a romantic relationship with a partner hundreds of miles away, you know that brief text messages like "Good morning, sweetie" can mean a lot. A research team led by Susan Holtzman investigated the role of text messaging and other forms of mediated communication in long-distance relationships (LDRs).

More than 600 emerging adults (ages 18–25) were asked about their mediated communication habits in romantic relationships. Not surprisingly, participants in LDRs engaged in more frequent video calling, voice calling, and texting compared to those in geographically close relationships (GCRs). More specifically, frequent and responsive texting predicted significantly greater relational satisfaction among participants in LDRs, but not in GCRs. Those in GCRs were more likely to use frequent voice calls to maintain their relationships.

Long-distance relationships were once seen as difficult to sustain, and texting was viewed as a "lightweight" mode of communication. This study suggests that frequent text messages can help LDRs not only survive but thrive. As the researchers note, even the most advanced technologies will struggle to compete with a simple and well-timed text saying, "I'm thinking about you."

Holtzman, S. Kushlev, K., Wozny, A., & Godard, R. (2021). Long-distance texting: Text messaging is linked with higher relationship satisfaction in long-distance relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38, 3543–3565.

Even relatively superficial communication can enhance important relationships. Communicating via text messaging can help work colleagues form more personal relationships ([McGloin et al., 2022](#)). It

can also help maintain long-distance romances, as described in the Focus on Research sidebar in this section. Social networking sites give family and close friends the chance to keep up with each other through status updates: “How did the interview go?” or “I’ve got dinner covered” ([Abel et al., 2021](#)). Even regular Snapchat exchanges can help maintain close relationships ([Kahlow et al., 2020](#)).

Scholars use the term **weak ties** to describe less-personal relationships typified by infrequent communication ([Sprecher, 2022](#)). Although the term “weak” sounds negative, these ties can offer strong rewards ([Volpe, 2019](#)). On a practical level, networking with contacts beyond your inner circle can be useful. Your second cousin might alert you to a job prospect. A neighbor might recommend a reliable auto mechanic or a gentle dentist. Moreover, researchers describe “the surprising power of weak ties” to stave off loneliness and enhance feelings of well-being ([Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014](#)). In short, the more weak ties you have, the happier you’re likely to feel.

One of the primary ways to stay connected in weak-tie relationships is through social media ([Pennington & Hall, 2021](#)). You can probably recall putting out an ISO (in search of) message online and getting helpful recommendations from grade-school friends, former workmates, or your great aunt. One columnist wryly notes that social networking “has changed social life by keeping weak connections on life support forever” ([Beck, 2019](#)). Put more positively, social media allows you to stay in touch with people who would otherwise remain distant relatives or long-lost friends.

2.1.3 Unhealthy or Healthy?

Some concerns about mediated communication go beyond the question of superficiality. Critics argue that digital communication is downright unhealthy. Others respond by pointing out how connecting electronically can actually improve health. Which claims are valid?

Unhealthy Aspects

Googling “dangers of social media” reveals a pervasive concern that mediated communication is a health threat. One addiction expert stated that giving children smartphones is like handing them a gram of cocaine ([Pells, 2017](#)). In fact, social scientists use the term “addiction” to describe problematic use of smartphones ([Olson et al., 2022](#)). One study found that cell phone addiction increases anxiety and leads to greater difficulty with face-to-face interaction ([Allred & Atkin, 2020](#)).

Overuse of mediated communication can take a toll on physical and mental health ([Lee et al., 2022](#)). At the most basic level, too much time online can lead to sleep deprivation ([Tandon et al., 2020](#)).

Smartphone users often stay up late hours checking their devices, driven by FOMO—the fear of missing out ([Hunt et al., 2018](#)). People who take time off from social media report better moods, less anxiety, and increased face-to-face interaction ([Carey, 2019](#); [Lambert et al., 2022](#)).

Whistleblower Frances Haugen revealed insider studies about Instagram by its parent company Facebook ([Allyn, 2021](#)). These tech giants knew for years that social media had detrimental effects on its young users. About 32 percent of teen girls in the revealed data said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse. There were also links between social media use and both eating

disorders and suicidal thoughts. These revelations confirmed earlier studies linking heavy reliance on mediated communication with depression, loneliness, and social anxiety ([Caplan, 2018](#); [Coyne et al., 2019](#)), especially among teenage girls ([Twenge et al., 2018](#)).

Some critics have challenged the cause-and-effect relationship between mediated communication and lack of well-being. For instance, one study followed social media users for years and found that for adolescent girls, depression leads to social media use rather than vice versa ([Heffer et al., 2019](#)). This implies that obsessive technology use might be a symptom rather than a cause of mental health issues. Nevertheless, there's a strong argument for carefully monitoring mental health symptoms among teenagers, particularly those who are heavy users of social media. The Dark Side of Communication box details one researcher's sobering conclusions about the relationship between smartphone use and mental health issues.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

The Effects of Smartphone Use Among Teens

Jean Twenge has spent her career studying generational trends, from Baby Boomers until today. She's dubbed those born since 1995 iGen because they're the first generation to spend their entire adolescence in the smartphone era. (This generation is more commonly known as Generation Z.)

Twenge analyzed large data sets collected across decades and noticed disturbing patterns ([Twenge, 2017](#); [Twenge et al., 2019](#)). Compared with teens in previous generations, Generation Z members:

- hang out less with their friends;
- go to fewer parties and on fewer dates;
- get less sleep; and
- are more unhappy, lonely, and depressed.

Twenge argues that today's teens spend much of their time "on their phone, in their room, alone and often distressed." On the positive side, Gen Z is physically safer than previous generations, in part because they go out less and engage in fewer overtly risky behaviors. But Twenge claims that they've undergone some fundamental changes in the way they communicate and relate with others.

Some critics have challenged Twenge's methods and conclusions ([Orben & Przybylski, 2019](#)). Others concur with her, arguing that smartphones are a source of social alienation and other problems ([Turkle, 2015](#); [James & Weinstein, 2022](#)). If you're a member of Gen Z, consider whether smartphone use is taking a toll on your mental and physical health. If so, you might want to commit to balancing your media use with plenty of face-to-face interaction with your friends, family, and loved ones.

Other health hazards associated with mediated communication are cyberstalking and harassment. Of course, surveillance and aggression existed before the internet—but mediated channels allow for unprecedented access to victims. Cyberstalking and harassment can take many forms: a barrage of unwanted texts and emails; messages with poems and song lyrics suggesting greater intimacy than exists; lewd photos and threatening posts; spreading rumors and falsehoods.

It's no surprise that these kinds of behaviors have harmful consequences for victims including anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and suicidal thoughts ([Stevens et al., 2021](#)). See the Dark Side of Communication in [Chapter 13](#) on the related issue of cyberbullying and its effects on well-being. (See also Activity 1 at the end of this chapter for a self-appraisal about negative effects of mediated communication.)

Healthy Aspects

Rigorous analysis of existing research reveals that many of the fears surrounding social media are overstated ([Popper, 2020](#); [Schemer et al., 2021](#)). When used in balanced ways, mediated communication can provide the opportunity to develop and maintain social connectedness. That connectedness is associated with mental and physical health ([Bekalu et al., 2019](#)) and a greater sense of well-being ([Taylor & Bazarova, 2021](#)).

Virtual communities can be an important source of social support and feedback on issues ranging from illness ([Rains et al., 2015](#)), to suicide prevention ([Luxton et al., 2011](#)), and substance use ([Schwebel & Urban, 2023](#)). That's especially important in dealing with potentially stigmatizing or isolating issues. Because online support group participants are similar yet relatively anonymous, these venues can offer help in ways that make strangers seem like close friends.

This was true for Brad, who was struggling to stay sober from alcohol. He describes how online support saved his life:

I began to get e-mails, phone calls, text messages, tweets and other digital notes from people around the world. Some offered kind words. Some offered support. Many people

shared their own stories of addiction. In my darkest times, these notes would come. And always, without question, they pulled me back from the brink.

Many of these messages were from people I have known for years. Another handful came from childhood friends and people I'd grown up with. Some I had known well; many I had not. Others came from complete strangers. I have no idea how they found me.

AA keeps me sane. But social media got me there. Without that far-reaching network of people—friends and strangers alike—I wouldn't be here today. ([Adler & Proctor, 2017](#))

It's worth noting that participants in a study of 12-step programs said they preferred face-to-face meetings to online versions ([Barrett & Murphy, 2021](#)). They viewed videoconferencing as a “valuable supplemental tool” for substance use recovery, but not a replacement for in-person gatherings. This captures a theme running through much of this section: mediated communication is best understood as a supplement, not a substitute, for face-to-face interaction.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Social Media Detox

How long could you last without access to social media? What effect would it have on your disposition and social life?

Participants in a study were instructed not to use social media for seven days. Apps were installed on their smartphones to monitor their online behavior. Researchers also checked in with the participants each day to see how they were doing. To no one's surprise, most of the participants exhibited withdrawal symptoms, such as craving and boredom. A substantial number (59 percent) broke down and used social media at least once. Participants also said they felt pressure from their peers to return to social media.

In a different study, participants who had been off social media for at least six months talked about their experiences. Most said they felt “out of the loop” with friends and family, as well as with news of the world. They also feared professional consequences of not being networked online. Nevertheless, most were happy with their decision to detox. They said their interactions with close relational partners improved and they stopped feeling the pressures of online social comparison. (See the photo/caption about NFL player A.J. Brown in this section for a similar appraisal.)

These studies offer scientific support for what most users already know: Communicating with others via social media is a basic part of most people’s daily lives. The challenge is learning how to use social media without it taking a toll on your personal well-being and relational success. That might require the occasional social media detox.

Pennington, N. (2021). Quitting social media: A qualitative exploration of communication outcomes. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 22, 30–38.

Stieger, S., & Lewetz, D. (2018). A week without using social media: Results from an ecological momentary intervention study using smartphones. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 21, 618–624.

2.1.4 The Bottom Line

What’s the takeaway from all this research? Does mediated communication bring people together or isolate them? Does it foster meaningful relationships or make them more superficial? Does it

enhance or reduce mental health? One psychologist offers this observation:

For some of us, social media will be a lifeline—connecting us to friends, family or strangers in times of need. For others, it will be a landmine—exposing us to triggering content or harassment. For most, it will be both, depending on when and how we use it. ([Nesi, 2022](#))

The following are suggestions for keeping mediated communication as more lifeline than landmine.

Moderation

As with many things in life, balance is vital to the healthy use of social media. Instagram co-founder Kevin Systrom put it in everyday terms: “Like anything—whether it’s food, or drink—moderation is key” ([Gibbs, 2018](#)). Studies hint that there’s a “Goldilocks” effect to the right amount of mediated communication—neither too little nor too much ([Denworth, 2019](#)). Overusing social media appears to damage mental health and face-to-face relationships ([Andreassen, 2015](#)). On the other hand, *underusing* mediated communication can negatively affect relationships ([Pedrero-Perez et al., 2019](#)). After all, going offline is likely to cut off access to social connections and support.

Active Versus Passive Use

Along with the amount of time people spend in mediated communication, the *way* they use mediated channels can shape whether the outcomes are beneficial or harmful. For example, passive consumers of social media suffer more than active ones. Perpetually scrolling through others’ content without interacting or creating your

own can become unhealthy ([Verduyn et al., 2017](#)). By contrast, social media users who create their own content generally feel more connected and better about themselves—because they’re using the sites for interpersonal reasons rather than as a point of passive social comparison.

Known Versus Unknown Communicators

Another difference lies in the type of people with whom users communicate. Social media users who interact with those they know offline fare better on depression measures than those who follow mainly strangers ([Shensa et al., 2018](#)). Phone calls and texting are positively correlated with well-being, while online gaming has the opposite effect—because the former is more interpersonal ([Liu et al., 2019](#)). In addition, having extended family who are available to you online decreases psychological distress ([Hampton, 2019](#)).

Any ill effects that may come from using mediated channels appear to be smaller than some critics originally claimed. After completing an expansive analysis of 226 published studies, communication scholar Jeff Hancock and his associates found that the impact of social media on well-being is statistically significant but small ([Hancock et al., 2019](#)). “Using social media is essentially a tradeoff,” Hancock explained. “You get very small advantages for your well-being that come with very small costs” ([Denworth & Waves, 2019](#)).

New and ongoing research will continue to explore both the beneficial and the harmful effects of evolving communication technology. Researchers hope to learn how other technological factors may play a role in wellbeing and successful relationships ([Orben & Przybylski,](#)

[2019](#)). For now, it's clear that mediated communication can be a tool for enhancing interpersonal relationships—as long as it's monitored and not used to extremes.



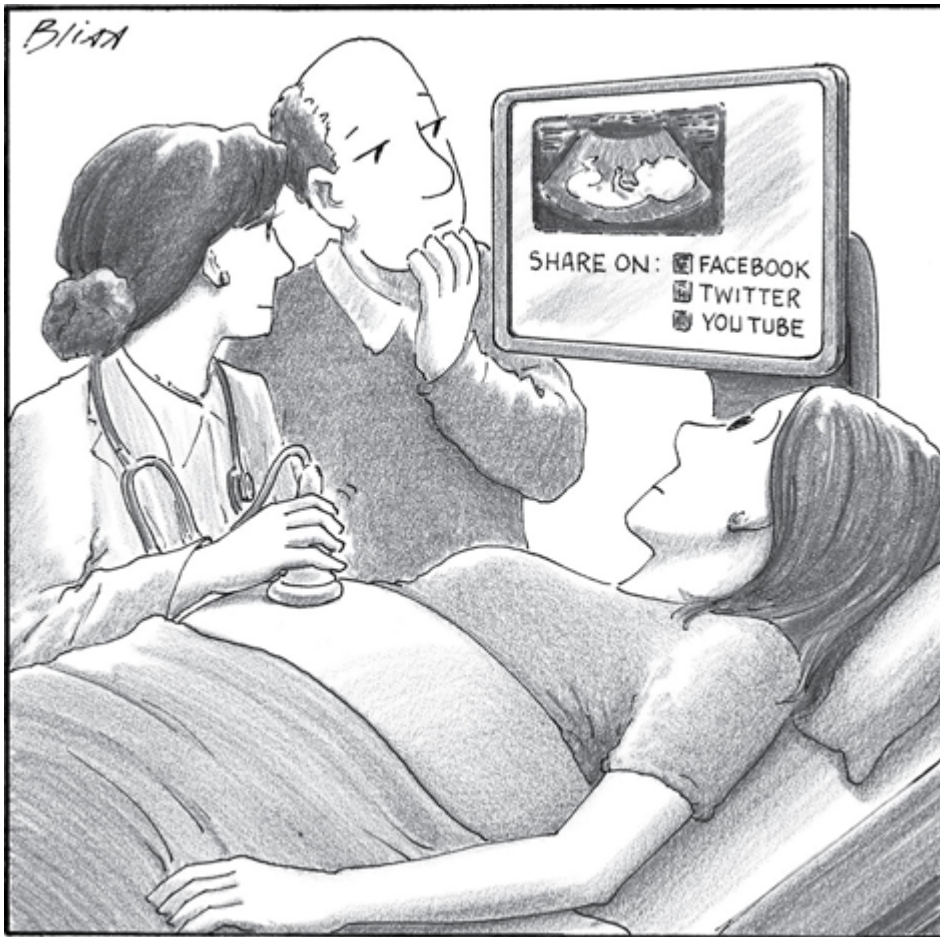
NFL receiver A.J. Brown says, “Since I got off social media, I’ve been stress-free, enjoying my moment, my life, the things that matter to me instead of building stress from looking at things or looking at other people” ([Pompei, 2022](#)). ***How can taking breaks from social media be good for your mental health? [View larger image](#)***

2.2 Mediated Interpersonal Versus Masspersonal Communication

Until recently, nobody would have confused interpersonal and mass communication. Individuals connected with one another in person, by written correspondence, and by telephone. By contrast, newspapers, magazines, and television were aimed at audiences numbering in the thousands, or even millions. Things are different today, as you'll now see.

2.2.1 Hallmarks of Mediated Interpersonal Communication

Imagine sharing photos of an unborn baby on Twitter. That would certainly be personal, but you probably agree that it isn't *interpersonal* in the sense we've been using the term. So, what features make a mediated interaction feel more interpersonal? It's not about the channel or the app ([O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018](#)). For example, some social media messages are generic: "Congrats!" Others are more specific and personal: "Remember our talk on the camping trip: I believe in you." Here are some features that help make mediated communication more interpersonal.



Personal Content

There's a clear difference between reminiscing with a friend and texting with a customer service rep about your phone bill. As you read in [Chapter 1](#), disclosure of personal information is one measure of a relationship's interpersonal nature. Not all personal disclosures are positive. A private message saying, "I'm embarrassed to be around you when you drink" would convey personal information but might weaken the relationship.

Personal messages don't have to be deeply revealing. Oversharing online can be obnoxious and awkward ([Agger, 2015](#)). But sooner or

later, you need to get personal to make interpersonal communication happen. [Chapter 4](#) includes more information about the role of self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships.

Small Number of Identifiable Receivers

A public speech is fundamentally different from a personal conversation or from the kind of interactions that go on around the dinner table. That's because messages shared with large audiences tend to be more generic than those exchanged among a small number of communicators.

The same logic applies in mediated channels. Think again about the example of tweeting an ultrasound image of a baby in utero. Sharing this type of news would feel more interpersonal if the parents-to-be crafted individual messages to close friends and family, tailoring each to suit the recipients ("You're going to be an uncle!" or "Thanks for your advice about choosing a doctor").

Mutual Obligation

Whether it's in-person or mediated, interpersonal communication calls for an exchange of messages ([Knapp & Daly, 2011](#)). Imagine running into a friend who says, "My day has been crazy ... how about you?" You'd know better than to walk away without responding. That would break the unspoken rule that interpersonal communicators have a sense of mutual awareness and obligation to one another ([Burleson, 2010](#)).

Just as in offline settings, mediated interpersonal communication involves this sense of mutual obligation. If you pose a question via text message or ask for a reply to your email, you're likely to feel hurt if there's no response. [Chapter 13](#) explains why being ignored can be hurtful, even devastating, regardless of the channel.

Expectation of Privacy

When you share your thoughts and feelings in an interpersonal conversation (whether via phone, via text, or in person), you can reasonably expect that those messages won't become public. In fact, you'd probably be offended if the recipients were to broadcast your messages without asking permission. Interpersonal communication tends to involve feelings of trust: You are choosing to open up or disclose to a particular person.

When you're texting your roommate, facetimeing with your family, or sending private Snaps to your significant other, you're using technology for interpersonal purposes. But some personal mediated content feels more like mass communication. The next section explores this intersection.

2.2.2 Hallmarks of Masspersonal Communication

The boundary between mass and interpersonal communication can be fuzzy. Accordingly, scholars have coined the term **masspersonal communication** to characterize how individuals use mediated

communication to reach large audiences in ways that forge and sustain personal connections ([O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018](#); see also [Choi & Choung, 2021](#)). [Figure 2.1](#) shows how social media and other mass channels can be used for personal communication.

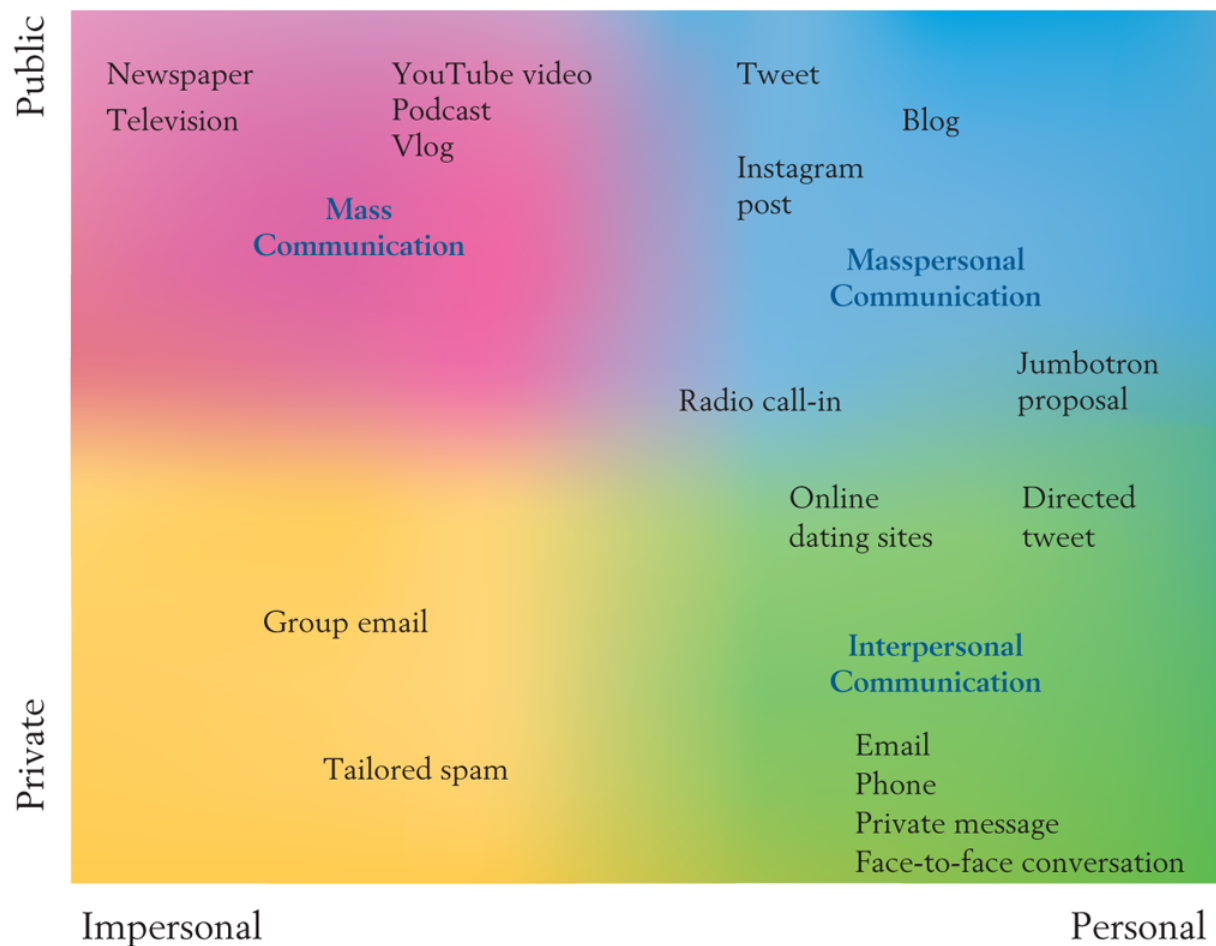


FIGURE 2.1 Examples of Mass, Mediated Interpersonal, and Masspersonal Communication Adapted from [O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018](#) [View larger image](#)

Personal Content

Both *interpersonal* and *masspersonal* communication involve personal content. Your masspersonal updates might range from

superficial (“I got all the classes I hoped for!”) to deeply significant (“Just learned my beloved grandma entered hospice care. I don’t know how I’ll get along without her love and support.”). Either way, a masspersonal message is about you; it’s personal.

Message boards are a good example of how mass and interpersonal communication combine. They have elements of mass communication because they’re available to large audiences; but they also have a personal dimension. Regulars may call each other by name and disclose details of their lives, even though they’ve never met in person.

Larger Audience

Masspersonal communication is a useful way to keep your extended social network informed about your life events, both big and small. Move across the country? Ace a test? Make pancakes shaped like cartoon characters for your nieces and nephews? With a few clicks you can send this information to anybody and everybody you know. Sharing these masspersonal updates—and scanning your own newsfeed for updates from friends and family—is an easy and powerful tool for maintaining your relationships ([Foster & Thorson, 2016](#)). Imagine how much more difficult keeping in touch was before the advent of social media.

Masspersonal messages have the potential to reach audiences far greater than you might imagine. In fact, most people are aware of only around 25 percent of their actual social media audience ([Bernstein et al., 2013](#)). It’s unlikely that most of the TikTok posters who have several million followers ever imagined that their videos would reach such a large audience. Even with a more modest online presence, it

may be that some of your viewers are social media lurkers who like to follow you without creating or interacting with content ([Sun et al., 2014](#)). And there's the possibility that your immediate followers might repost your messages to their networks.

Sometimes having a larger audience can be gratifying; other times, it can be humiliating. Members of your personal network might broadcast not only your amazing feats but your embarrassing blunders to a wider audience. Misguided social media statements or jokes about hating work or playing hooky have gotten people fired.

Less Mutual Obligation

Masspersonal content doesn't carry the same level of obligation to respond that you'd expect when sending or receiving a private message. Think about the newsfeeds you follow: You probably don't respond to every post you see. After all, the posts weren't directed specifically at you, and many probably weren't even relevant. When you are the one broadcasting information on social media, you may have an imagined audience in mind. But what if some of your followers didn't happen to see your message?

The frequency and nature of your messages will influence the level of response. It's unrealistic to expect your followers to reach out approvingly after seeing the umpteenth photo of your adorable puppy or favorite sports team. On the other hand, many masspersonal messages call for *some* response ([French & Bazarova, 2017](#)). You would probably feel unappreciated if nobody reacted to your posts about finishing your first marathon or getting accepted to graduate school.

Even with less momentous news, users can develop a *response threshold*—or desired reaction size—they use to decide if their masspersonal posts are successful ([Carr et al., 2018](#)). Likes and other brief reactions are often sufficient: They're a form of social currency that say, "I acknowledge and approve of what you said" (Sumner et al., 2018). If you read something even mildly notable, sending a quick Like or comment can nourish the relationship ([Scissors et al., 2016](#)).

Low Expectation of Privacy

You don't expect your thoughts to become public when you leave a voicemail message or send a text, and you would probably be upset if someone were to snoop through your phone's contact list. By contrast, it's best to assume that every masspersonal message you broadcast on social media will be public ([Burkell et al., 2013](#)).



The more public your social media channel, the less control you have over who sees your messages and what they do with them. That may be fine: You'd probably be delighted to get hundreds or thousands of views of your YouTube appeal for donations to help a local family in distress. Or your tweet encouraging volunteers to show up at a protest march. On the other hand, you might be embarrassed if your sarcastic post about one of your professors reached a larger audience, including your professor.

While purely interpersonal messages are obviously important, masspersonal communication is sometimes the ideal approach. Imagine that an old friend from high school posted an engagement photo on Instagram. Expressing "Congratulations!" on your friend's public page might be the most desirable response. A private text might

feel intrusive if you haven't spoken to this friend in years. Moreover, public channels offer a way to advertise your thoughts and feelings. In fact, you probably have a larger audience in mind as you craft a masspersonal post—otherwise, you would send it privately.

Masspersonal messages might seem shallow, but they have the potential to strengthen interpersonal relationships and mobilize social support. Consider one example: A friend we know posted a Facebook status update with the news that her beloved dog had passed away, “crossing the rainbow bridge” as she phrased it. The masspersonal post became the starting point for a tidal wave of one-on-one interpersonal support. Many friends posted fond memories: “I’ll never forget the time your dog stole a sandwich right out of my hand and ran off with it. It was so funny! We’ll miss her.” Closer friends and family reached out via phone, video chat, and text message. Some stopped by to give a hug and bring food to her house, imagining she wasn’t in the mood to cook.

Masspersonal posts can be a great way to connect with your network at large, but they aren’t well suited as a primary means of communicating with the people who are close to you, especially on important topics ([McEwan et al., 2018](#)). Imagine learning about your best friend’s engagement via a social media post. You’d probably feel hurt and angry, figuring that you deserved a private, one-on-one disclosure before the news went masspersonal. Some scholars have concluded that masspersonal communication, while useful, is “simply not comparable to having a conversation” ([Hall, 2018](#)). [Table 2.1](#) summarizes the main similarities and differences between mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication.

TABLE 2.1 Characteristics of Mediated Interpersonal Versus Masspersonal Communication

Mediated Interpersonal Communication	Masspersonal Communication
Personal content	Personal content
Small number of receivers	Larger audience
High obligation to respond	Lower obligation to respond
High expectation of privacy	Lower expectation of privacy

Choosing between interpersonal and masspersonal channels can make a big difference in how your messages are received, and in the consequences that follow. Making the right decisions is one element of communicative competence. The following section explores competence in more detail. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a reflection on your use of interpersonal/masspersonal communication.)

2.3 Competence in Mediated Communication

Effective mediated communication requires the principles of competence outlined in [Chapter 1](#): asking yourself “What are my options?”; “Which one(s) are best suited for this situation?”; and “How can I use the approach I select most skillfully?” Along with these considerations, competent mediated communication has its own set of principles.

2.3.1 Consider the Channel(s)

What’s the best communication channel: Video chat? Texting? Email? Social media? Face-to-face? You can answer this question by pausing for a moment to think about all the channels you could choose to say “I love you,” “I quit,” or “I’ll pick up dinner tonight.” (Really, pause and make a list.) Which one is best? Of course, the answer is “It depends” on a host of factors. Here are some channel attributes to consider when making your choices.

Richness

Social scientists use the term **richness** to describe the abundance of nonverbal cues that add clarity to a verbal message ([Sherblom, 2020](#)).

Leanness describes messages that carry less information due to a lack of nonverbal cues. As you’ll read in [Chapter 7](#), face-to-face communication abounds with nonverbal messages that give communicators information about the meanings of one another’s words. By comparison, most mediated channels are leaner. (See [Figure 2.2](#).)

Channel	Text	Voice	Audio-Visual	In-Person
Examples	Email, texting, letters, online posts	Phone calls, voice mail	Video conferencing, Zoom, FaceTime	Face-to-face interaction


Leaner  Richer

FIGURE 2.2 Leanness–Richness Spectrum of Communication Channels [View larger image](#)

There are times when a lean message is the best route to take. Maybe you don’t want the receiver to hear the quiver in your voice, see the sweat on your forehead, or notice the clothing you’re wearing. Moreover, lean messages communicate less information about communicators’ personal features. One study found that the text-only format of most online messages can bring people closer by minimizing the perception of differences due to gender, social class, race or ethnicity, and age ([Rains & Tsetsi, 2017](#)). When you want people to focus on what you’re saying rather than your appearance, leaner communication can be advantageous.

On the other hand, leaner channels can make it harder to interpret a message with confidence. Your ironic remarks and attempts at humor can easily be misunderstood. Adding phrases such as “just kidding” or