Interpersonal Communication
Why It Matters
Learning Objectives

AFTER COMPLETING THIS CHAPTER, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO

1. Define and explain the importance of communication presence
2. Define interpersonal communication, distinguishing it from other types of communication
3. Use a communication model to identify the essential elements and transactional nature of interpersonal communication
4. Explain the functions interpersonal communication serves
5. Describe the characteristics, core principles, and axioms of interpersonal communication
6. Explain how gender and culture affect interpersonal communication
7. Provide examples of how digital media influence interpersonal contacts
8. Develop a plan to improve interpersonal communication

Let's talk about interpersonal communication. Do you ever stop what you’re doing to think about it? Have you, for example, ever wondered how others assess your interpersonal presence? For instance, after being with you, might they describe you as attentive or distracted, authentic or fake, empathic or distant? And how should you react to their description? Might you take steps to change in response to assessments that are less than positive?

What about your own assessment of your communication behavior and choices? How, for example, do you decide if it would be better to interact with another person face-to-face or via text? What if you had to choose between texting or calling? What if your options were to post on someone’s Facebook wall or to Instagram? What do your answers suggest about your interpersonal availability and preferences? What’s your go-to means of communicating—the one you usually find most comfortable and appealing? Are you best at communicating with others who are physically present or communicating via social media? And why does any of this matter?
COMMUNICATION PRESENCE

Ours is a complex world. With so many communication options at hand, the choices we make reflect our approach to managing our identity or communication presence—the unique composite of characteristics we present in both the physical and online worlds. How others respond to us in each of these domains reveals our effectiveness at navigating between communication spaces. How others assess our communication presence—how positive or negative they are toward the characteristics they attribute to us—shapes the relationships we will share with them.

Becoming better at connecting and establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships with others, whether face-to-face or digitally, is something we all can benefit from. Are you on board?

TRY THIS

A First Look at Digital Branding

Based solely on the name of your wi-fi network, what impressions might others form of you?

In an effort to influence others’ reactions, wi-fi network names have morphed from boring series of digits to personalized monikers much like vanity license plates.

Choose a wi-fi name that you believe will reveal to others something they may not know about you. For example, one ballet dance instructor branded her wi-fi network “PointToMe.” How do you want to brand yours? What would you want your branding to communicate about you?

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHETHER TO SPEAK WITH A PERSON FACE-TO-FACE OR TEXT?

Are you among the two-thirds of people more likely to use your smartphone to connect with others? If you’re like many young adults, your smartphone serves as your prime personal connector. You likely use it to check Facebook, text, tweet, or post on Instagram—but less often to make a phone call. For some people, actually talking to another person creates discomfort. Such individuals find technology freeing, because they don’t have to be in the physical presence of others. They feel able to say what they want without fear of being interrupted or even having to listen to another’s response.

We have an abundance of communication choices. (See Figure 1.1) With so many available options, making the right choice is not always easy, and our choice may not necessarily be the one favored by those with whom we interact. Our goal is to help you explore your communication choices and the potential benefits and drawbacks they present for becoming as effective as you can be at communicating interpersonally.
**WHAT DO YOU KNOW?**

Before continuing your reading of this chapter, which of the following five statements do you believe to be true, and which do you believe to be false?

1. Communication is normally intentional. **T** **F**
2. Interpersonal communication is always between two people. **T** **F**
3. If you already consider yourself a good communicator, then how you engage others does not need to change. **T** **F**
4. Interpersonal communication affects your health. **T** **F**
5. Machines are altering the nature of interpersonal communication. **T** **F**

Read the chapter to discover if your answers are right or if you’ve made any erroneous assumptions.

ANSWERS: 1. F; 2. T; 3. F; 4. T; 5. T

**FIGURE 1.1**

Texting Is Most Common Daily Communication Method for Teens

Percentage of teens who contact their friends daily by different methods, by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>17</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text messaging</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Call on cell phone</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
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<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talk on a landline phone</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social network site</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant messaging</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on information from the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

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WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

Communication is our link to humanity. In its broadest sense, it is a process involving the deliberate or accidental transfer of meaning. One person does or says something, while others observe what was done or said and attribute meaning to it. Whenever you observe or give meaning to behavior, communication is taking place.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

There are many kinds of communication. We distinguish them based on the number of people involved, the interaction’s formality, and the opportunity to give and receive feedback. For example, since intrapersonal communication occurs when you think or talk to yourself, it requires only a single communicator—you! In contrast, interpersonal communication occurs when you interact with another person, forming a dyad, or pair. Both individuals in a dyad share the responsibility for determining the nature of a relationship by creating meaning from the interaction, whether it is in person or mediated by technology.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION TAKES TWO

The fact that interpersonal communication takes two people means that it is indivisible. Without the second person, interpersonal communication is impossible. Thus, the parties to interpersonal communication are a duo: a couple, a pair, or perhaps adversaries. From an interpersonal perspective, even groups of three or more individuals are viewed as composites of dyads, effectively serving as the foundations for separate pairings and potential coalitions. Without a dyad, a relationship does not exist, and without a relationship, there is no interpersonal communication. This means that if one person withdraws from the relationship, then that relationship terminates—unless or until the connection between them is reestablished.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION ESTABLISHES CONNECTION

We measure the quality of an interpersonal relationship along a continuum, with “intimate communication” at one end and “impersonal communication” at the opposite end. The more personally we
interact with another person, the more “interpersonal” our relationship becomes. When we engage in interpersonal communication, our goal is to treat one another as genuine people, not as objects, and to respond to each other as unique individuals with whom we create a distinct relational culture, not as people merely playing roles.4

The more personal a relationship becomes, the more interdependent the members become, sharing thoughts and feelings with each other. Our lives become interconnected, especially when contrasted with how we relate to people with whom we are uninvolved and to whom we don’t reveal much about ourselves. We develop personal relationships because of the intrinsic rewards we derive from them; we find them emotionally, intellectually, and perhaps even spiritually fulfilling. In contrast, we have impersonal relationships usually because of the extrinsic rewards they offer, such as maintaining professional working relationships with others to help us reach our goals. Which kinds of relationships do you have more of—those that are impersonal, or those that are personal in nature?

**INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IS A LIFELONG PROJECT**

The effectiveness of interpersonal relationships depends on the extent to which we practice and exhibit interpersonal skills. While we may be born communicators, we are not born with effective interpersonal skills—those we need to learn. Nor are effective skills static; the same techniques may not work for all people in all situations. The culture of each person, his or her gender, the environment, and the individual’s goals will determine how that person approaches and processes interpersonal communication.

Just as every person represents a unique combination of physical, psychological, education, gender, and cultural characteristics that distinguish us from one another, each new relationship teaches us a little bit more about the nature of people and interpersonal communication. Each new relationship increases our comfort at interacting not only with those who share our characteristics, but also with those whose attitudes, life experiences, and perspectives differ from ours.

**TRY THIS**

**Strangers at the Door?**

When you were a young child, your parents and/or caregivers probably cautioned you not to speak to strangers. However, travel opportunities and social networks such as Facebook make interacting with strangers much more commonplace, even ordinary. Answer the following questions:

1. In which arena are you more willing to interact with a stranger: online, at the mall, or when taking public transportation? Explain.
2. How does the anonymity or privacy of online relationships increase or decrease your level of personal comfort?
3. In your opinion, which is more likely to result in a lasting interpersonal relationship—a friendship that begins online, or a relationship that begins with the parties face-to-face? Explain your answer.
As we grow and learn, we should continually revise and update our personal theories of what works during interpersonal contacts, or our assumptions will compel us to repeat interpersonal scenarios or scripts that are doomed to fail. The effective interpersonal communicator does not take others or the means of communicating for granted. Instead, he or she attempts to continually enhance communication presence.

Our sense of personal identity results from and influences our interpersonal relationships. When we do it well, interpersonal communication helps us work through problems, and enhances our feelings of self-worth. When we do it poorly, however, personal growth and achieving our unique potential may be frustrated.

Whether an interpersonal relationship is productive or not depends on how satisfying it is and how much attention we pay to its health. Having good interpersonal skills can mean the difference between happiness and unhappiness or success and failure in multiple life contexts—home, job, school, health care settings, and society—as well as across cultures and generations. Enhanced understanding of the factors in play when two people communicate, whether in a personal or a professional relationship, increases the chance of developing interpersonal competence—the ability to communicate effectively.5

As you read the rest of this chapter, consider the following questions about yourself:

- How effective am I at communicating with people from diverse cultures?
- Am I equally effective interacting with men and women and with individuals whose sexual orientations differ from my own?
- How easy is it for me to develop relationships with people my own age and those of different ages?
- To what extent am I able to maintain self-control when I interact with others? Under what conditions do I lose control?
- How and to what extent do I use technology in my interpersonal relationships? In what ways is technology changing my interpersonal communication?

**MODELS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION**

Whether we are able to share meaning during person-to-person encounters depends on how well we handle the essential elements active in the process. For example, depending on the situation, patting someone on the back may be perceived as friendly and supportive or as a form of sexual harassment. There are seven key elements that influence interpretation of this act (see Table 1.1). Let’s discuss each one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1.1</th>
<th>THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>The senders and receivers of communication messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messages</td>
<td>The content of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channels</td>
<td>The media through which messages travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise</td>
<td>Interference with the ability to send or receive messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Information received in exchange for messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>The environmental, situational, or cultural setting in which communication takes place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>The result of a communication episode</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The Interpersonal Communication Playbook

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Chapter 1: Interpersonal Communication

PEOPLE

Recall that interpersonal communication between any two people ranges from “impersonal” at one end of an imaginary continuum to “intimate” at the other end.

When you respond impersonally to another person, you communicate based on limited knowledge of the categories into which to place that person—that is, the social groups or the culture to which you believe the person belongs—rather than on your personal experience interacting with that individual.

In contrast, when you respond to someone personally, you respond to an individual, drawing on your knowledge of their personality to guide your interactions. In other words, your past experience with the individual allows you to differentiate that person from the groups to which that individual belongs. You now take this unique person and their needs into account.

As a relationship develops and you get to know someone better, not only can you describe the person’s behavior, but you also can more accurately predict their behavior in a particular situation. When you know someone really well, you also are able to explain the reasons for their actions. For instance, when you share an impersonal relationship with someone at work, you likely can describe the individual’s behavior—maybe how they procrastinate in completing assignments. When you see a supervisor giving that person a project to work on, you may be able to predict that the project will not be completed on time. Were you to share an even more personal relationship with your coworker, however, you also might be able to explain the reasons behind the procrastination, such as concerns about a child’s illness or feelings of inadequacy.

Each party in an interpersonal relationship participates in the functions of sending and receiving messages. Each serves simultaneously as sender and receiver, both parties giving out and

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ANALYZE THIS: ARE YOU IN A DISGUISE?

In the poem *Anonymous*, 21st century poet Samuel Manashe suggests that when in the company of another person, too often we pretend to be someone we are not, keeping our actual identity secret and hoping to remain unknown or anonymous.

*Anonymous*

Truth to tell,
Seldom told
Under oath,
We live lies
And grow old
Self-disguised—
Who are you
I talk to?

1. How might remaining anonymous be enabling to someone?
2. What could compel you to disguise yourself when interacting with another person online or offline?
3. How would you handle the pain, frustration, and anger caused by feeling the need to suppress your cultural identity or hide your feelings to maintain a relationship?

Source: “Anonymous,” from New and Selected Poems of Samuel Menashe copyright © 2005 by Literary Classics of the United States, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

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taking in messages. For example, in the following exchange, both Jana and Karl give and receive messages:

**Jana:** I’m so tired. I wish we didn’t have to go to the Joneses’ party.

**Karl:** You always feel tired whenever we have plans to go to a party for someone I work with.

**Jana:** Why do you have to attack me when I say how I feel?

**Karl:** What’s the matter with you? I’m not attacking you. I’m only commenting on what I observe and experience directly.

**Jana:** Give me a break. Don’t I have a right to be tired?

**Karl:** Sure you do. Just tell me one thing. Why do you never feel tired when we’re going to a party hosted by your friends?

Interpersonal communication is transactional in nature. It is a process in which transmission and reception occur simultaneously, and source and receiver continually influence one another. What we think of each other and what we believe the other to know affect the messages we send. Each party in a dyad simultaneously performs the roles of sender and receiver, also known as **role duality**. How the individuals perform the roles, or how good they are at sending and receiving, depends on what they bring to the relationship, including their feelings about themselves, their knowledge about communication, and their attitudes, values, and goals. All these elements influence how well a sender encodes his or her thoughts, feelings, emotions, and attitudes by putting them into a form another can relate to, and how the receiver decodes the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and attitudes of the sender.

**TRY THIS**

**Rating Relationships**

Think about some of the relationships you have had over your lifetime.

1. Identify an extremely satisfying interpersonal relationship and an extremely frustrating one.
2. Identify the specific aspects of each relationship that made it satisfying or frustrating for you.
3. After summarizing the characteristics and qualities that differentiate your most satisfying relationship from your most frustrating one, propose steps you might have taken to increase your satisfaction with the relationship you found frustrating.

**MESSAGES**

We negotiate the meaning we derive from interpersonal communication by sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal **messages**. Whom we speak to, what we choose to speak about, what we do as we interact, the words we use, the sound of our voices, our posture, our facial expressions, our touch, and even our smell constitute the message or the content of our communication. Everything
we do has potential message value for the person with whom we are interacting or for someone observing the interaction.

Messages can be conveyed through any one of our five senses. Some messages—such as a kiss or the words “I love you”—are more personal than others. Some of our messages we send purposefully, while others, such as nervous tics, we emit unconsciously or accidentally. Everything we do when interacting with another person has potential message value as long as the other person is observant and gives meaning to our behavior.

**CHANNELS**

A message travels via a channel, a medium that connects sender and receiver, much as a bridge connects two locations. We may use multiple channels at the same time to communicate a single message. In fact, under most circumstances, interpersonal communication is a multi-channeled interaction using visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and situational means to convey both verbal and nonverbal messages. Consider a first date: You make sure you look and smell nice; you choose a quiet setting to ensure you can hear each other; and you generally put your best face forward in both verbal and nonverbal ways in order to say, “I like you and I hope you like me too.”

Capable communicators are adept channel switchers. They know how to use sound, sight, touch, taste, smell, and the environment, as well as words and nonverbal signs, to get messages across. However, if you find yourself consistently tuning in on just one channel, you might miss the most salient parts of a message. For instance, if you speak to people only by text, you might miss the underlying tone of concern when your best friend asks, “Is everything okay? I haven’t seen you in a while.” While we may prefer to send or receive messages through a particular channel, we should pay attention to and use all of the available channels.

Being adept at channel switching means that if one channel is closed or damaged, we can open another to compensate. For instance, rather than assuming that a blind person will be able to recognize us by our voice, we also should name ourselves. Since the blind person is unable to see the visual cues we use to shade the meaning of a verbal message, we also may need to take special care to ensure that the meanings we want conveyed are contained in the words we choose and the expressiveness of our voice.

**NOISE**

In communication studies, noise includes anything that interferes with or impedes our ability to send or receive a message. Noise distracts communicators by focusing their attention on something extraneous to the communication act. As the level of noise increases, it becomes increasingly unlikely that we will be successful at negotiating or sharing meaning. Effective communicators find ways to ensure their messages get through accurately despite any noise.
Noise emanates from both internal and external sources. Among the external sources of noise are the sight, sound, smell, and feel of the environment. A drab room, an overly warm space, a loud siren, an offensive odor, and too many conversations occurring at the same time are all examples of environmental noise.

Among the internal sources of noise are personal thoughts and feelings. Racism, sexism, ageism, feelings of inadequacy, hunger, excessive shyness or extroversion, and deficient or excessive knowledge can all interfere with the ability to send and receive messages effectively. Most of us find it easier to cope with external noise than with internal noise because closing a window, for example, is usually a lot easier than opening a mind or changing a personality. Have you created or been influenced by noise in any of your relationships today? Which kind(s) of noise typically causes you the greatest problems? (See Table 1.2.)

### Table 1.2 Types of Noise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Noise</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semantic noise</td>
<td>Noise due to the failure to understand the intended meaning of one or more words or the context in which the words are being used (people speaking different languages, using jargon and “technicales”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiological noise</td>
<td>Noise due to personal illness, discomfort, or a physical problem including speech, visual, auditory, or memory impairment (difficulty articulating, hearing or sight loss, fatigue, disease)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological noise</td>
<td>Noise due to anxiety, confusion, bias, past experience, or emotional arousal that interferes with communication (sender or receiver prejudice, closed-mindedness, rage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual noise</td>
<td>Noise due to information overload or underload (over- or under-preparedness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental noise</td>
<td>Noise due to the sound, smell, sight, and feel of the environment or physical communication space that distracts attention from what is being said or done (cars honking, garbage rotting, people talking at once, cellular or computer interference)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Feedback**

Feedback is information we receive in response to messages we have sent. Both verbal and non-verbal, it lets us know how another person is responding to us. Feedback offers clues as to how we are coming across, whether we were heard through the noise, and how the receiver interpreted our communicative efforts. Feedback reveals whether or not our message was interpreted as we hoped and, if not, which portions of the message need to be resent.

Feedback can be positive or negative. Positive feedback enhances behavior in progress. It serves a reinforcing function, causing us to continue our behavior. In contrast, negative feedback stops behavior in progress. It serves a corrective function, prompting us to discontinue one or more behaviors because of their apparent ineffectiveness. In this way, negative feedback helps eliminate behavior that others judge inappropriate.
Because we constantly communicate with ourselves (even as we communicate interpersonally), feedback can emanate from both internal and external sources. **Internal feedback** is the feedback you give yourself as you assess your own performance during an interpersonal transaction. **External feedback** is feedback you receive from the other person. Competent communicators are sensitive to both feedback types, since both serve important functions.

Feedback often focuses on a person or a message. We can, for example, comment on a person’s appearance or message effectiveness. In addition, we can be totally honest about feedback, offering **low-monitored feedback**, or we can carefully craft a response designed to serve a particular purpose, offering **high-monitored feedback**. Whether our feedback is spontaneous or guarded depends on how much we trust the other person and how much power that person has over our future.

We also can offer immediate or delayed feedback. For example, we can nod our head every time the other person says something we agree with. Or we can withhold our reaction until after she or he has finished speaking. When we interview for a job, we are rarely told immediately after the interview whether we will be given the position. Instead, we receive delayed feedback; sometimes days, weeks, or even months pass before we know whether or not the interview was successful.

**Feedforward** is a variant of feedback. However, instead of being sent after a message is delivered, it is sent prior to a message’s delivery as a means of revealing something about the message to follow. Feedforward introduces messages by opening the communication channel and previewing the message, much as this book’s preface does.

**CONTEXT**

The environmental and situational or cultural context in which the communication occurs (its setting) can also affect its outcome. The physical setting includes an interaction’s specific location, that is, its appearance and condition. A candlelit exchange may have a different feel and outcome from one held in a busy, brightly lit office. The social setting derives from the status relationships and roles assumed by each party. Some relationships seem friendlier and are less formal than others. The psychological setting includes the interaction’s emotional dimensions. It influences how people feel about and respond to each other. The temporal setting includes not only the time of day an interaction takes place but also the history, if any, that the parties share. Any previous communication experience that you and another person have had will influence the way you treat each other in the present. The cultural context is composed of the beliefs, values, and rules of communication that affect your behavior. If you and the other person are from different cultures, the rules you each follow may confuse the other or lead to missing chances for effective and meaningful exchanges. Sometimes the context is so obvious or intrusive that it exerts great control over our interaction by restricting or dominating how we relate to one another; other times it seems so natural that we virtually ignore it.

**EFFECT**

As we interact, we each experience an effect—meaning that we are influenced in some way by the interaction. One person may feel the effects more than the other person. One person may react more quickly than the other. The effects may be immediately observable or initially not observable at all.
An effect can be emotional, physical, cognitive, or any combination of the three. As a result of interacting with another, we can experience feelings of elation or depression (emotional); we fight and argue or walk away (physical); or we can develop new ways of thinking about events or become confused (cognitive).

**VISUALIZING COMMUNICATION**

To be sure, the thinking about interpersonal communication has evolved over the years. The earliest model—a linear or unidirectional model—depicted communication as going in one direction only. Questions such as “Did you get my message?” statements such as “I gave you that idea,” and acts such as leaving someone a note with instructions suggest this one-way perspective.

Gradually, a more realistic two-way model—known as an interaction model—came to be preferred. The interaction model visualized interpersonal communication as a back-and-forth process, much like a game of tennis; it also acknowledges the presence and effects of both feedback and context. However, though more accurate than the one-way model, the interaction model fails to capture the complexity of interpersonal communication, including the reality that interpersonal communication does not involve a straightforward back-and-forth action and reaction as might occur when you send a text and a friend responds.

In reality, however, communication exchanges involve source and receiver responding to one another simultaneously rather than sequentially. A new and even more realistic transactional model, as shown in Figure 1.2, emerged to capture this reality. The transactional model's strength is that it depicts sending and receiving as simultaneous rather than distinctly separate acts. In so doing, it helps us visualize the vital complexity of interpersonal interaction. (See Table 1.3 for a summary of the various models' strengths and weaknesses.)

**FIGURE 1.2**

**Transactional Model of Interpersonal Communication**
TABLE 1.3 ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF COMMUNICATION MODELS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODEL</th>
<th>COMMUNICATION EXAMPLES</th>
<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>LIMITATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Television and radio</td>
<td>Simple and direct</td>
<td>Not useful for most face-to-face encounters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E-mail and texts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Packaged presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that do not allow for</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>modifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Instant messaging</td>
<td>Wider applicability</td>
<td>Still discounts receiver’s active role in creating meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class presentations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>where content is adjusted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>based on feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional</td>
<td>Any encounter in which</td>
<td>Most realistic depiction of interpersonal</td>
<td>Does not apply to texting, tweeting, and posting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>meaning is co-created</td>
<td>communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TRY THIS

Making Model Sense

Use the transactional model of interpersonal communication in Figure 1.2 to analyze the following dyadic scenario. Identify how each of the essentials of interpersonal communication included in the model—people, messages, channels, noise, feedback, context, and effect—makes its presence felt during the interaction.

Simona: (approaching a restaurant table): Hi, Kevin. I thought I recognized the back of your head. How ya doing? Long time no see.

Kevin: (turning, somewhat startled): I recognized your perfume—I used to love it when—(abrupt break). It’s been a while, hasn’t it? When was the last time we got together? Is it a year?

Simona: (smiling): Longer than that. I haven’t heard from or seen you since your divorce from Jan.

Kevin: Haven’t seen me since the divorce. That makes it almost 2 years and 24 days, then.

Simona: Time sure goes fast when you’re having fun, doesn’t it? Well, you look great. Life’s been good to you, huh?

Kevin: Yeah, I just got back from 6 months troubleshooting in Singapore. I got a promotion, and I’m finally making the kind of money I deserve.

Simona: Good for you! Emilio and I still see Jan, you know.

(Continued)
How does interpersonal communication enhance life?

Communicating interpersonally helps us discover who we are. It fulfills our need for human contact and personal relationships, and it can contribute to our changing our attitudes and behavior. In these ways, interpersonal communication serves psychological, social, information, and influence functions.
**IT FULFILLS PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS**

First and foremost, just as we need water, food, and shelter, we need people. When we are cut off from human contact, our health suffers. In fact, being in at least one good relationship appears to be a prerequisite of physical and psychological well-being. For example, some maximum-security prisoners are locked alone in their cells for up to 23 hours each day. The feelings of isolation the inmates experience result in their becoming restless, angry, violent, and potentially suicidal. When restrictions are loosened, however, and inmates allowed out of their cells for hours each day, able to play sports and mingle and dine with others, their behavior and emotional health improve.

Interpersonal communication also enhances self-other understanding. Through our interactions with others, we learn how different individuals affect us. In fact, we depend on interpersonal communication to develop our self-awareness, hone our communication presence, and maintain our sense of self. To quote communication theorist Thomas Hora: "To understand oneself, one needs to be understood by another. To be understood by another, one needs to understand the other."

Because interpersonal communication is a fluid process that depends on constantly changing components, it offers lots of opportunities for self-other discovery. Different contexts help us figure out who likes or dislikes us and why, when and why to trust or distrust someone, what behaviors elicit the strongest reactions, under what conditions we have the power to influence another person, and whether we have the ability to resolve relational conflict.

**IT FULFILLS SOCIAL FUNCTIONS**

Through interpersonal communication, we are able to begin and sustain relationships. Our interpersonal contacts meet our social needs to varying degrees. Although we vary greatly in the extent to which we experience these needs, according to psychologist William Schutz, our relationships reflect the following in particular:

- **Our need for affection**—to express or receive fondness
- **Our need for inclusion**—to be included or include others as full partners
- **Our need for control**—to direct or exert influence over the self and others so that we feel we are able to deal with and manage our lives and environment.

When we are in a relationship with someone whose needs complement or balance our own, each of us is able to have our needs met. When our needs are not complementary, however, we are more apt to experience relationship struggles or conflict. Do your experiences confirm this? (We explore the work of William Schutz in more depth in Chapter 12.)

Good interpersonal communication also allows us a glimpse into another person’s reality. For example, developing an interpersonal relationship with someone whose culture differs from our
own broadens our point of view. Our interpersonal styles may differ, but we adapt to the sound, form, and content of their messages and pay attention to how members of different cultures feel about displaying affection, exerting control, defining roles, and meeting goals. While it may be easier to identify with and associate with those who are like us, coming from different cultures does not preclude our learning to share similar meanings. Interpersonal communication similarly fulfills our need to be friended and to friend others. It helps alleviate feelings of isolation, fulfilling our desire to feel needed, loved, wanted, and capable. Because of this, interpersonal communication may increase our personal satisfaction, helping us feel more positive about ourselves.

**IT FULFILLS INFORMATION FUNCTIONS**

During interpersonal contacts, as we share information, we reduce the amount of uncertainty in our lives. By taking in information, we meet the need to acquire knowledge.

Information is not the same thing as communication. Just as more communication is not necessarily better communication, more information is not necessarily better information. Sometimes no information and no communication may be the best course. We can, after all, talk a problem or issue to death. Thus, just as there is a time to talk, there is a time to stop talking and listen.

**IT FULFILLS INFLUENCE FUNCTIONS**

We use interpersonal communication to influence others—sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly. As we exercise influence, our need to gain agreement is met. Interpersonal communicators are both the users of and targets of persuasion.

As we observed earlier in this chapter, interpersonal communication is often goal directed, methodically planning how to get what we want. We seek contact with and advice from others whom we believe can help us. This is not to say that human beings are naturally manipulative or deceptive, as neither of these practices supports the interdependent and transactional nature of interpersonal communication. Communication is not something we do to others or have done to us. It is a mutually reinforcing activity we engage in together. We are both affected by what each of us does and says.

**TRY THIS** 

Functions in Action

Consider three conversations: one you recently had with a significant other, one between you and a friend, and one between you and an acquaintance or co-worker you usually don’t see outside of work. Explain which interpersonal communication function(s) each interaction fulfilled: psychological, social, information, and/or influence. Be specific in describing and assessing how each interaction illustrates the function(s) you identify.
Chapter 1: Interpersonal Communication

CONVERSATION WITH SIGNIFICANT OTHER

CONVERSATION WITH A FRIEND

CONVERSATION WITH A COWORKER

| Psychological | | |
| Social | | |
| Information | | |
| Influence | | |

UNIVERSITY INTERPERSONAL CONTACT

Every interpersonal communication contact has certain essential elements and serves one or more functions. Every interpersonal communication contact also features the following:

- **Key characteristics:** descriptions of the communication that are common across different situations or contexts
- **Core communication principles:** identifiable behavioral patterns and motivations
- **Axioms:** the fundamental rules by which communication may be analyzed or explained

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Let’s first explore the noteworthy characteristics of interpersonal communication (see Table 1.4).

TABLE 1.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNICATION IS . . .</th>
<th>IN OTHER WORDS . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A dynamic process</td>
<td>It is ongoing, continuous, and in a constant state of flux.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrepeatable and irreversible</td>
<td>It is unique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learned</td>
<td>We find out over time what works for us and what does not work if we remain conscious of the communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characterized by wholeness and nonsummativity</td>
<td>It operates as a complete entity, much like a team functions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interpersonal Communication Is a Dynamic Process

By dynamic process we mean that interpersonal communication is ongoing and in a constant state of flux. All the components continually interact with and affect each other. What one person says or does influences what the other person says or does. Every interpersonal encounter is a point of arrival from a previous encounter and a point of departure for a future encounter.

Interpersonal Communication Is Unrepeatable

Every interpersonal contact is unique. It has never happened in just that way before, and it will never happen in just that way again. Why? Because every contact changes us in some way and, as a result, can never be exactly repeated or replicated. Try as we might, we can never recapture exactly the same feelings, thoughts, or relationship that existed at a specific point in time. We are no longer exactly the same person we were before we made contact.

Interpersonal Communication Is Irreversible

In addition to being unrepeatable, interpersonal communication is irreversible. Once we have said or done something to another, whether in person or online, we cannot erase its impact. After exhibiting behavior, we cannot simply say, “Forget that!” and substitute a better or more appropriate behavior in its place (though we sometimes try). We cannot unhear words, unsee sights, or undo acts. They are irretrievable. Presenting a new stimulus does not change the previous stimulus. It merely becomes part of a behavioral sequence.

Interpersonal Communication Is Learned

Over time, we learn what works for us in an interpersonal relationship and what does not. We can hinder our communication with another person if we remain unconscious of how we affect him or her, and vice versa. Part of the art of interpersonal communication involves recognizing how our words and actions affect others, how their words and actions affect us, and then, based on our observations, making the necessary adjustments.

Interpersonal Communication Is Characterized by Wholeness and Nonsummativity

When we say that the interpersonal relationship is characterized by “wholeness,” we mean that we consider more than the individuals who are in the relationship; we look at the unique ways in which the people involved influence each other. When we say that interpersonal communication is characterized by “nonsummativity,” we are saying that the whole is more than the sum of its parts; interpersonal communication is about more than just its participants per se. We cannot understand a couple by looking at each of the partners individually. The nature of the relationship must be examined. The “us” must be explored. The relationship takes on a quality that we cannot understand merely by possessing information about its parts.12
INTERPERSONAL PATTERNS

Interpersonal communication involves understanding patterns of behavior, predicting what others will do and say, and providing reasons for their actions, as well as our own. Thus, understanding an individual’s patterns of behavior, not just a single behavior, provides the basis for understanding the person’s interpersonal communication. In other words, a single isolated behavior is not what we need to focus on; rather, we must take into account entire behavioral sequences.

Interpersonal communication involves not only interpreting but also predicting and accounting for another person’s behavior. If we are able to distinguish individuals from a general group, then we recognize their uniqueness and are able to know and understand them. For example, were we to date a number of different people yet not distinguish one date from another, we would not be very effective interpersonal communicators. To the extent that we can predict the behavior of a specific romantic interest, and account for that behavior—what we term reasoned sense making—we can understand that individual more than we might understand others.

We also reason retrospectively. Retrospective sense making means making sense of our own behavior once it has occurred. We interpret our own actions in light of the goals we have or have not attained. We look back on interactions and continually redefine our relationships, which is our way of making sense of them. As our interactions with another person progress, the events of our relationship increase in number, and as a result, the relationship and how we feel about it changes.

FIVE COMMUNICATION AXIOMS

A classic study by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson identified five axioms, or universally accepted principles, of communication that enable us to understand interpersonal interactions more fully. (See Table 1.5.)

### TABLE 1.5 AXIOMS OF COMMUNICATION

| 1. You cannot not communicate. |
| 2. Interactions have content and relationship dimensions. |
| 3. Interactions are defined by how they are punctuated. |
| 4. Messages are verbal symbols and nonverbal cues. |
| 5. Exchanges are symmetrical or complementary. |

From a study by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson.

**Axiom 1: You Cannot Not Communicate**

Behavior has no opposite. We cannot voluntarily stop behaving. Even if we consciously decide not to respond, even if we do our utmost not to move a muscle or utter a sound, our stillness and silence are responses and have message value and influence others.

**Axiom 2: Every Interaction Has a Content and Relationship Dimension**

The content dimension of a message involves the literal meaning of the words used, while the relationship dimension involves how the message was said, indicating how it is to be interpreted. The relationship dimension reveals what one party to the interaction thinks of the other. For example, a husband...
says to his spouse, “Get over here right now.” The content level is the husband’s words. But the message can be delivered in a number of ways: as an order, a plea, a flirtation, or an expression of sexual desire, for example. Each manner of delivery suggests a different kind of relationship. It is through such variations that we offer clues to another person regarding how we see ourselves in relation to that person.

**Axiom 3: Every Interaction Is Defined by How It Is Punctuated**

Though we often feel as if we can label the beginning and the end of an interaction, in actuality, communication has no definitive starting or finishing line. It is difficult to determine exactly what is stimulus and what is response. Consider this example:

*A woman is usually late getting home from work. When she does get home, she often finds her partner asleep. Both are angry. The woman might observe that she works so much because all her partner does is sleep. The partner might say that all he does is sleep because she’s never home.*

Neither of them interprets the other’s behavior as a response to their own. For the woman, her partner’s behavior is the stimulus, and hers is the response; he causes her behavior. For the partner, it’s just the opposite. Whereas he sees the sequence as going from working to sleeping, she sees it as going from sleeping to working. Which is it, really?

We all segment experience somewhat differently because we each see it differently. We call the dividing of communication into segments *punctuation*. The way a communication is punctuated usually benefits the person doing the punctuating. Punctuation also reveals how an individual interprets a situation and offers insight into the nature of an interpersonal conflict in particular and the interpersonal relationship in general.

**Axiom 4: Messages Consist of Verbal Symbols and Nonverbal Cues**

During face-to-face or online interactions, we emit two kinds of messages: discrete, verbal symbols (i.e., words) and continuous, nonverbal cues. According to Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, the content of a message is more apt to be carried via the verbal system, whereas the relationship level of the message is typically carried via the nonverbal system. Although we can usually control what we say or write, it is much more difficult to control the nonverbal cues we emit. Thus, we may not speak angry words, but our face may betray our rage. As a result, it is easy to lie with words but hard to produce behavior that supports the lie. Nonverbal behavior often gives us away.

**Axiom 5: Interactions Are Either Symmetrical or Complementary**

Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson categorize relationships as either symmetrical or complementary. In a *symmetrical relationship*, the parties mirror each other’s behavior. If one person is solicitous, the other is as well. If one person whines, the other does also. In contrast, in a *complementary relationship*, the parties engage in opposite behaviors. If one person is docile, the other is assertive. If one leads, the other follows.

Neither symmetrical nor complementary relationships are trouble-free. In a symmetrical relationship, the parties run the risk of experiencing “symmetrical escalation.” Believing they are “equal,” both people might assert, for example, the right to exert control. Once this starts, each may feel compelled to engage in battle to demonstrate his or her equality. And so, a status struggle begins. The main danger facing those in a symmetrical relationship is a runaway sense of competitiveness.
In contrast, those who share complementary relationships may face a problem called “rigid complementarity.” This problem surfaces when one party begins to feel that control is automatically his or hers. An overly protective mother who cannot accept that her child is grown, an employer unable to share leadership, and a teacher who cannot learn from others—all illustrate the rigidness that can develop in people who become locked into self-perpetuating, unchanging, unhealthy patterns of behavior. Switches in power are natural; we need to be prepared for them.

Taken together with the characteristics and principles of communication, the five axioms of communication provide additional knowledge as we seek to enhance our understanding and increase the effectiveness of our interpersonal contacts. Now let’s widen our focus.

**DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Because U.S. society is multicultural, and because cultural values help shape our acceptance of and preference for specific communication styles, we should understand the role culture plays in our interpersonal contacts. Even though the United States is the most demographically diverse country in the world, how regularly do you take cultural differences into account in your person-to-person interactions?

**DIVERSITY AND COMMUNICATION STYLE**

Developing *cultural awareness*, the ability to understand the role that cultural prescriptions play in shaping communication, is an asset. Intercultural ignorance too frequently slows our ability to create meaningful interpersonal relationships with people who are culturally different from us.

Whenever cultural variability influences the nature and outcomes of interpersonal communication, culture is having an effect. Learning about other cultures, including their systems of knowledge, belief, values, customs, and artifacts, facilitates person-to-person interaction. Every culture can be subdivided into co-cultures consisting of members of the same general culture who differ in some ethnic or sociological way from the dominant culture. In the United States, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, the physically challenged, gay people, and the elderly are examples of co-cultural groups. To engage in effective interpersonal communication with members of these and other groups, it is important to enhance your knowledge of the norms and rules that characterize their interactions. Remember, the lessons taught to you by your culture are not necessarily the lessons others have been taught by theirs.

Among culture’s lessons are how to say hello and goodbye, when to speak and when to remain silent, how to behave when angry, how much eye contact to make when interacting, and how much...
gesturing and touching is appropriate. If culture guides behavior, we must make the effort to understand someone’s culture if we are to understand the person.15

When interacting with someone whose cultural background differs from yours, considering the following questions can improve your communication:

- How do this person’s feelings about socialization differ from mine?
- How does his or her concept of self differ from mine?
- To what extent do our attitudes, values, and thinking processes differ?
- To what degree is he or she more or less competitive than me?
- In what ways does his or her use of nonverbal cues differ from mine?

**ORIENTATION AND CULTURAL CONTEXT**

While an array of variables allows us to distinguish one culture from another, the two we focus on here are individual and collective orientation and high-context and low-context communication.16

**Individual and Collective Orientation**

Cultures that are more individualistic in nature, such as those of the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Germany, stress individual goals. In contrast, cultures more collectivistic in nature, such as those represented by many Muslim, African, Asian, and Latin American countries, stress group goals.17 In an individualist culture, you are responsible for yourself and maybe your immediate family; in a collectivist culture, you are responsible for the entire group. Likewise, whereas individualist cultures promote competition, collectivist ones stress cooperation.

**High-Context and Low-Context Communication**

Cultures are also distinguished from each other by their use of high- or low-context communication. High-context cultures are tradition bound; cultural traditions guide members’ interactions, causing them to appear to outsiders as overly polite and indirect in relationships. Members of low-context cultures, in contrast, usually exhibit a more direct communication style, one that is verbally explicit. Members of Western cultures tend to use low-context communication, whereas members of Asian and other Eastern cultures typically use high-context communication.18 Because they also place a premium on face-saving behavior, members of high-context cultures are much less confrontational. Preferring to preserve harmony, they avoid arguing for fear the other person might lose face. For similar reasons, members of high-context cultures are also reluctant to say “no” directly to another person. Thus, members of low-context cultures may have difficulty deciding when and if the “yes” of a member of a high-context culture really means yes.

**THE IMPACT OF GENDER**

Culture also shapes gender, and gender shapes communication.19 Socially accepted variations in the definitions and views of masculinity and femininity, gender differences, are taught to us as we grow up. As historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes, “To be an I at all means to be gendered.”20
**GENDER AND COMMUNICATION STYLE**

Gender is a social creation that imposes a sense of social order by reflecting the societal characteristics associated with the biological categories of male and female. Subtly or overtly, we are pressured to conform to social norms, encouraged to learn accepted interaction scripts, and usually develop preferences for using different communication styles. Though attitudes have evolved, in U.S. society, many still expect women to be more nurturing, sensitive to others’ needs, and more emotional than men. Similarly, they expect men to be more independent, assertive, and emotionally restrained than women. Some families even persist in dividing responsibilities along gendered lines, assigning more physically demanding outdoor chores to males, while expecting females to clean the home’s interior, cook, and care for other family members, including younger siblings and aging parents. Some hospitals still wrap baby girls in pink blankets and baby boys in blue blankets. Girls and boys similarly are provided with different kinds of toys—perhaps dolls for girls and action figures for boys. Schools have been criticized for encouraging students to pursue different curricula depending on their gender. So, from the delivery room to the home, to the school, and on to romantic relationships and career paths, we see gender shaping lifestyle. However, as we become more conscious of arbitrarily created gendered meanings, we are able to broaden our understanding of what is appropriate behavior and what we accept as “normal.”

While we all express gender through behavior that we believe is normal, what we define as normal changes with time. By identifying how arbitrarily created gendered constructions, or conventions, affect interpersonal communication and our relationships, we take a step toward understanding what we hope for when it comes to our interpersonal lives. Do you see your options as unlimited? What tasks do you feel free to perform? What limits, if any, do you believe should be placed on the role gender plays in our social, professional, and family relationships? While all societies promote gender ideologies that specify appropriate behaviors for males and females, what should you do if you believe a gendered construction is privileging, disadvantage, empowering, or paralyzing you or a partner?

**THE IMPACT OF MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY**

“The medium is the message.” “The medium is the massage.” We can trace both of these sayings to the musings of the late media critic and communication theorist Marshall McLuhan. According to McLuhan, the channels of communication affect both the sending and the receiving of messages. The same words convey different messages depending on whether they are sent using face-to-face interaction, print, a cell phone, a video, or a podcast. The medium changes things, altering the message by massaging its contents.

It is now over half a century since McLuhan predicted that the introduction of new technologies would transform our world into a mobile global village. Technology makes it increasingly possible for us to watch and listen to, introduce ourselves to, and have continuing contact with individuals across the country and around the world without ever leaving our homes. Technology also is altering our sense of self, our social norms, our views of reality, our images of success and failure, our happiness, our interpersonal options, and the communication rules we adhere to. All these changes impact our communication presence.
Years ago, Apple’s Steve Jobs observed that computers really were personal and should be renamed “inter-personal computers.” Today we use computers, tablets, and smartphones to log on to Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, or an endless litany of other sites, to connect with others. In the year 2000, the average person spent 2.7 hours a week online. In 2010, that number jumped to 18 hours a week. In 2017, teens spent up to 9 hours a day on various social platforms. On average, in 2017, Americans spent 12 hours, 7 minutes a day consuming media, including radio and television. However, when we form a relationship online, we are likely to idealize and create heightened expectations for it, expectations that might not be realized should we actually meet. In fact, online partners feel greater intimacy with and attraction for one another than when they actually meet one another face-to-face. Have any of your online relationships developed into flourishing offline ones? To what do you attribute their success or failure?

**TRY THIS**

**What’s Okay With You?**

What guidelines do you think people ought to follow when using electronically enhanced communication? For example, have you ever engaged in any of the behaviors identified in the chart below yourself? Would you become annoyed, insulted, or feel at risk if another person engaged in any of the identified behaviors? Use the chart to record your answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE BEHAVIOR</th>
<th>EXHIBITED</th>
<th>MY REACTION TO ANOTHER EXHIBITING THE BEHAVIOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Texting while walking in the street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texting another person while dining out with a friend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering a cell during a movie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking loudly on your cell on public transportation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texting back in response to a missed call</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking on a cell with one friend when out with someone who is talking on a cell to another friend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not liking an Instagram post right away</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweeting about one friend to another</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing Facebook while watching TV with a significant other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. What rules, if any, would you advise we adhere to when using digitally enhanced communication?

2. What makes certain uses of digitally enhanced communication either acceptable or unacceptable in your eyes?

3. How would you react if a rule important to you were violated?

In addition to broadening the network of people we communicate with, technology makes it possible for those who experience communication apprehension when face-to-face with another person to connect without such fear. We can interact remotely or in person, be anonymous, someone else, or ourselves. If the choice were yours alone, would you opt to increase or decrease the number of your virtual interactions compared to those you experience face-to-face? Why?

As well as spending more time in the digital dimension, we also devote more time to viewing and talking about reality TV and other programs. As a result, our mediated experiences are influencing our real-life experiences and relationships. Mediated reality is often sexier or more violent than real life. Despite this, we sometimes try to apply what we learn from them to our own lives, only to end up disappointed. Our love affairs are rarely as poignant or as passionate as those in the media. Our friends are rarely as attractive, giving, or fun to be with as those we see depicted. Physicians and lawyers are rarely as successful treating or representing us as their fictional counterparts are. Somehow, real life falls short of the lives we encounter either online or via television and film.

Years back, parents used to cajole, “Turn off the TV.” Their plea has now changed to something like “Turn off the device and come watch television.” Or are your parents as plugged into Facebook and other apps as you are? Do you or they take the smartphone to bed as you once did a stuffed animal? The claims we make about Internet addiction, while much like the claims people used to make about television being a plug-in drug, are being taken seriously by consumers and creators alike. Might you be addicted to your device? Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are hypnotically compelling for many of us, in part because they deliver unscheduled “variable rewards”—much like slot machines do. Messages, alerts, notifications, photos, and “likes” are sent to us randomly, making it virtually impossible for us not to react to them. They induce large numbers of us to become compulsive site checkers looking for a dopamine boost—almost as if we were seeking a fix.

Quite simply, a machine is altering our consciousness and the nature of our interpersonal interactions. We need to think about that. In coming chapters, we will look at the extent to which our devices are personalizing or depersonalizing our contacts, improving or harming communication with friends and family members, and fostering or impeding the development of what we call a community. When immersed in the digital domain, for example, do you gravitate toward cliques of people who share your interests, or do you seek to widen and diversify your interpersonal circle?
ON THE WAY TO GAINING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Even though interpersonal communication is an inevitable part of life, few, if any, of us are as effective or as successful at it as we could be. Therefore, we invite you to treat this class as your interpersonal communication laboratory. Use the information you gain and the skills you practice as guides when you interact with others. There is no such thing as being too good at interpersonal communication. Whatever your capabilities are right now, to help yourself become better at communicating interpersonally, promise yourself you will do the following.

ADD TO YOUR STOREHOUSE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Your chance of influencing your interpersonal encounters depends, at least to some extent, on your knowledge of how interpersonal relationships work. While our relationships vary significantly, with some being plagued by problems and others proceeding smoothly, one of our objectives in this book is to share with you a number of techniques you can use to enhance the quality of your relationships and the satisfaction you derive from them.

RECOGNIZE THE EFFECTS OF YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Every relationship affects you in some way. Some influence your understanding of others; some alter the quality of your life. Some add to your confidence; others diminish your belief in yourself. While healthy relationships enrich your life, unhealthy ones too often rob you of energy, leaving you demoralized or apathetic. Another goal of this course is to help you understand the forces at work during person-to-person contacts and the complex ways in which interpersonal communication changes you. If you understand the challenges you face, identify alternative modes of responding, and learn how to think about your relationships, then you will be better prepared to deal effectively with them.

ANALYZE YOUR OPTIONS

The interpersonal communication choices you make have impacts on you and your partner. Rather than responding automatically, take time to think about your options. What happens in a relationship usually is not beyond your control. In most situations, you have freedom to respond in any number of ways. Every contact you engage in offers opportunities to improve it if you remain flexible and open. Another of our goals is to help you learn to take advantage of this.

INTERACT ETHICALLY, RESPECT DIVERSITY, AND THINK CRITICALLY

Effective interpersonal communicators act ethically in their relationships, demonstrate their respect for diversity, and think critically about the interactions they share. Ethical communicators demonstrate the ability to adhere to standards of right and wrong. They follow appropriate
interaction rules, treat other people as they would like to be treated, and never knowingly harm someone else in an effort to achieve personal goals.

Interpersonal communicators who respect diversity understand culture’s role in person-to-person interactions, tolerate difference and dissent, willingly interact with people from a variety of backgrounds, demonstrate a decreased use of stereotypes to guide behavior, process experience from the viewpoints of others, avoid imposing their cultural values on other people, and refrain from holding discriminatory attitudes.

Individuals who think critically about their relationships know that communication is complex, and they don’t know all there is to know. They are open-minded; reflect on others’ ideas rather than respond impulsively; open themselves to new ideas and new ways of perceiving; challenge themselves to reexamine their beliefs, values, and behaviors; and concern themselves with unstated assumptions in addition to overt discourse. They think things out, analyzing and evaluating outcomes, seeking to understand and remember what worked or didn’t, and creating opportunities for their own personal growth together with the personal growth of others.

**REFLECT ON THIS**

*The Cell Effect*

Over a decade ago, researcher Noelle Chesley wanted to find out if the time people spent on cellphones enhanced or detracted from their overall feelings of happiness. To answer the question, Chesley surveyed more than 1,200 adults and concluded that a correlation existed: The more time individuals spent on cellphones, the less happy and less satisfied they became with their family relationships. Chesley attributed this, at least in part, to the work lives of people spilling over into their personal lives and causing stress at home.

**Consider these questions:**

1. Do your experiences today confirm Chesley’s findings? Does time spent on your phone stress the relationships you share with people important to you, or does it help bring you closer?
2. Do you think Chesley would have found the same results if she had studied the time we spend on tablets or computers? Explain your answer.
3. What recommendations can you offer for alleviating such relationship stressors? For example, would you expect others to abide by rules specifying when to rely on smart phones or other digital tools?


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Chapter 1: Interpersonal Communication

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PRACTICE AND APPLY SKILLS TO IMPROVE INTERPERSONAL PRESENCE

This text shares skills you can practice to enhance your interpersonal presence. Commit to practicing them. How you present yourself, perceive others, use words and nonverbal cues, listen, progress in a relationship, overcome relational obstacles, demonstrate trust and trustworthiness, and handle your emotions all affect your effectiveness when interacting with friends, family members, coworkers, health providers, and others. The extent to which you practice and apply the skills we discuss will determine whether you add to your interpersonal behavioral repertoire, demonstrating your interpersonal versatility and resourcefulness.

CONNECT THE CASE

The Case of Sylvia and Khalil

“After he left my dorm, he texted me, ‘I’m sorry, it’s over.’ That’s all he said,” Sylvia told her roommate Justine. “How could he end things just like that? Why didn’t he talk to me when we were together? I thought everything was fine with us.”

Sylvia and Khalil had been together for several months. They had met on campus at the beginning of the semester and had been seeing each other regularly. Sylvia had even invited Khalil to spend Thanksgiving with her at her parents’. They had returned to campus after the holiday, and then this happened. “What did I do to cause this?” Sylvia asked Justine. “Do you think he met someone else?”

Sylvia was despondent. Questions raced through her mind. She tried to access Khalil’s Facebook page, but he had already defriended her, deleted her pictures, and changed his relationship status to single. She decided to text him back, asking, “What happened? What did I do?” Then she turned off her cell, afraid of what he would text back to her.

Khalil was sitting in his off-campus apartment staring blankly at his iPad. He had just defriended Sylvia and changed his Facebook status. He didn’t feel good about it, but he told himself he had no choice. Now she was texting him. He didn’t want to read it. “How can I tell her the truth?” he wondered. Sure,
they had had some great times together—but that was until he went home with her for Thanksgiving dinner. Soon after entering Sylvia's parents’ home, Khalil had begun to feel uncomfortable. Her folks were nice enough, but he sensed a certain amount of distance on their part.

By the time they had finished dinner, Khalil was certain that because he was Egyptian, Sylvia’s parents had reservations about him. They hadn’t done or said anything directly to him; he just had a feeling. Maybe he should have raised his concerns with Sylvia. But he told himself that ending things this way was easier. Was he right? Khalil just didn’t know. He turned off his cell.

Demonstrate your understanding by answering these questions:

1. What do you think about the way Sylvia and Khalil handled their situation?

2. What does the behavior of each suggest about his or her communication weaknesses and strengths?

3. Would you have used texting and Facebook in the same way as Sylvia and/or Khalil? Explain your answer.

4. Given the current status of their relationship, what advice would you give each of them?
1. Define and explain the importance of communication presence.

Communication presence is the unique composite of characteristics we present when interacting both digitally and in the real world. Communication presence affects interpersonal effectiveness and relationship development.

2. Define interpersonal communication, distinguishing it from other types of communication.

Interpersonal communication occurs between two people, forming a dyad. Interpersonal communicators make personal contact, build a connection, and establish a relationship. The process of interpersonal communication is ongoing and ever changing, and it occurs whenever we interact with another person, sharing responsibility for creating meaning (what we extract from the interaction) and managing our relationship (determining its nature).

3. Use a communication model to identify the essential elements and transactional nature of the interpersonal communication process.

Every interpersonal interaction is transactional in nature, meaning it involves two people who simultaneously function as sender and receiver; it contains messages (the content of communication), channels (the medium or media carrying the message), noise (anything interfering with the reception of a message), feedback (information returned to a message source in response to a message sent), context (the physical, psychological, temporal, and cultural setting for communication), and effect(s) (the emotional, physical, and/or cognitive influence of the communication).

4. Explain the functions that interpersonal communication serves.

Interpersonal communication fulfills psychological functions by enhancing self–other understanding; social functions by meeting our needs for affection, inclusion, and control; information functions by promoting the sharing of knowledge and reduction of uncertainty; and influence functions by enabling us to use strategic communication to achieve goals.

5. Describe the characteristics, core principles, and axioms of interpersonal communication.

Among interpersonal communication’s characteristics are that it is a dynamic process, unrepeatable and irreversible, learned, and noted for its wholeness and nonsummativity. Among the principles underlying interpersonal communication are the importance of using behavioral patterns and both reasoned and retrospective sense making to predict and interpret behavior. The following five axioms add to our understanding of interpersonal relationships: (1) You cannot not communicate; (2) every interaction has content and relationship dimensions; (3) every interaction is defined by how it is punctuated; (4) messages consist of verbal symbols and nonverbal
cues; and (5) interactions are either symmetrical or complementary.

6. Describe how gender and culture affect interpersonal communication.

Gender and cultural prescriptions shape interpersonal communication. Because of their potential to enhance or complicate interpersonal relations, we can demonstrate sensitivity and avoid misunderstandings by increasing our awareness of the culture and gender preferences of others and recognizing the importance of respecting and adjusting to differences.

7. Provide examples of how digital media are reshaping interpersonal contacts.

Digital media have broadened our options for communicating interpersonally. They are altering our sense of self, social norms, and views of reality. We send an increasing number of texts, using our cell phones more than ever before. Whether such options are personalizing or depersonalizing interaction is still open to debate.

8. Develop a plan to improve your interpersonal communication.

Adding to your storehouse of knowledge about interpersonal communication, critically analyzing how your relationships affect you as well as the behavioral options open to you, committing to interacting ethically, respecting diversity, and thinking critically about person-to-person interactions, together with developing and practicing skills, will make you a more effective interpersonal partner.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Can you explain the different kinds of communication you use in a day and how they help meet your needs? (See pages 1–2 and 12–14; and Try This, page 16.)

2. Can you give examples of what makes communication interpersonal? (See pages 2–5.)

3. Can you name and define the elements and axioms at work during interpersonal communication by using them to analyze some of your recent communication exchanges? (See pages 20–22.)

4. Can you summarize how communicating online as opposed to face-to-face alters the nature of interpersonal communication? (See pages 25–27; and Try This, page 5 and page 24.)

5. Can you write a paragraph describing the steps you will take to enhance your interpersonal skills? (See pages 27–29.)

KEY TERMS

- Channel 9
- Communication 4
- Communication presence 2
- Complementary relationship 20
The Interpersonal Communication Playbook

Context 11
Cultural awareness 21
Dyad 4
Effect 11
External feedback 11
Feedback 10
Feedforward 11
Gender 22
High-monitored feedback 11
Interaction model 12
Internal feedback 11
Interpersonal communication 4
Intrapersonal communication 4
Interpersonal competence 6
Low-monitored feedback 11
Messages 8
Negative feedback 10
Noise 9
Positive feedback 10
Reasoned sense making 19
Retrospective sense making 19
Role duality 8
Symmetrical relationship 20
Transactional model 12

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