Lesson 3.1 Perceiving and Presenting the Self

Just as our perception of others affects how we communicate, so does our perception of ourselves. But what influences our self-perception? How much of our "self" is a product of our own making and how much of it is constructed based on how others react to us? How do we present ourselves to others in ways that maintain our sense of self or challenge how others see us? We will begin to answer these questions in this section as we explore self-concept, self-esteem, and self-presentation.

1. Self-Concept

Self-concept refers to the overall idea of who a person thinks he or she is. If we were to say to an individual, “Tell me who you are,” within the answers would be clues as to how that person envisions himself or herself (self-concept). Each person has an overall self-concept that might be encapsulated in a short list of overarching characteristics that he or she finds important. But each person’s self-concept is also influenced by context, meaning, we think differently about ourselves depending on the situation we are in. In some situations, personal characteristics, such as our abilities, personality, and other distinguishing features, will best describe who we are. You might consider yourself laid back, traditional, funny, open-minded, or driven, or you might label yourself a leader or a thrill seeker. In other situations, our self-concept may be tied to a group or cultural membership. For example, you might consider yourself a member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity, a Southerner, or a member of the track team.

Our self-concept is also formed through our interactions with others and their reactions to us. The concept of the "looking glass" self explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people’s reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us. Charles Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1902).

This reflective process of building our self-concept is based on what other people have said, such as “You’re a good listener,” and other people’s actions, such as coming to you for advice. These thoughts evoke emotional responses that feed into our self-concept. For example, you may think, “I’m glad that people can count on me to listen to their problems.”

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons to other people. *Social comparison theory* states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people. Social comparisons are based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 261.

In terms of superiority and inferiority, we evaluate characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn’t appropriate. Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If a man wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, he may be discouraged by his difficulty keeping up with the aerobics

instructor or running partner and judge himself as inferior, which could negatively affect his self-concept. Using as a reference group people who have only recently started a fitness program but have shown progress could help maintain a more accurate and hopefully positive self-concept.

We also engage in social comparison based on similarity and difference. Since self-concept is context-specific, similarity may be desirable in some situations and difference more desirable in others. Factors like age and personality may influence whether or not we want to fit in or stand out. Although we compare ourselves to others throughout our lives, adolescent and teen years usually bring new pressure to be similar to or different from particular reference groups. Think of all the cliques in high school and how people voluntarily and involuntarily broke off into groups based on popularity, interest, culture, or grade level. Some kids in your high school probably wanted to fit in with and be similar to other people in the marching band but be different from the football players. Conversely, athletes were probably more apt to compare themselves, in terms of similar athletic ability, to other athletes rather than kids in show choir.

But social comparison can be complicated by perceptual influences. As we learned earlier, we organize information based on similarity and difference, but these patterns don’t always hold. Even though students involved in athletics and students involved in arts may seem very different, a dancer or singer may also be very athletic, perhaps even more so than a member of the football team. As with other aspects of perception, there are positive and negative consequences of social comparison.

We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won’t stop until they get a high score on the video game or set a new school record in a track-and-field event. Some people strive to be the first chair in the clarinet section of the orchestra, while another person may be content to be the second chair. The education system promotes social comparison through grades and rewards such as honor rolls and dean’s lists. Although education and privacy laws prevent instructors from displaying each student’s grade on a test or paper for the whole class to see, it's okay to share with classes the total number of As, Bs, Cs, and so on. This doesn’t violate anyone’s privacy rights, but it allows students to see where they fall in the

grade distribution. This type of social comparison can be used as motivation. The student who was one of only three out of twenty-three to get a D on the exam knows that most of her classmates are performing better than she is, which may lead her to think, “If they can do it, I can do it.” But the social comparison that isn’t reasoned can have negative effects and result in negative thoughts like “Look at how bad I did. Man, I’m stupid!”

These negative thoughts can lead to negative behaviors, because we try to maintain internal consistency, meaning we act in ways that match up with our self-concept. So if the student begins to question her academic abilities and then incorporates an assessment of herself as a “bad student” into her self-concept, she may then behave in ways consistent with that, which is only going to worsen her academic performance. Additionally, a student might be comforted to learn that he isn’t the only person who got a D and then not feel the need to try to improve, since he has company. You can see in this example that evaluations we place on our self-concept can lead to cycles of thinking and acting. These cycles relate to self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are components of our self-concept.

(https://secure.flickr.com/photos/35067687@N04/49501047091)

2. Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is more specifically an evaluation of the self. Barbara M. Byrne, *Measuring Self-Concept across the Life Span: Issues and Instrumentation* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1996), 5.

If I again prompted you to “Tell me who you are,” and then asked you to evaluate (label as good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable) each of the things you listed about yourself, I would get clues about your self-esteem. Like self-concept, self-esteem has general and specific elements. Although our self-esteem varies across our life span and contexts, people are generally more likely to evaluate themselves positively while others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively. Joel Brockner, *Self-Esteem at Work* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988), 11.

How we judge ourselves affects our communication and our behaviors, but not every negative or positive judgment carries the same weight. The negative evaluation of a trait that isn’t very important for our self-concept will likely not result in a loss of self-esteem. For example, you may not be very good at drawing. While you may appreciate drawing as an art form, you don't consider drawing's ability to be a very big part of your self-concept. If someone critiqued your drawing ability, your self-esteem wouldn’t take a big hit. You may however consider yourself a good student. You work hard and devote your time and energy to improving your ability to learn each semester. If someone critiqued your abilities as a student, your self-esteem would be hurt. Now, this doesn’t mean we can’t be evaluated on something we find important. Even though being a "good" student may be very important to your self-concept, you are still regularly evaluated on it through class activities and assignments.

Self-esteem isn't the only factor that contributes to our self-concept though; perceptions about our competence also play a role in developing our sense of "self".

Self-Efficacy- *refers to the judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context.* Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York, NY: W. H. Freeman, 1997). As you see in the figure below, judgments about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which then influences our self-concept.

The following example also illustrates these interconnections:

Jalen did a good job on his first college speech. During a meeting with his professor, Jalen indicates that he is confident going into the next speech and thinks he will do well. This skill-based assessment is an indication that Jalen has a high level of self-efficacy related to public speaking. If he does well in the speech, the praise from his classmates and professor will reinforce his self-efficacy and lead him to positively evaluate his speaking skills, which will contribute to his self-esteem. By the end of the class, Jalen likely thinks of himself as a good public speaker, which may then become an important part of his self-concept.

Throughout these points of connection, it's important to remember that self-perception affects how we communicate, behave, and perceive other things. Jalen's increased feeling of self-efficacy may give him more confidence in his delivery, which will likely result in positive feedback that reinforces his self-perception. He may start to perceive his professor more positively since they share an interest in public speaking, and he may begin to notice other people's speaking skills more during class presentations and public lectures. Over time, he may even start to think about changing his major to communication or pursuing career options that incorporate public speaking, which would further integrate being "a good public speaker" into his self-concept. You can hopefully see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative

cycles. While some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives.

This Photo by the Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affects our feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem. As we saw in Jalen's example, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 99.

Negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves while negative feedback will do the opposite, ultimately affecting behavior and causing a negative cycle.

Influences on Self-Perception

We have already learned that other people influence our self-concept and self-esteem. While interactions we have with individuals and groups are important to consider, we must also note the influence that larger, more systemic forces have on our self-perception. *Social and family influences, culture, and the media* all play a role in shaping who we think we are and how we feel about ourselves. Although these are

powerful socializing forces, there are ways to maintain some control over our self-perception.

Social and Family Influences- Various forces help socialize us into our respective social and cultural groups and play a powerful role in presenting us with options about who we can be. While we may like to think that our self-perception starts with a blank canvas, our perceptions are limited by our experiences and various social and cultural contexts.

Parents and peers shape our self-perceptions in positive and negative ways. The feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can lead to positive views of self. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 99.

In the past few years, however, there has been a public discussion and debate about how much positive reinforcement people should give to others, especially children. The following questions have been raised: Do we have current and upcoming generations that have been overpraised? Is the praise given warranted? What are the positive and negative effects of praise? What is the end goal of the praise? Let's briefly look at this discussion and its connection to self-perception.

Whether praise is warranted or not is very subjective and specific to each person and context, but in general, there have been questions raised about the potential negative effects of too much praise. Motivation is the underlying force that drives us to do things. Sometimes we are intrinsically motivated, meaning we want to do something for the love of doing it or for the resulting internal satisfaction. Other times we are

extrinsically motivated, meaning we do something to receive a reward or avoid punishment. If you put effort into completing a short documentary for a class because you love filmmaking and editing, you have been largely motivated by intrinsic forces. If you complete the documentary because you want an "A" and know that if you fail your parents will not give you money for your spring break trip, then you are motivated by extrinsic factors.

Both can, of course, effectively motivate us. Praise is a form of extrinsic reward, and if there is an actual reward associated with the praise, like money or special recognition, some people speculate that intrinsic motivation will suffer. But what's so good about intrinsic motivation? Intrinsic motivation is more substantial and long-lasting than extrinsic motivation and can lead to the development of a work ethic and a sense of pride in one's abilities. Intrinsic motivation can move people to accomplish great things over long periods and be happy despite the effort and sacrifices made. Extrinsic motivation dies when the reward stops. Additionally, too much praise can lead people to have a misguided sense of their abilities.

College professors who are reluctant to fail students who produce failing work may be setting those students up to be shocked when their supervisor critiques their abilities or output once they get into a professional context. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 105–7.

There are cultural differences in the amount of praise and positive feedback that teachers and parents give their children. For example, teachers give less positive reinforcement in Japanese and Taiwanese classrooms than do teachers in US

classrooms. Chinese and Kenyan parents do not regularly praise their children because they fear it may make them too individualistic, rude, or arrogant. Anna Wierzbicka, “The English Expressions *Good Boy* and *Good Girl* and Cultural Models of Child Rearing,” *Culture and Psychology* 10, no. 3 (2004): 251–78.

Research has also found that communication patterns develop between parents and children that are common in many verbally and physically abusive relationships. Such patterns have negative effects on a child’s self-efficacy and self-esteem. Wendy Morgan and Steven R. Wilson, “Explaining Child Abuse as a Lack of Safe Ground,” in *The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication*, eds. Brian H. Spitzberg and William R. Cupach (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 341.

As you’ll recall from our earlier discussion, attributions are links we make to identify the cause of a behavior. In the case of aggressive or abusive parents, they are not as able to distinguish between mistakes and intentional behaviors, often seeing honest mistakes as intended and reacting negatively to the child. Such parents also communicate generally negative evaluations to their children by saying, for example, “You can’t do anything right!” or “You’re a bad girl.” When children do exhibit positive behaviors, abusive parents are more likely to use external attributions that diminish the achievement of the child by saying, for example, “You only won because the other team was off their game.” In general, abusive parents have unpredictable reactions to their children’s positive and negative behavior, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child that can lead to lower self-esteem and erratic or aggressive behavior. The cycles of praise and blame are just two examples of how the family as a socializing force can influence our self-perceptions. Culture also influences how we see ourselves.

Cultural Influences- How people perceive themselves varies across cultures. For example, many cultures exhibit a phenomenon known as the self-enhancement bias, meaning that we tend to emphasize our desirable qualities relative to other people. Steve Loughnan et al., “Economic Inequality Is Linked to Biased Self-Perception,” *Psychological Science* 22, no. 10 (2011): 1254.

But the degree to which people engage in self-enhancement varies. A review of many studies in this area found that people in Western countries such as the United States were significantly more likely to self-enhance than people in countries such as Japan. Many scholars explain this variation using a common measure of cultural variation that

claims people in individualistic cultures are more likely to engage in competition and openly praise accomplishments than people in collectivistic cultures. The difference in self-enhancement has also been tied to economics, with scholars arguing that people in countries with greater income inequality are more likely to view themselves as superior to others or want to be perceived as superior to others (even if they don't have economic wealth) to conform to the country's values and norms. This holds because countries with high levels of economic inequality, like the United States, typically value competition and the right to boast about winning or succeeding, while countries with more economic equality, like Japan, have a cultural norm of modesty. Steve Loughnan et al., "Economic Inequality Is Linked to Biased Self-Perception," *Psychological Science* 22, no. 10 (2011): 1257.

The race also plays a role in self-perception. For example, positive self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to be higher in African American adolescent girls than Caucasian girls. Michelle B. Stockton et al., "Self-Perception and Body Image Associations with Body Mass Index among 8–10-Year-Old African American Girls," *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* 34, no. 10 (2009): 1144.

More recent studies have discounted much of the early research on race and self-esteem that purported that African Americans of all ages have lower self-esteem than whites. Self-perception becomes more complex when we consider biracial individuals —more specifically those born to couples comprising an African American and a white parent. Dorcas D. Bowles, "Biracial Identity: Children Born to African-American and White Couples," *Clinical Social Work Journal* 21, no. 4 (1993): 418–22.

In such cases, it is challenging for biracial individuals to embrace both of their heritages, and social comparison becomes more difficult due to diverse and sometimes conflicting reference groups. Since many biracial individuals identify as and are considered African American by society, living and working within a black community can help foster more positive self-perceptions in these biracial individuals. Such a community offers a more nurturing environment and a buffer zone from racist attitudes but simultaneously distances biracial individuals from their white identity. Conversely, immersion into a predominantly white community and separation from a black community can lead biracial individuals to internalize negative views of people of color and perhaps develop a sense of inferiority. Gender intersects with culture and biracial identity to create different experiences and challenges for biracial men and

women. Biracial men have more difficulty accepting their potential occupational limits, especially if they have white fathers, and biracial women have difficulty accepting their black features, such as hair and facial features. All these challenges lead to a sense of being marginalized from both ethnic groups and interfere in the development of positive self-esteem and a stable self-concept.

There are some general differences in terms of gender and self-perception that relate to self-concept, self-efficacy, and envisioning ideal selves. As with any cultural differences, these are generalizations that have been supported by research, but they do not represent all individuals within a group. Regarding self-concept, men are more likely to describe themselves in terms of their group membership, and women are more likely to include references to relationships in their self-descriptions.

For example, a man may note that he is a Tarheel fan, a boat enthusiast, or a member of the Rotary Club, and a woman may note that she is a mother of two or a loyal friend.

Regarding self-efficacy, men tend to have higher perceptions of self-efficacy than women. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 105.

In terms of actual and ideal selves, men and women in a variety of countries both described their ideal selves as more masculine. Deborah L. Best and Jennifer J. Thomas, “Cultural Diversity and Cross-Cultural Perspectives,” in *The Psychology of*

Gender, 2nd ed., eds. Alice H. Eagly, Anne E. Beall, and Robert J. Sternberg (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2004), 296–327.

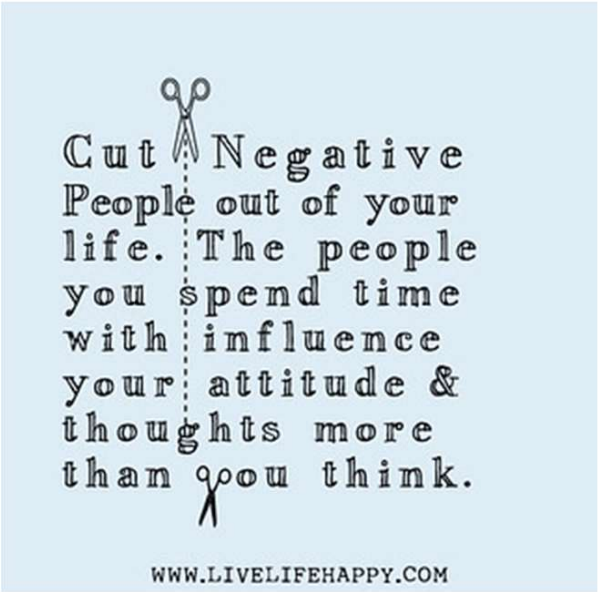
As was noted earlier, gender differences are interesting to study but are very often exaggerated beyond the actual variations. Socialization and internalization of societal norms for gender differences account for much more of our perceived differences than do innate or natural differences between genders. These gender norms may be explicitly stated—for example, a mother may say to her son, “Boys don’t play with dolls”—or they may be more implicit, with girls being encouraged to pursue historically feminine professions like teaching or nursing without others stating the expectation.

Media Influences- The representations we see in the media affect our self-perception. The vast majority of media images include idealized representations of attractiveness. Even though the images of people we see in glossy magazines and on movie screens are not typically what we see when we look at the people around us in a classroom, at work, or in the grocery store, many of us continue to hold ourselves to an unrealistic standard of beauty and attractiveness. Movies, magazines, and television shows are filled with beautiful people, and less attractive actors, (when they are present in the media), are typically portrayed as the butt of jokes, villains, or only as background extras. Gordon L. Patzer, *Looks: Why They Matter More than You Ever Imagined* (New York, NY: AMACOM, 2008), 147.

Researchers have found that only 12 percent of prime-time characters are overweight, which is dramatically less than the national statistics for obesity among the actual US population. Gordon L. Patzer, *Looks: Why They Matter More than You Ever Imagined* (New York, NY: AMACOM, 2008), 147–48.

Further, an analysis of how weight is discussed in prime-time sitcoms found that heavier female characters were often the targets of negative comments and jokes that audience members responded to with laughter. Conversely, positive comments about women’s bodies were related to their thinness. In short, the heavier the character, the more negative the comments, and the thinner the character, the more positive the comments. The same researchers analyzed sitcoms for content regarding male characters’ weight and found that although comments regarding their weight were made, they were fewer in number and not as negative, ultimately supporting the notion that overweight male characters are more accepted in media than overweight female

characters. Much more attention has been paid in recent years to the potential negative effects of such narrow media representations.



In terms of self-concept, media representations offer us guidance on what is acceptable or unacceptable and valued or not valued in our society. Mediated messages, in general, reinforce cultural stereotypes related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class. People from historically marginalized groups must look much harder than those in the dominant groups to find positive representations of their identities in media. As a critical thinker, it is important to question media messages and to examine who is included and who is excluded.

Advertising in particular encourages people to engage in social comparison, regularly communicating to us that we are inferior because we lack a certain product or that we need to change some aspect of our lives to keep up with and be similar to others. For example, for many years advertising targeted at women instilled in them a fear of having a dirty house, selling them products that promised to keep their house clean, make their family happy, and impress their friends and neighbors. Now messages tell us to fear becoming old or unattractive, selling products to keep our skin tight and clear, which will in turn make us happy and popular.

3. Self-Presentation

How we perceive ourselves manifests in how we present ourselves to others. Self-presentation is the process of strategically concealing or revealing personal information to influence others' perceptions. Lauren J. Human et al., "Your Best Self

Helps Reveal Your True Self: Positive Self-Presentation Leads to More Accurate Personality Impressions," *Social Psychological and Personality Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2012): 23.

We engage in this process daily and for different reasons. Although people occasionally intentionally deceive others in the process of self-presentation, in general, we try to make a good impression while remaining authentic. Since self-presentation helps meet our instrumental, relational, and identity needs, we stand to lose quite a bit if we are caught intentionally misrepresenting ourselves. In May of 2012, Yahoo!'s CEO resigned after it became known that he stated on official documents that he had two college degrees when he only had one. In a similar incident, a woman who had long served as the dean of admissions for the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology was dismissed from her position after it was learned that she had only attended one year of college and had falsely indicated she had a bachelor's and master's degree. Lauren Webber and Melissa Korn, "Yahoo's CEO among Many Notable Resume Flaps," *Wall Street Journal Blogs*, May 7, 2012, accessed June 9, 2012.

http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2012/05/07/yahoos-ceo-among-many-notable-resume-flaps (http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2012/05/07/yahoos-ceo-among-many-notable-resume-flaps)

.

Such incidents clearly show that although people can get away with such false self-presentation for a while, the eventual consequences of being found out are dire. As communicators, we sometimes engage in more subtle forms of inauthentic self-presentation. For example, a person may state or imply that they know more about a subject or situation than they do to seem smart or "in the loop." During a speech, a speaker works on a polished and competent delivery to distract from a lack of substantive content. These cases of strategic self-presentation may not ever be found out, but communicators should still avoid them as they do not live up to the standards of ethical communication.

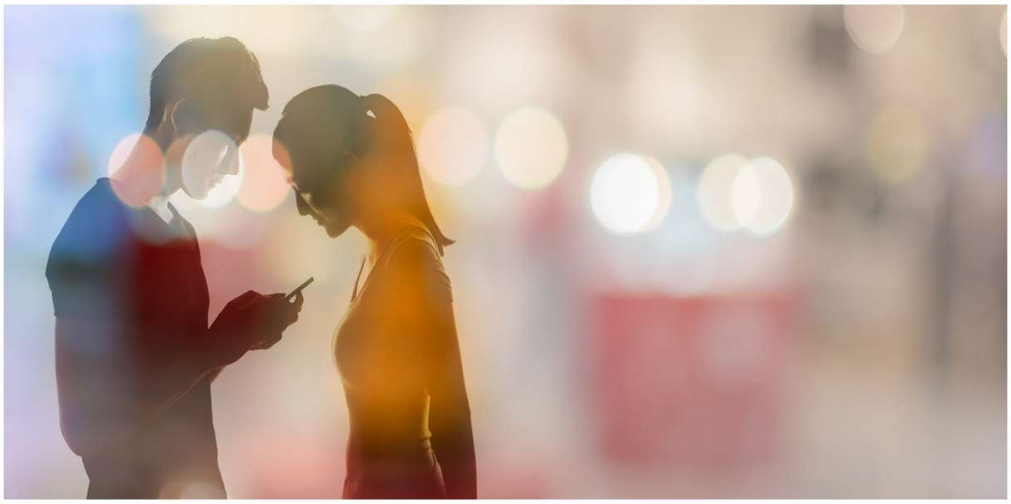
Consciously and competently engaging in self-presentation can have benefits because we can provide others with a more positive and accurate picture of who we are. People who are skilled at impression management are typically more engaging and confident, which allows others to pick up on more cues from which to form impressions. Lauren J. Human et al., "Your Best Self Helps Reveal Your True Self: Positive Self-Presentation Leads to More Accurate Personality Impressions," *Social Psychological and Personality Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2012): 27.

Being a skilled self-presenter draws on many of the practices used by competent communicators, including becoming a higher self-monitor. When self-presentation skills and self-monitoring skills combine, communicators can simultaneously monitor their expressions, the reaction of others, and the situational and social context. John J. Sosik, Bruce J. Avolio, and Dong I. Jung, "Beneath the Mask: Examining the Relationship of Self-Presentation Attributes and Impression Management to Charismatic Leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 13 (2002): 217.

Self-Presentation Online- Although social networking has long been a way to keep in touch with friends and colleagues, the advent of social media has made the process of making connections and those all-important first impressions much more complex. Just looking at Facebook as an example, we can see that the very acts of constructing a profile, posting status updates, "liking" certain things, and sharing various information via Facebook features and apps is self-presentation. Junghyun Kim and Jong-Eun Roselyn Lee, "The Facebook Paths to Happiness: Effects of the Number of Facebook Friends and Self-Presentation on Subjective Well-Being," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 14, no. 6 (2011): 360.

People also form impressions based on the number of friends we have and the photos and posts that other people tag us in. All this information floating around can be difficult to keep track of. So how do we manage the impressions we make digitally given that there is a permanent record?

Perhaps we need to look at it from this perspective, most people are aware of how visible the information they post is, and they choose to only reveal things they think will form favorable impressions. But the mediated nature of Facebook also leads some people to disclose more personal information than they might otherwise in such public or semipublic forums. These hyperpersonal disclosures run the risk of forming negative impressions based on who sees them.



In general, the ease of digital communication, not just on Facebook, has presented new challenges for our self-control and information management. Sending someone a sexually provocative image used to take some effort before the age of digital cameras, but now “sexting” an explicit photo only takes a few seconds. So people who would have likely not engaged in such behavior before are more tempted to now, and it is the desire to present oneself as desirable or cool that leads people to send photos they may later regret.

In the next unit, we'll discover how "self-disclosure" impacts face-to-face and online relationships.

In Summary

- Our self-concept is the overall idea of who we think we are. It is developed through our interactions with others and through social comparison that allows us to compare our beliefs and behaviors to others.
- Our self-esteem is based on the evaluations and judgments we make about various characteristics of our self-concept. It is developed through an assessment and evaluation of our various skills and abilities known as self-efficacy.
- Socializing forces like family, culture, and media affect our self-perception because they give us feedback on who we are. This feedback can be evaluated positively or negatively and can lead to positive or negative patterns that influence our self-perception and then our communication.
- Self-presentation refers to the process of strategically concealing and/or revealing personal information to influence others' perceptions. When competent self-presenters combine self-monitoring skills they increase their proficiency and confidence as communicators.