

# 2

## COMMUNICATING IDENTITY

### The Social Self

Carolina is active on social media. She posts pictures on Instagram often and has around 700 followers. Her pictures are split about evenly between selfies and photos with friends. She also has a few old pictures up with her ex-boyfriend, although she took most of those down when they broke up a few months ago. At that time, she also changed her caption from his name with a heart next to it to her favorite quote, “carpe diem.” Carolina’s dad is Italian and she visits her relatives in Rome almost every summer, so her Instagram also features many photos taken in Italy. She is proud of her ethnic background, so she often captions these pictures with Italian flags or positive comments about the country. Carolina also has a Finsta (fake Instagram account) with only about 50 followers on it. Here she posts more candid and often funny photos that she would not want everyone to see. She is also active on Twitter where she retweets funny posts, direct messages tweets to friends, and posts an occasional subtweet. Her Twitter timeline goes back several years, showing who she went to school dances with, friends who wished her happy birthday over the years, and her activities in sports and her college sorority.

What does Carolina’s social media say about her? It lets people know if she is dating or not (though the information she posts may or may not be true), gives others a sense of how popular she is (from her number of followers and pictures with people), her physical appearance (though some pictures are photoshopped), gives strangers a glimpse of who she is, provides a peek into her personal and social life, and facilitates interaction with acquaintances and friends. Whether her **self-presentation** is effective depends on who views her page. Carolina’s social media accounts communicate to her friends in important ways; through her pictures and wall, she identifies herself as a good friend to certain people. Her social media accounts also send messages to classmates and potential friends; if they view her profile on Instagram or Twitter, it will help shape their impressions of her. But what if potential employers, professors, or her parents look at her page? Putting our identity out there for everyone to see raises questions about appropriateness, audience analysis, and privacy. Unlike everyday interactions, social networking sites such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook are less nimble in creating multiple identities. Perhaps that is why some people like Carolina have Finsta accounts where they can share parts of themselves that are more candid and perhaps less flattering with a smaller set of friends.

**Self-presentation:** The things we do to portray a particular image of self.

The Internet is but one venue where people present and manage their identities. Identity management occurs in face-to-face interaction, in social networking, on the telephone, in text messages, and even in letters and gifts. Research most often focuses on face-to-face contexts that offer a glimpse into how people create and present their identities. Identity management is chiefly important at the beginning of relationships when people try to make a good initial impression, but it is even important in well-developed relationships. Once we are close to someone, we usually want to make good impressions on other people in their social networks, such as their friends and family.

In this chapter, we explore how people use communication to manage their identities in social interaction. First, we briefly discuss the development of personal identities and the role that relationships play in their development. Second, we discuss general principles of identity management, such as whether trying to make a good impression is deceptive and manipulative or is simply a natural, often unconscious process. Finally, we review literature on three perspectives on identity management, including Goffman's (1959) **dramaturgical perspective**, P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) **politeness theory**, and research on facework.

**Dramaturgical perspective:** A perspective suggesting that the world is a stage, people are actors, and we enact performances geared for particular audiences, with performances enacted to advance beneficial images of ourselves.

**Politeness theory:** Brown and Levinson's extension of Goffman's work, which focuses on the specific ways that people manage and save face using communication.

**Identity:** The person we think we are and the self we communicate to others.

**Identity management:** The process people use to project and maintain a positive image to others.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

Communication scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and family researchers, among others, study how personal identities affect our lives. People are increasingly concerned about many aspects of their identity: popularity, education, relational partners, cars, résumés, homes, income, bodies, attractiveness, styles, sororities, occupations, health, mental well-being, and happiness. But identity is more than a personal experience: It is inherently social, communicative, and relational. Identity is inextricably interwoven with messages (verbal and nonverbal) we send about ourselves and with how other people respond to those messages.

### Defining Identity

We define **identity** as the person we think we are and communicate to others. Specifically, it is the personal "theory of self that is formed and maintained through actual or imagined interpersonal agreement about what self is like" (Schlenker, 1985, p. 67). Identity is the sense of self or the "I" that has been a central topic in psychology and communication for years (R. Brown, 1965). Identity is the self, the face, the ego, and the image we present to others in everyday life. It helps define who we are in relation to others, including what makes us similar and unique (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006). **Identity management** occurs when we try to influence people's images of ourselves. Carolina does this on her public social media accounts when she posts her best photos, including both selfies and pictures with friends. She manages her identity on social media by trying to present a favorable brand or image of herself as an attractive, educated young woman who loves to travel and has lots of friends.

### Human Nature and Identity

Human beings are cognitively sophisticated creatures who reflect on who they are and how they fit into the greater social fabric. Indeed, a universal quality of all human beings

regardless of culture is a sense of self as being distinct from others (D. E. Brown, 1991; Erikson, 1968). Thus, a sense of identity is a genetic legacy of our species that becomes increasingly focused as we develop. Of course, our identities are largely shaped by culture and communication, but our essence as humans includes an identity as a unique individual.

## Communication and Identity

In large part, our identity is shaped in interactions with other people, the image or brand we seek to project, our anticipated interactions, and the way people respond to and judge us. No force is as powerful in shaping identity as the feedback we get and the self-image we form from observing ourselves behave and interact, as well as observing how people respond to us. Think about Carolina's social media. If she gets a lot of likes and positive comments when posting pictures while in Italy, she is likely to keep posting these types of pictures and to become even prouder of and more identified with her Italian heritage. Expressing identity on public or semipublic social media sites, such as Instagram and Twitter, has a stronger impact on our personal identity than sharing our identity with a single friend because of the broader audience we reach (Walther et al., 2011). The larger the perceived audience, the more carefully managed our identities generally are.

**Social identity theory** explains how we develop and maintain our identity. Identity does not exist in a vacuum: It is linked to our membership in social groups as broad as our ethnic, sexual, or religious affiliation or as narrow as small cliques—for example, Italian American, bisexual, Catholic, alumnus of West High School, a resident of the Bronx, a softball player, and a member of “the big four” (a group of childhood friends). After scrolling through Carolina's Twitter, for instance, you would probably associate her with several large and small groups, including her high school, sports teams, and sorority, as well as her Italian heritage. A key principle of social identity theory is that membership is characterized by in-group behaviors that signal membership and define someone as being a part of a group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Group members may dress a certain way, get similar tattoos, talk with an accent, use particular gestures, play the same sports, or have conversational routines that identify themselves as belonging to the group. To maintain positive views of ourselves, we often think of “our” groups as better than other groups who are considered outsiders. We often think that our way of doing things is superior, what we wear looks best, what we say is smartest, our view of the world is most reasonable, our perspective on a conflict is a sensible one, our values are moral and divine, and our beliefs are correct. Of course, these beliefs are all biased. People in other groups also believe that those groups are the best.

Several factors influence the impact a group has on our identity, including how central the group is to our self-view (Oakes, 1987). For instance, an ethnic group association may be important for someone like Carolina, who has visited relatives in Rome, but unimportant to those who have little connection to their ethnic roots. Several studies have also shown that minority groups are especially likely to identify with their ethnic backgrounds. African Americans or Latinos see ethnicity as more central to their identity than do Caucasians (R. L. Jackson, 1999). People in minority groups are typically more aware of their membership in that group than are majority members. Why is that? Everyday events remind them of their minority status. Think about how many dark-skinned dolls you see advertised on television. Not many! Even in stores in African American neighborhoods most dolls are white, leaving African American girls to imagine that their dolls look like them.

**Social identity theory:** A perspective focusing on the way in which people's identification with groups shapes their behavior, toward both members of that group and members of other groups.

Think about examples in your textbooks: How many describe the lives of gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals? Not many. Despite our efforts to include all sexual orientations in this book, research on gay relationships is not abundant, so gay or lesbian students cannot always relate to our examples of heterosexual relationships. In these cases, group identity is more salient to minority group members because their lives are surrounded by reminders that they don't "fit" into the majority group's way of thinking or doing.

To clarify how identities are formed, Hecht (1993) introduced the **communication theory of identity**. He argued that identity is based on four interdependent layers or frames that reflect how people see themselves (see also Hecht, 2015; Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2004):

- **Personal Identity:** The self-concept or individual understanding we have of ourselves.
- **Enacted Identity:** The communication, management, and performance of our identity.
- **Relational Identity:** The way we see ourselves in relation to others, including how we believe other people view us (perhaps, as kind, popular, or nerdy), our roles within relationships (such as sister, uncle, friend, or lover) and the joint identities we share with others (such as couple or family identities).
- **Communal Identity:** The way we see ourselves in relation to social identities (such as culture, generation, and sexual orientation) and social discourses (such as social media and popular culture depictions of people).

These four frames work together to affect identity development (Hecht, 1993, 2015). Sometimes there are identity gaps between conflicting frames of identity such as personal and relational frames (Jung & Hecht, 2004) and between different roles within a given frame, such as between a wife and a granddaughter (J. A. Kam & Hecht, 2009). Relational identity gaps have been associated with both self-reported stress and physiological measures of stress such as increased cortisol (Merrill & Afifi, 2017). Larger identity gaps, for instance, between grandparents and adult grandchildren, can lead to reduced communication satisfaction (Pusateri, Roaché, & Kam, 2016). Different frames of identity may be privileged in certain situations and cultures. For example, Carolina might emphasize her personal identity more in her Finsta account, which shows a more candid representation of herself. However, her more public Instagram account broadcasts a more carefully crafted enacted identity that reflects how she wants people to see her. In individualistic cultures such as U.S. culture, people focus on individual needs, whereas in collectivistic cultures, group needs are privileged (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, in individualistic cultures, personal identity may be central to one's overall identity, whereas in collectivist cultures relational identity may be salient. Communal identity may be strongest under conditions of high uncertainty where knowing how society or culture functions guides our behavior (Grant & Hogg, 2012).

All couples routinely deal with identity issues, but interracial or intercultural couples often face special challenges (S. Williams & Andersen, 1998). Each person in an interracial or intercultural couple must deal with not only who he or she is as an individual, for example, as a white man or an African American woman (personal frame), but also with

**Communication theory of identity:**

A theory that focuses on how identities are managed. Identity construction can be viewed through four frames of identity (personal, enactment, relationship, and communal).

how they present themselves as a couple to others (enactment frame), what it means to be an interracial couple (relationship frame), and how to best blend their different cultural backgrounds (communal frame). Scholars are increasingly aware of these identity-related challenges in interracial or interethnic relationships.

Couples comprised of people with different cultural backgrounds often face other challenges, potentially including differences in language, conflict styles, communication preferences, and **sexual scripts**, as well as pressure from family and friends to dissolve the relationship (see Gaines & Liu, 2000; S. Williams & Andersen, 1998). Although it is hard for many college students today to imagine, there was a time in the not-so-distant past when most U.S. states banned interracial marriages, with Alabama most recently removing that law in 2000 (Hartill, 2001). Now interracial marriage is rising (see Figure 2.1). Indeed, of new marriages between 2008 and 2010, more than 15% were interracial (Frey, 2015), with 17% or one out of six marriages in 2015 an interracial union (Livingston, 2017). In 2010, 44% of interracial marriages in the United States were Hispanic/white, 16% were Asian/white, and 9% were African American/white (Frey, 2015). It is noteworthy that 20% of interracial marriages fell into an “other” category, which reflects the diversity in these marriages. The rise of interracial marriage will promote greater racial and ethnic diversity in the United States within the next generations.

As a result of ethnic norms and the societal pressures confronting them, U.S. Census data show that, historically, interethnic couples in the United States are more likely than same-ethnicity couples to get divorced (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). On the other hand, most research finds very few differences in the quality of inter- and intraracial couples and emphasizes that the differences within an interracial couple, if managed, strengthen the bond between partners in such relationships (Troy, Lewis-Smith, & Laurenceau, 2006). Having a strong relational identity is a key to happiness in many relationships, especially those between individuals with different cultural or racial backgrounds.

**Sexual scripts:** Ideas guiding communication that are rooted in expectations about how males and females typically act in romantic or sexual interactions.

**FIGURE 2.1** ■ Interracial Marriage in the U.S. from 1980 to 2015



Note: Data for this graph were taken from Frey (2015) and Bialik (2017).

## Cultural and Ethnic Identity

As the prior discussion indicates, culture and ethnicity are central to many people's core identity. Most people, especially people from minority groups, have some sense of ethnic identity, seeing themselves as, for example, African Americans, Asian Americans, or Latin Americans. Some identities relate to a specific country such as Mexican Americans, Swedish Americans, Chinese Americans, Italian Americans, or Filipino Americans. Groups sometimes identify with the concept of race or color and describe themselves as black, brown, or white (Orbe & Drummond, 2009). "Whiteness," of course, does not literally exist and is a cultural construction of many groups who have tended to be more or less privileged in U.S. society (Lipsitz, 2006); it is also really only a function of how far one's ancestors lived away from the equator, because lighter skin was necessary in northern Europe for greater vitamin D absorption (Jablonsky & Chaplin, 2000). But since most voluntary immigrants to the United States during its first 200 years were "white," it became part of the identity of many people in North America and even a term used by the Census Bureau, despite the fact that most "white people" in the United States choose *American* as their primary identity (Orbe & Drummond, 2009; Pusateri et al., 2016). A more accurate term is *European American*, but most European Americans use the term *white* or *Caucasian* if they have any racial identity at all (Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford, 1996). Indeed, research suggests that 74% of African Americans, 59% of Hispanic Americans, and 56% of Asian Americans see their racial or ethnic background as a core part of their identity, compared to only 15% of white Americans (Horowitz, Brown, & Cox, 2019).

Terms are complex; there is almost always controversy over the correct term: *Hispanic* versus *Latina(o)* versus *Latin American*; or *black* versus *Afro-American* versus *African American* (Orbe & Drummond, 2009). The safest and most sensitive move in communication is to use the term that people themselves use in establishing their identity. As the United States becomes more diverse, people increasingly have become multicultural and identify with two or more groups. Even the U.S. Census Bureau has begun to permit designation of multiple racial categories on the census form. Projections suggest that this trend will continue so that by 2050 the number of people who identify with more than one race will have tripled (Frey, 2015).

## Sexual Identity

Of course, ethnicity is but one aspect of identity that challenges relational partners. Sexual identities hold an important position in individuals' sense of self in relationships. These expressions, including how we initiate relationships with prospective partners, whether we hold hands in public, or if we are comfortable with intimate displays of public affection, are public messages about our relational identity. Such displays are less threatening for heterosexual couples because that sexual orientation is still considered more normative in today's society. The decisions to initiate a relationship, hold hands, or display public intimacy are far more significant identity issues for gay or lesbian couples. Research suggests that some gay, lesbian, and transgendered people still closet their real identities because of fears of rejection, violence, and misunderstanding, particularly when those real identities conflict with their religious background (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011), whereas others are able to integrate and reveal their real identities. For most individuals with identity gaps, except for the most secure, feelings of separation, fear, and alienation are often present. Steinbugler

(2005) examined the double trouble of identity in interracial gay and lesbian couples. One of her participants (a 28-year-old black, gay male dating a white, gay male) reflected on their behavior as a couple this way:

We have a lot of PDA [public displays of affection] but not overt, not loud PDA. It's very quiet. For example, . . . we'll walk and one of us will rub the other on the back. Or if we hold hands it's sort of brief, very brief. (p. 435)

This is a common strategy for couples who want to show affection to each other but do not want attention or judgment from those around them (Steinbugler, 2012, p. 65).

Individuals in the LGBTQ community often struggle with identity from an early age. Eliason and Schope (2007) summarized some identity challenges these individuals face, including noticing differences, experiencing confusion, exploring identity, choosing labels, and identifying in-groups and out-groups. Growing up, many LGBTQ people feel they are different but they lack the “language to describe the differences” (Eliason & Scope, 2007, p. 20). Those feelings can stem from not fitting in with their peers or feeling that they are not meeting their parents' or society's expectations. At a young age, this feeling of difference can lead to confusion about one's identity. A next step is often identity exploration, which involves making comparisons to others, whether to those in the LGBTQ community or straight individuals. Identity exploration can also involve changing appearance, such as dress and hairstyle, and engaging in new sexual experiences. Another part of identity construction for those in the LGBTQ community involves choosing an identity label, such as lesbian, queer, bisexual, and so forth, or refusing to label oneself. Finally, these individuals often define their identities in relation to in-groups they identify with and out-groups that they may see as more or less accepting of their sexual and/or gender identity. The struggle for ethnic minorities, those in the LGBTQ community, and other people who are minorities in intolerant societies highlights the struggle between public and private identities.

## Talkin' 'bout My Generation

As discussed earlier, a major trend is that younger generations are becoming increasingly diverse. There are many other ways that generations differ from one another, including ways that affect identity. **Generational identity** reflects common ways that cohorts of people growing up at certain times see themselves. Scholars have argued that at their “base, generational differences are cultural differences: As cultures change their youngest members are socialized with new and different values” (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012, p. 1045). As shown in Figure 2.2, **Generation Z**, often defined as those born between 1997 and 2016, is now the largest generation in the United States. **Baby Boomers** (born 1946–1964) still comprise a sizable segment of the U.S. population, larger than both the **Millennials** (born 1981–1996) and **Generation X** (born 1965–1980). The **Silent Generation** includes those born between 1928 and 1945, and the **Greatest Generation** includes those born prior to 1928.

Generational identities are based partly on the common experiences and sociological influences that people living in a particular time in history experience together. These common experiences lead to generational differences in what people value, and these values then affect people's identities and the images they wish to project. Does this mean everyone

**Generational identity:** A type of identity that reflects common ways that cohorts of people growing up at certain times in history see themselves.

**Generation Z:** The generation born in the United States between 1997 and 2016, who grew up immersed in communication technologies powered by smartphones.

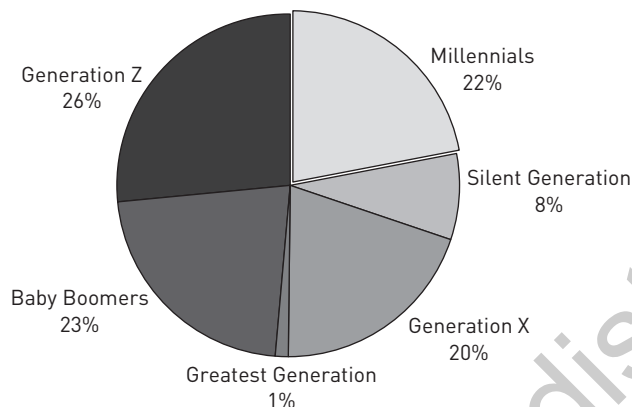
**Baby Boomers:** The generation born in the United States between 1946 and 1965.

**Millennials:** The generation that was born in the United States between 1981 and 1996.

**Generation X:** The generation born in the United States between 1965 and 1980.

**Silent Generation:** The generation of people born in the United States between 1928 and 1945.

**Greatest Generation:** Generation of people born in the United States between 1910 and 1928.

**FIGURE 2.2** ■ Percentage of U.S. Population by Generation in 2017

Note: These percentages were calculated from data reported in Statista (2017).

in a particular age group has a similar identity? Of course not. People can be incorrectly stereotyped based on age just as they can be inaccurately stereotyped based on culture or any other trait. Nonetheless, compared to other cohorts, those in a particular generation are more likely to value some traits than others (Renfro, 2012; Ryback, 2016; P. Taylor & Keeter, 2010; Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Widman & Strilko, n.d.; K. C. Williams, Page, Petrosky, & Hernandez, 2010; A. Williams, 2015a, 2015b).

### The Silent Generation

The Silent Generation grew up during the Great Depression and World War II, lived through hard times, and made great sacrifices for their country. Also called traditionalists, some of the characteristics those in the Silent Generation tend to value include being loyal, respectful of rules and authority, hardworking, and dedicated. They put duty over fun, value family and tradition, and tend to be patriotic. Being self-sacrificing and giving their family a good stable life are values that many in this generation place at the core of their identities. Most grew up in close family units and usually in two-parent households. They value independence and consistency. Their communication preferences also tend to be traditional, preferring phone calls and face-to-face interaction over newer forms of communication such as texting.

### Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are connected to the Vietnam War, the civils rights movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, and the sexual revolution. All except the youngest Baby Boomers remember the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr. They grew up in a time of great political and social upheaval when a sizable portion of teens and young adults questioned the government's authority. Also dubbed the Me Generation, Baby Boomers value individualism, self-expression, and living in the present, but at the same time, many are workaholics who see their careers as a central part of



their identity. They believe in working hard to get things done and accomplish their goals. This generation has also been called “time poor” because they are often overloaded with activities. Baby Boomers value relationships and face-to-face interaction given that they grew up without social media. For this generation, technological communication is more related to efficiency and productivity than making interpersonal connections. They have adapted to changing technologies but also value the immediacy of face-to-face interaction.

### Generation X

Generation X was shaped by the Cold War and the AIDS epidemic, and saw changing gender roles with more mothers entering the workplace. Gen X is also the generation credited for starting the technology revolution. In the 1980s people were switching from typewriters to personal computers, and e-mail was fast becoming a staple of people’s communication choices. Perhaps because many children in this generation grew up with two working parents or in single-parent households, Gen X is known for valuing self-reliance and work–life balance. This generation is also adaptable to different situations, values flexibility, and copes relatively well with uncertainty. Education is highly valued, especially for Gen X women wanting to break the proverbial “glass ceiling” that held back their mothers. This generation values pragmatism, appreciates knowledge, and sees skepticism as healthy. Because Gen X also saw the advent of new communication technologies, most in this generation adapt well to new forms of communication. They tend to use multiple forms of communication (e-mail, texting, face-to-face) for different purposes and value clear, direct communication.

### Millennials

Millennials were shaped by technology, and most are old enough to remember 9/11 as well as the economic downturn in the mid-2000s. They see how fast things can change and, perhaps as a result, have been found to value loyalty less than past generations. As a group, Millennials are multitasking fun-lovers. They are entrepreneurial, creative, and think globally. Their motto is working smarter rather than harder. They value creativity more than perseverance and a strong work ethic. Millennials sometimes stress, however, about achieving a good life that meets the high expectations presented in social media. Some Millennials value social responsibility and environmentalism and seek jobs that make a difference. They are socially confident, but they can also be more self-absorbed, entitled, and narcissistic than the generations before them. They are technologically savvy, having grown up using various forms of technological communication, and less adept at face-to-face communication than previous generations. Many spend more time communicating with friends through text than face-to-face.

### Generation Z

This generation has lived under the threat of terrorism all or most of their lives. Their early images of people in power include an African American president, and they grew up with gay marriage being legal in many states. Generation Zers are also different from previous generations because they are **digital natives**. As A. Williams (2015b) put it, “Millennials were digital; their teenage years were defined by iPods and MySpace. But Generation Z is the first generation to be raised in the era of smartphones. Many do not remember a time before social media.” This newest generation values a fast-paced

**Digital natives:** Individuals who grew up with smartphones; a term often associated with Generation Z.

environment and lives in the present. Compared to past generations, they value diversity and have fewer prejudices based on race, culture, or sexual orientation. Generation Zers tend to be very individualistic and less tied to gender roles than any other generation. Many also have the attitude that people should be who they are and do whatever makes them happy as long as they are not hurting other people. Generation Z can be impatient and poor at time management given their expectations for immediate access to information. Their high levels of exposure to social media leads them to value social acceptance and to get stressed about social comparisons to others.

Regardless of which generation a person is from, research suggests that, since the mid-20th century, people of all generations have become increasingly preoccupied with their identities. In fact, in the 1960s and 1970s people in the United States became so preoccupied with image and artifice that Herzog (1973) wrote *The B.S. Factor: The Theory and Technique of Faking It in America* and so self-absorbed that Lasch (1979) wrote *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. Both books were echoed a dozen years later in a series of Canon EOS Rebel camera commercials themed “Image is everything,” displaying Andre Agassi’s buff body and long hair. Subsequently, Agassi (2009) revealed that his hair was indeed all image; he was going bald, and his long hair was a wig. Similarly on social media today, people can filter and edit to create an ideal image. These examples illustrate something that communication researchers have known for decades—that *perceptions are seen as reality*. If you can manipulate other people’s perceptions, you can appear to be credible, cool, attractive, rich, whatever—even if you’re not.

## Social Media and Identity

Use of social media and all forms of technological communication is increasing among all generations, but Millennials and Generation Zers are most likely to use social network sites, especially Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Snapchat (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015; Ledbetter et al., 2011; P. Taylor & Keeter, 2010). Interestingly, Millennials and Generation Zers have closer romantic relationships if they communicate with partners more frequently and through both increased face-to-face interaction and social media (S. H. Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). Sites like Instagram and Facebook are used principally to maintain social networks, and they are employed differently by extroverts and introverts (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Extroverts use social networking for social enhancement, to improve their images, and to enhance their face-to-face relationships. Introverts, on the other hand, use social networking as social compensation, to make up for what they lack in face-to-face interaction. Research indicates that social networking is a complement to face-to-face interaction for most people rather than a substitute for face-to-face communication (S. H. Taylor & Bazarova, 2018), even though some social networkers (such as introverts) do substitute social networking for face-to-face interaction (Kujath, 2011).

## Types of Social Media Users

Aside from the differences between introverts and extroverts, research suggests there are three different types of social networking site users: (1) broadcasters, (2) interactors, and (3) spies (Underwood, Kerlin, & Farrington-Flint, 2011). Although people can fall into any or all of these roles at a given time, most people use social networking primarily for one of these purposes. **Broadcasters** use social networking sites primarily

### Broadcasters:

When referring to how people communicate via social networking sites, this term refers to people who primarily use sites such as Facebook and Twitter to send one-to-many messages (or announcements) rather than using these sites to interact with others in a back-and-forth fashion.

to send one-to-many messages, much like radio or television broadcasters, but interact infrequently on their sites. For instance, they might post photos of a life event or let people know where they are and what they are doing. Users of Twitter commonly fit the profile of broadcasters because they have an asymmetric relationship with followers who some have characterized as a community (Takhteyev, Gruzd, & Wellman, 2012). Communicating one's identity is a major focus for broadcasters.

**Interactors** use social networking sites primarily to connect with friends and acquaintances on a reciprocal basis and to establish close relationships with friends (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Underwood et. al., 2011). For example, they often comment on friends' Instagram pictures and use social media to issue invitations. Interactors also use social networking to make new friends and become better acquainted in addition to increasing intimacy with close friends (Hsu, Wang, & Tai, 2011; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Dating relationships become stronger, more satisfying, and more invested, and they last longer when a person publicly declares he or she is "Facebook official" and in a relationship, posts pictures of the partner, and posts on the partner's wall (Lane, Piercy, & Carr, 2016; Toma & Choi, 2015). Developing and maintaining relationships, as well as displaying relational identities, are major foci for interactors.

Finally, **spies** use social media sites as identity surveillance (Tokunaga, 2011b). Often called "stalking" someone's social media, romantic partners might check each other's Facebook pages to monitor their activities with potential rivals or search to see if certain people liked a picture their partner posted on Instagram. People also use social networking sites to verify information, such as verifying that someone's online profile matches how a person has presented her- or himself. Before meeting someone in person, social media sources can be viewed to glean information. Indeed, spying on another's social networking site has benign uses related to uncertainty reduction (see Chapter 4) and the acquaintance process. But it also has a dark side: Spying online can constitute cyberstalking (see Chapter 13) and has been used by sex offenders in attempting to create online liaisons with their victims (Dowdell, Burgess, & Flores, 2011).

**Interactors:** When used to describe a type of user of a social networking site, this term refers to people who use sites such as Twitter and Facebook primarily to interact and connect with friends and acquaintances on a reciprocal basis and to establish close relationships.

**Spies:** In the context of social media, people who primarily use social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to learn things about others.

## The Bright and Dark Sides of Social Networking and Identity

Social networking has both positive and negative effects on people's identities and their relationships. For example, social networking has the potential to broaden people's identities and social connections by exposing them to people with whom they would otherwise never interact. But at the same time, social media can keep people isolated in a bubble surrounded by those homophilous (similar) to themselves, keeping them from learning and growing. In general, social networking sites bring together people who are homophilous rather than broadening the diversity of one's social network. For example, the "audience" of Twitter microbloggers are mainly from the same community or travel to the same destinations, suggesting they may constitute an actual as well as a virtual community (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011). Similarly, Twitter political conversations are almost entirely homophilous, negating the effect of most political persuasion or conversion. Indeed, research shows that social networking groups, including both males and females and their same- and opposite-sex followers, are typically composed of people similar in terms of ethnicity, religion, politics, age, country of origin, attitude toward children, and sexual orientation (Bright, 2018; Thelwall, 2009). Even in international Facebook groups, people

are most likely to interact with other people from countries that share borders, language, civilization, and migration (Barnett & Benefield, 2017). In short, social networking is a medium that people generally use to communicate with individuals who are, in most respects, just like them.

Another problem with social networking is that it can increase the importance of popularity, materialism, and good looks as desired parts of identity. Facebook and Snapchat perfectly match the needs of Millennials and Generation Zers by working as a feedback loop to create connection and satisfy narcissistic qualities that may be intensified by using social media platforms. One study showed that people with narcissistic tendencies report using Instagram to look cool and gain popularity, as well as keep track of others' activities (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Another showed that teens and young adults who use Instagram frequently and follow a lot of strangers tend to make more negative social comparisons about themselves and be more depressed than those who use Instagram less frequently and tend not to follow strangers. Other platforms, such as Snapchat, can also fuel the need for popularity by encouraging Snapchat streaks and displaying the number of people who viewed one's story.

Although interaction on social media is beneficial (linking up friends, staying in touch, posting photos), the dark side is addiction and excessive attention seeking, including the use of profanity, nudity, and manipulated images; the collection of a large group of followers to boost egos; invasions of privacy; and the endless seeking of popularity. Research suggests that Facebook promotes mental health by establishing connections among friends and maintaining relationship among both young and old users (Yu, Ellison, & Lampe, 2018), but it can promote depression when people use it to make evaluative social comparisons with others (Steers, 2016). Not having many followers or perceiving oneself as less successful or attractive than the idealized brand or image posted on these sites can have adverse effects on self-esteem (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). Thus, people use social media to present their own identity to others, and they also compare their identity to the enacted identities presented by others.

Studies have compared frequent users of social media and video games with infrequent users. Frequent users tend to have low social community participation, low academic achievement, attention-deficit disorder, depression, substance abuse, poor impulse control, and problems in their close relationships (Andreassen et al., 2016; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Tokunaga & Rains, 2016), indicative of addiction to social media. Indeed, using social media during college classes is quite common and is associated with the need for relational maintenance, the alleviation of loneliness, and perceived low teacher competence (Ledbetter & Finn, 2016). Renfro (2012) noted that Generation Zers are more emotionally attached to their phones and social media than any other generation before them and that Internet addiction is now classified as a legitimate mental disorder.

"Friending" or "following" each other is a crucial part of social media and creates connection. Research shows a higher number of followers creates more social capital and social resources but only up to a point; too many friends may make a person seem shallow (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; see Tech Talk for more on how the quantity of Facebook friends is related to both positive and negative personal attributes). Research on Millennials, and especially Generation Z, shows that social networks display popularity and extend beyond one's immediate friendship network. Pictures posted on Instagram or Twitter, for example, can be seen by people from other schools, states, or countries, creating

lasting impressions. In high school and college, people can become “social media stars” who amass hundreds of likes on their Instagram and Twitter photos, with others wanting to post pictures with them on social media and on their Snapchat and Instagram stories.

## TECH TALK

### SIZE MATTERS: IDENTITY AND MEGA-FRIENDING ON FACEBOOK

For many young people, the number of friends they have on a social media site such as Instagram or Facebook is crucial to their identity. Research shows that having a large number of friends on Facebook is proportional to a person’s happiness, subjective well-being, and positive identity (J. Kim & Lee, 2011). Moreover, positive self-presentations on your site also lead to more happiness and a positive identity. Mega-friending seems to be of most benefit to people that are low in self-esteem and compensating for their low self-esteem (J. E. R. Lee, Moore, Park,

& Park, 2012). This strategy actually seems to work in bolstering people with low self-esteem. Similarly, research shows that need-for-popularity, personal vanity, and narcissism are associated with greater Facebook use, recruiting more friends, checking up on friends, and increasing grooming activity to enhance one’s online identity (Bergman, Fearington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012). Apparently having a lot of friends and looking good on Facebook is today’s equivalent of new, fashionable clothes or a hot car!

Social media sites can also foster disconnection and hurt feelings, such as when people are “defriended” or “unfollowed.” Other negative aspects of social media are denying or ignoring a friend request, deletion of a public message, low ranking or no ranking among a person’s top friends, disparaging remarks on a person’s site, a posted question that is ignored, gossip appearing on a third party’s message board, restricted access to a friend’s page, and defriending (Tokunaga, 2011a). Having someone “unlike” your pictures or remove pictures with you from their page can also be hurtful and show disconnection. These events, as well as others such as ending a Snapchat streak, can certainly strain a relationship or even lead to or mark its termination.

An even bigger problem is the use of social networking sites by sex offenders, who often disguise their “true” identity online and pose as someone else. For example, when one of our daughters was in fourth grade, she and her friends “liked” a post by “Winnie the Pooh” that was circulating on Facebook. “Winnie the Pooh” then posted another message saying, “No one wants to play with me and Piglet. Will you play with us?” Some users posted messages saying “yes” and then “Winnie the Pooh” went on their pages and asked them to friend him on his “other” Facebook page. Luckily, the girls were suspicious and deleted Winnie the Pooh from their accounts. Who “Winnie the Pooh” really was, and if he (or she) was truly a danger, was never determined, but this example illustrates how easily someone can change her or his identity on social networking sites.

Research provides some guidelines recognizing possible sexual offenders. In addition to posing as people (or characters) that they are not, sex offenders are often impatient and initiate sexual conversation during their first interaction (Dowdell et al., 2011). They may also use ruses, such as inviting potential victims to nonexistent parties or pretending to provide them with job opportunities, as a way to try to meet (and potentially harm) them.

## The Image: Creating an Identity

We are known by our image or brand. Few people know the real us, but they know us by the image or brand we project. Few of us get to peek behind the curtain and learn if other people's image is the real deal. From a communication perspective, images constitute reality, a concept not lost on advertisers, sports figures, celebrities, and even the general public. Today many people employ makeup, nose jobs, boob jobs, or other plastic surgery; workouts; cars; and homes to enhance their physical image. And, in our busy and web-based world, we often fail to learn much more about people than what they look like, what they wear, and what they drive.

Famous sports figures such as tennis star Serena Williams, golfer Tiger Woods, gymnast Simone Biles, and basketball player LeBron James are icons who transcend reality. Their pictures are on television, in magazines, in airports, and on the Internet. They rise above their human status to become symbols of success and credibility, sometimes even despite scandal, slumps, or debilitating injuries that threaten to shatter the facade they and their agents have created. Our political leaders are no different. Andersen (2004) stated the following:

Neither President Bill Clinton nor President George Bush ever saw military combat, but as commanders in chief they frequently appeared with troops in flight jackets and military uniforms. An image of a president supporting the troops, saluting the flag, or dressed in a military uniform communicates patriotism and exudes leadership. (pp. 255–256)

These images trigger involuntary reactions in people, often called *heuristics* or what Cialdini (1984) calls our “heart of hearts”, automatic processes that circumvent criticism and analysis.

## Identity, Perception, and Self-Esteem

Our identities help us understand ourselves in relation to the world in which we live. Self-esteem and identity are part of a person's **theory of self** or **vision of self**. Self-esteem refers to how positively or negatively we view ourselves. People with high self-esteem tend to view their traits and behaviors in a positive light, whereas people with low self-esteem mostly see their traits as negative. Identity defines who we are (see Schlenker, 1985; Vignoles et al., 2006) by specifying the characteristics that define us (African American, student, smart, heterosexual, attractive, introvert) and comparing ourselves to others (smarter than John, not as smart as Maria).

Self-esteem is, to a large degree, a function of the extent to which a person can control one's own life, doing one's duty, benefitting others, and achieving high social status (M. Becker et al., 2014). Unlike self-esteem, however, one's identity is not only evaluative; it is also a perception of oneself as a person. For instance, both Carolina and her friend Lindsay see themselves as fun-loving partiers. However, Carolina may think that partying is a cool aspect of her personality, whereas Lindsay may be depressed because she realizes partying is interfering with her success in school, yet she can't seem to stop going out every night. Thus, whereas partying is part of each of their identities, it contributes to high self-esteem for Carolina and to low self-esteem for Lindsay. The focus of this chapter is on identity and identity management and not on self-esteem, despite their influences on one another.

### Theory of self:

The idea that our identities help us understand ourselves in relation to the world in which we live, and that the self is made up of self-esteem and identity.

**Vision of self:** A person's theory of self, made up of self-esteem and identity.

## Expanding Identity

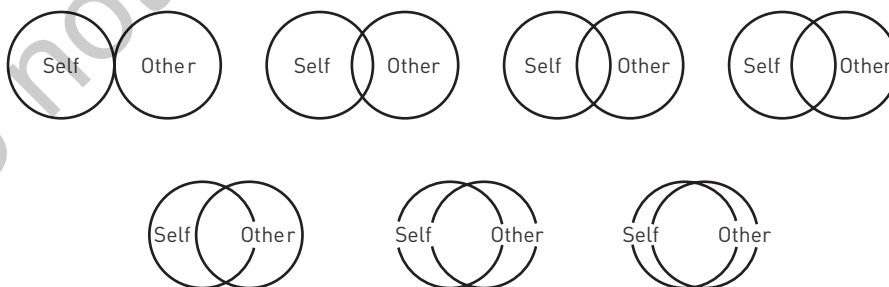
One theory in particular is well suited to explain the benefits of relationships. A. Aron and Aron's (1986, 1996) **self-expansion theory** helps explain how identity influences the development of close relationships after first impressions are made. People seek to expand the self, to be more than they are. A fundamental human desire is to broaden our experiences and extend our identities (E. Aron & Aron, 1996). We do not seem satisfied with a static sense of self. Instead, we seek to develop our sense of self as part of our physical, cognitive, and emotional development. For example, if you are good at oil painting, you might try other kinds of art, such as ceramics or watercolors. If you like reading or watching television, you may search for new types of books or shows you have not read or seen previously.

One reason people enter into relationships is the opportunity to expand their identities. An excellent way to expand the self is by becoming close to someone who contributes to our identity development by exposing us to new experiences. A. Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992) found that the more partners defined their relationship as a meshing of both identities, the closer they were likely to be. Figure 2.3 shows the inclusion-of-others-in-self scale that these authors have used in their studies. Research consistently finds that an expansion of self through inclusion of others characterizes close relationships. In one study where couples were randomly called over a week's time, the more activating and expanding a couple's activities were at the time of the call, the greater were the relational satisfaction and quality (Graham, 2008), suggesting that the effects of self-expansion are continuously being experienced. Three recent studies suggest that self-expansion promotes sexual desire in long-term romantic relationships; likewise, sexual desire promotes self-expansion (Muisse et al., 2019). Finally, relationship interventions designed to mindfully seek new and exciting possibilities with one's partner can dramatically improve relationships (J. W. Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2007).

Rather than having two completely separate identities, people in close relationships tend to merge identities, allowing each partner's identity to expand through new experiences. In a test of this prediction, A. Aron, Paris, and Aron (1995) over a 10-week period asked students to list as many self-descriptive words or phrases in response to the question, "Who are you today?" and if they had fallen in love during the task. Consistent with the theory's prediction, those who fell in love showed a marked increase in the number of self-definitions

**Self-expansion theory:** A theory that maintains that people have relationships to grow and extend their own selves.

**FIGURE 2.3** ■ The Inclusion-of-Others-in-Self Scale:  
Which Drawing Best Describes Your Relationship?



Source: Copyright © American Psychological Association.

they listed, an indication that their identity had expanded. Likewise, consistent with the theory, a breakup of a self-expansive relationship led to a significant contraction of one's working self-concept and a detrimental impact to one's own identity (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006). Recent research suggests that falling in love may be motivated by the desire for self-expansion (A. Aron & Aron, 2016; Lamy, 2016; also see Chapter 8).

Self-expansion theory does not suggest that in strong relationships partners' identities are completely intertwined. The theory emphasizes the importance of self in relationships. Losing one's sense of self or one's individual identity in favor of a relational identity is not what the theory would predict as a "healthy" relationship outcome. Instead, the theory predicts that close relationships are those in which both individuals have strong self-identities that grow from the new experiences that each partner's identity brings.

A relationship's success depends on its ability to expand the partners' experiences and sense of self. A common phenomenon in many relationships is stagnation; that is, over time, the relationship gets bogged down by routine, decreasing satisfaction for both partners and threatening a breakup (see Chapter 15). Self-expansion theory offers an explanation and remedy for this common problem: Relationships stagnate when they stop creating self-expansion (A. Aron & Aron, 1986, 1996). The remedy for stagnation is for partners to help one another find new and exciting experiences that can be incorporated in their identity. Research suggests that infidelity is often associated with insufficient self-expansion with one's primary partner, so need-fulfillment and self-expansion are pursued in an alternative relationship (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). Self-expansion theory also helps us understand people's connections to their communities, neighborhoods, and social networks (Mashek, Cannady, & Tangney, 2007). This theory, to our knowledge, has not been applied to interracial relationships, though its premises seem especially well suited for the identity expansion opportunities found there.

## PRINCIPLES OF IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

Identity affects how we perceive ourselves, how others perceive us, how we behave, and how we evaluate our relationships. Seven principles provide a summary of this research.

### HIGHLIGHTS

#### SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

1. Identities provide us with a hierarchical structure of who we are.
2. The feedback we receive from others helps shape our identities.
3. Our identities help us interpret feedback from others.
4. Identity incorporates expectations and guides behavior.
5. Identities and the identities presented by others influence our evaluations of self.
6. Identity influences the likelihood of goal achievement.
7. Our identity influences what social relationships we choose to pursue, create, and maintain.



## Identity and Hierarchical Structure

The first principle is that *our identities provide us with a hierarchical structure of who we are*. Although we define ourselves in myriad ways, our identity helps organize these various facets into a structure that fluctuates according to context (Schlenker, 1985). Our identity includes our relationships (e.g., boyfriend, friend, son), roles (e.g., student, basketball player, law clerk), goals (e.g., live in Europe, get a job helping others), personal qualities (e.g., friendly, honest), accomplishments (e.g., 3.5 GPA, organization president), group or cultural membership (e.g., sorority member, Asian), and appearance (e.g., attractive, wears trendy clothes).

These facets of our identity vary in how much they centrally define who we are. The more central they are to our definition of self, the more stable they are across our lifetime and the more prominent they are during self-presentation. Think back to Carolina and her Instagram page. Although its content gives visitors a sense of Carolina's identity structure, Carolina is probably displaying only part of her identity when she posts on that page. Thus, people who view her page might have biased impressions about Carolina. For example, they might think that Carolina cares for her friends more than her family, when actually the reverse is true.

## Identity and the Looking-Glass Self

The second principle is that *the feedback we receive from others helps shape our identities*. Charles Horton Cooley (1922) first developed the notion of the looking-glass self, a metaphor that identity is shaped by feedback from others. He argued that social audiences provide us with an image of ourselves similar to the one we see in a mirror. For example, think of why you believe that you were smart enough to go to college. Your identity as an intelligent person was cultivated through interactions with parents, teachers, and peers. Perhaps a teacher in high school said you were smart enough to go to college, or your parents gave you positive feedback and encouragement, or a friend kept complimenting you on your ability to learn. Indeed, college itself is a major source of broad exploration and identity reformulation (Beyers & Goossens, 2008), and the effect is bigger for students who reside on college campuses. So, experience in college provides another “mirror” that helps you reform and shape an identity that may last a lifetime. Regardless of the source, other people likely helped develop your identity.

## Identity and the Interpretation of Feedback

The third principle is that *our identities help us interpret feedback from others*. Just as people's feedback affects our identities, our identities affect how we perceive others' feedback (Schlenker, 1980). People like Carolina who view themselves as extroverts react differently from those who define themselves as introverts when someone says to them, “You're awfully quiet today.” The emotions they experience and perceptions of what the statement means, as well as what it says about the sender of the message—and the intent—are influenced by their identity as an introvert or extrovert, and other qualities as well.

Research also suggests that we are likely to interpret feedback from others as consistent with our identity (W. B. Swann, 1983; W. B. Swann & Read, 1981). People who consider themselves attractive may interpret someone's negative comment about their appearance as an expression of envy rather than a true perception of their attractiveness.

An unattractive person may interpret that statement as consistent with a negative self-image. Moreover, we generally remember information consistent with our identity and discount inconsistent information (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). However, research suggests that this tendency applies only to central aspects of our identity and those aspects for which we have strongly held beliefs (Stangor & Ruble, 1989). For less central aspects of self, inconsistent information is more easily dismissed. For example, a young man who adopts an identity as someone who enjoys drinking on weekends may struggle when a friend says that she thinks drinkers are irresponsible. This feedback may influence both his identity development and his relationship with her. For a person who takes only an occasional drink, her comment would have little effect on his identity or their relationship.

### Identity, Expectations, and Behavior

The fourth principle specifies that *identity incorporates expectations and guides behavior*. The central characteristics we think we possess create social expectations for our behavior (Schlenker, 1985) and self-fulfilling prophecies (Merton, 1948). We tend to behave consistently with our identity. For example, if a person's identity includes being a good student, the individual will behave in identity-consistent ways by studying harder and attending classes regularly. If a person's identity includes being an athlete, the individual's daily workouts become central to that identity. Research has shown that moral identity, whereby a person thinks of her- or himself as a good and ethical person, is associated with more moral behavior (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Notice that these behaviors set up a **self-fulfilling prophecy** that causes persons to behave in a way (often unconsciously) that makes it more likely that their behavior will be consistent with their identity.

### Identity and Self-Evaluation

The fifth principle is that our *identities and the identities presented by others influence our evaluations of self*. The expectations connected to identity provide people with comparison points against which to judge their performances (Schlenker, 1985; Vignoles et al., 2006). Thus, our identity influences our evaluation of how well or poorly we perform. For instance, students who see themselves as intelligent and high achieving are likely to get upset if they receive a C on an exam or a paper, whereas those who see themselves as poor students might be delighted to receive a C. Interestingly, self-esteem and identity may be most closely connected through this expectation–evaluation link. Unrealistically flattering self-definitions lead to expectations of self that are unlikely to be met, which leads to a string of perceived failures.

In addition, when people compare themselves to idealized images, their identity suffers. In one research study, people viewed social media profiles that included pictures. Women viewed other women's profiles, and men viewed other men's profiles. Some participants were exposed to four profile pictures of very attractive individuals, whereas others were exposed to four profile pictures of unattractive individuals. Those who were exposed to the attractive photos felt worse about their appearance than those exposed to the unattractive photos. In the same research study, men felt worse about their accomplishments after being exposed to impressive résumés versus weak résumés (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011). Social comparison of one's identity is alive and well on social networking sites.

#### Self-fulfilling prophecy:

A prophecy that occurs when an expectation exists that an event will happen and a person behaves in a way (often unconsciously) that actually makes it more likely that the anticipated event will occur.

## Identity and Goal Achievement

The sixth principle is that *identity influences the likelihood of goal achievement*. Achieving goals is facilitated by the presence of qualities that are consistent with a goal. Thus, people who see themselves as good students are likely to get better grades because they see studying and attending class as important behaviors to help maintain their identities. The same type of process influences goal achievement in our relationships. For example, the likelihood that Brad will achieve his goal of dating Justin depends on the extent to which Brad believes he possesses characteristics desired by or appealing to Justin. If an important aspect of Brad's identity is his sensitivity and Justin prefers to date a partner who is macho, Brad may feel he has little hope of attracting Justin. Self-fulfilling prophecies also relate to goal achievement. For instance, if Carolina believes that she can secure a job as an Italian language translator, she is likely to be more confident, stay motivated, and perhaps work harder—all of which will make it easier to achieve her goal.

## Identity and Relationships

The final principle is that *our identity influences what social relationships we choose to pursue, create, and maintain*. Years ago, psychologist Eric Erikson (1968) theorized that ego and identity development are essential prerequisites to relational development. Research has confirmed this theory. One study showed that development of a strong and stable identity is an essential precondition for the development of intimacy; people with a strong identity at age 15 had a more intimate relationship at age 25 than those who had a weak identity at age 15 (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010).

People prefer interactions with people who provide identity-consistent feedback to them (T. Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992). So people who have positive identities prefer to be treated positively, while people who define themselves in negative terms, such as *unintelligent*, unconsciously seek partners who confirm that negative identity. Why is this the case? People distrust feedback that is inconsistent with their identity, so they perceive those who offer contrary feedback as dishonest (W. B. Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). The consequences of this tendency can be serious, especially for women who are victims of abuse, who may unconsciously find themselves attracted to individuals who treat them the same way as those who abused them in the past.

Identity-consistent behavior is particularly important in established relationships. W. B. Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon (1994) found that our preference for “authentic” feedback (feedback consistent with our identity) or “positive” feedback (feedback more favorable than our view of self) changes across relationship stages. The researchers found that people in the most intimate marriages preferred authentic feedback, but people in dating relationships preferred feedback that was more positive than their self-image. Evidently, we want others to view us through rose-colored glasses while dating, but we prefer authenticity in successful marriages.

In sum, how we view ourselves plays a central role in the interactions we seek, relationships we pursue, and the way these interactions and relationship develop. However, we have not yet addressed how we communicate our identity to others, how we maintain our identity despite threats to its validity, and what social rules are in place to help us navigate the pitfalls of identity management. The next section focuses on communication and how identity management influences our behavior across a variety of situations.

## COMMUNICATING IDENTITY TO OTHERS

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Antonio: *I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano; A stage where every man must play a part, And mine a sad one.*

Gratiano: *Let me play the fool.*

—William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice, Act I, Scene I*

Shakespeare's writing popularized the notion that "all the world's a stage," upon which we are merely actors. Scholars have embraced this concept when describing identity management (see K. Tracy, 1990). Three interrelated theoretical perspectives illuminate how people use communication to present themselves in a positive light: (1) self-presentation; (2) Goffman's (1959, 1967, 1971) dramaturgical approach, which suggests people are similar to actors on a stage; and (3) P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Our efforts at self-presentation reflect the things we do to portray a particular image of self (e.g., I'm a rebel, I'm smart, I'm helpless), while the latter two approaches involve activities that are a part of everyday interaction (e.g., politeness, image maintenance, image repair).

### General Issues in Self-Presentation

On any given day, you try to portray a particular impression of yourself to your boss, your parents, your teacher, and your romantic partner. This means concealing or minimizing potential faults while maximizing strengths. On Carolina's social media, the image she presents to her friends on Finsta (i.e., as a partier) is likely quite different from the image or brand she wants to display to prospective employers on LinkedIn. Carolina may be worried or embarrassed to learn that a potential employer searched for her online if there are any photos of her anywhere engaging in behavior that might make her seem immature or unprofessional. In the next section, we examine if impression management is hypocritical, manipulative, and deceptive; reflects communication competence; or simply represents the way people unconsciously present themselves to others.

### Is Self-Presentation Hypocritical, Manipulative, or Deceptive?

When discussing self-presentation in class, some students think self-presentation is hypocritical, indicative of insecurity, phony, manipulative, or downright deceptive. These students are uncomfortable with the notion that we are chameleon-like in our behavior, changing according to the audience and situation. Are we trying to deceive people? The answer is sometimes but not usually. Self-presentation is usually a matter of highlighting certain *aspects* of ourselves for different audiences. We may possess elements of intelligence, sociability, athleticism, sarcasm, career orientation, and laziness in our identity, but we segregate these elements when communicating to various audiences. This segregation is not usually deceptive if those characteristics are all real aspects of ourselves. For example, Carolina may display her social side to her friends and her serious side to teachers and employers. Her family might see both sides of Carolina's personality.

Of course, people fabricate identities. The news is full of people who lead double lives, embellish their résumés, or fake their identities in Internet chat rooms and embellish their image on social media. Computer-mediated communication provides more opportunity to fabricate our identity as anyone who has been "catfished" can attest. People are more likely

to engage in online deception when they are younger, more frequent computer users, more materialistic, and more tech savvy (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Frunzaru & Garbasevski, 2016). **Attractiveness deception** is a common form of online identity enhancement; for example, men are likely to lie about their height and women about their weight (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Whitty, 2008). People also engage in online deception about age, personality, relational intentions, and relational status (Whitty, 2008). When people notice discrepancies between a person's online identity and their real identity, they judge them as hypocritical, untrustworthy, and misleading (Deandrea & Walther, 2011). Even seemingly innocuous and trivial self-presentations trigger unfavorable reactions. On online dating platforms, a balance between impression management and authenticity is key (de Vries, 2016; N. Ellison, Heino, & Gibb, 2006). People who attempt to present a real but ideal self are perceived the most positively. The ideal self-presentation strikes a balance between positivity and plausibility. (See Chapter 3 for more on online dating and attraction.)



**Photo 2.1:** Part of identity management is showing different facets of yourself to others depending on the situation and your goals for an interaction.

We all employ less extreme forms of identity manipulation. Have you ever pretended you understood someone, hidden your anger from others, put on a happy face, feigned interest in a boring conversation, or acted as if you liked someone you actually disliked? These are called **display rules** (Andersen, 2008) and are part of face maintenance. Communication researchers have investigated a similar construct, **emotional labor**, where people must display certain attitudes or emotions at work (Rivera, 2015; S. J. Tracy, 2005; S. J. Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). We act these ways for many reasons, but they involve a belief in the importance of self-presentation. We may not want people to know that we are angry or sad because we want to maintain our composure. We may have an occupation requiring a certain demeanor. We may not show boredom because that would be disrespectful. We may not express our dislike because that would disrupt group dynamics. Are these behaviors deceptive? Most communication scholars and psychologists would say no. The fact that you want to keep your composure is competent or respectful communication that represents a part of who you are.

**Attractiveness deception:** A form of online identity enhancement where people lie about their physical characteristics to seem more attractive.

**Display rules:** Manipulation and control of emotional expressions such as pretending you understood someone, hiding your anger or sorrow from others, and putting on a happy face when you are sad.

### How Is Self-Presentation Related to Communication Competence?

Researchers who study communication competence indicate that socially skilled people have a knack for communicating effectively and appropriately (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1988). Competent communicators usually have more successful lives and relationships. You would probably not have many friends if you acted as formally as you would during a job interview while hanging out with your friends. Similarly, you would probably not be hired if you acted like you do at a party when meeting a prospective employer. Among friends we act relaxed, discuss social activities, get a little crazy, and often trade stories about humorous events. During a job interview, we should emphasize very different aspects of ourselves—as a reliable colleague, a smart person, and someone who can contribute to the company's development. If we switch gears, does this mean that we are phonies? No. It means we understand that we must fulfill different roles for different audiences. Role flexibility can help us be effective communicators, as long as we are not manipulating others for evil purposes.

**Emotional labor:** A term that describes the effort it takes to show a different emotion than the one being felt. It is generally used to describe that effort in the context of jobs that require manipulation of emotion expression (e.g., servers, first responders).

We also display different aspects of ourselves to friends than strangers. We assume strangers do not know much about us, so it is important to disclose favorable information about ourselves. By contrast, friends probably already know of our accomplishments, so pointing them out again may be perceived as conceited, thus backfiring; also, close friends can recognize realistic from unrealistic stories, whereas strangers have difficulty making such a distinction. Tice, Butler, Muraven, and Stillwell (1995) conducted five studies that compared the differences in people's self-presentations to friends and to strangers. They concluded, "People habitually use different self-presentation strategies with different audiences, relying on favorable self-enhancement with strangers but shifting toward modesty when among friends" (p. 1120). Indeed, one of the best aspects of close friendships is being comfortable enough to present our most authentic selves to each other. Overall, then, being able to present different aspects of ourselves appropriately to different people at different times can be a sign of communicative competence.

### **To What Extent Is Self-Presentation a Deliberate, Conscious Activity?**

Self-presentation is so commonplace that it becomes routine, habitual behavior that is encoded unconsciously. DePaulo (1992) offered several examples of habitual impression management behavior, including postural etiquette that girls learn as they are growing up and the ritualistic smiles by the first runner-up at beauty pageants. Other examples are the routine exchange of "thank you" and "you're welcome," table manners and the myriad taken-for-granted politeness strategies. These behaviors were enacted deliberately and consciously at one time but nowadays have become habitual, automatic aspects of interaction.

At times, however, even habitual behaviors become more deliberate and conscious. When we have a lot at stake, self-presentations are more planned and controlled (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1985). For example, when you first meet your girlfriend's or boyfriend's parents, you will probably be more aware than usual of your posture, politeness, and other behaviors that you do not normally think about. Your deliberateness in enacting these behaviors may be further heightened if your partner's parents do not approve of the relationship or if you expect resistance from them. Thus, in some circumstances (e.g., on first dates, at the dean's office, or in an interview), we are deliberate in using impression management tactics, but most of our self-presentational strategies are relatively habitual and are performed unconsciously.

### **"Life Is a Stage": The Dramaturgical Perspective**

In his classic book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) advanced a revolutionary way of thinking about identity management—the dramaturgical perspective. Borrowing from Shakespeare, Goffman used the metaphor of theater to describe our everyday interactions. Goffman maintained that we constantly enact performances geared for audiences—with the purpose of advancing a beneficial image of ourselves. In other words, we are concerned about appearances and work to ensure that others view us favorably.

The evidence for this view is strong, not just in everyday interactions but also when people want to avoid displaying what they perceive as an unfavorable image. Several studies show that some sexually active individuals refrain from using condoms because they are afraid such an action may imply that they (or their partners) are "uncommitted" or

“diseased” (Lear, 1997). Holtgraves (1988) argued that gambling enthusiasts pursue their wagering habits partly because they wish to portray themselves as spontaneous, adventurous, and unconcerned about losing money. Snow and Anderson’s (1987) yearlong observational study revealed that even homeless people present themselves to their communities in ways that help restore their dignity. For instance, a 24-year-old male who had been homeless for 2 weeks told those authors the following:

I’m not like the other guys who hang out at the “Sally” [Salvation Army]. If you want to know about street people, I can tell you about them; but you can’t really learn about street people from studying me, because I’m different. (p. 1349)

This man clearly tried to distance himself verbally from what he considered to be an undesirable identity: being homeless. In fact, distancing was the most common form of self-presentation these authors found among the homeless.

Since Goffman’s early work, scholars have outlined certain conditions under which impression management becomes especially important to us (Schlenker, Britt, & Pennington, 1996). Although researchers still consider impression management to be something that is always salient to us, the following three conditions seem to make it especially important.

### **Condition 1: The Behavior Reflects Highly Valued, Core Aspects of the Self**

People are more concerned about successful impression management of central features of their identity than peripheral ones. Central features are those characteristics that define us best, whereas peripheral features are more tangential to who we think we are. Our identities are tied to the distinctive characteristics we perceive as unique and central to who we are as people (Vignoles et al., 2006). For example, Carolina sees herself as fun loving and outgoing but only moderately career oriented, so she is likely to portray herself as more social than professional. Situations such as planning a party or college reunion are likely to call forth a particularly strong need for Carolina to present her distinct self.

### **Condition 2: Successful Performance Is Tied to Vital Positive or Negative Consequences**

If your success in a cherished relationship depends on your ability to convince your partner of your commitment, the importance of impression management heightens. You might send your significant other flowers, give gifts, and say “I love you” more often as ways to show you are a devoted, committed partner. In a similar vein, if you are told that your raise at work depends on teamwork, you may devote more attention to your identity as a team player. We are especially motivated to be perceived positively when interacting with attractive or valued others (see Jellison & Oliver, 1983; Schlenker, 1984).

### **Condition 3: The Behavior Reflects Directly on Valued Rules of Conduct**

Certain rules of conduct are especially important. For example, some people strongly believe that engaging in conflict in a public setting is inappropriate (E. Jones & Gallois,

1989) and violating that norm would be threatening to their desired public identity. Similarly, some people believe that public displays of affection are inappropriate and may act more physically distant in public than in private. Others value assurance and public affection, believing that this is an essential component of relational identity that makes them feel valued and secure. Understanding and respecting people's identity needs is important, as is the ability to compromise when two people have different needs.

These three identity conditions are prominent in close relationships, especially in early stages when partners try to make positive first impressions (W. B. Swann et al., 1994). In early stages, people typically display central aspects of themselves to their partners (Condition 1). Success in these displays can make the difference between attracting or repelling a friend or romantic partner (Condition 2). Finally, ground rules are often set as to what types of conduct will be most highly valued (Condition 3). To the extent that the three conditions outlined here are salient, people will engage in impression management. Consistent with his dramaturgical perspective, Goffman (1959) referred to social behavior designed to manage impressions and influence others as a performance in front of a set of observers or an audience and in a particular location: a stage.

### **Front Versus Back Stage**

As in any theatrical venue, there are two primary stage locations: front and back. The front stage is where our performances are enacted, where our behaviors are observed by an audience, and where impression management is particularly important. Conversely, the back stage is where we can let our guard down and do not have to think about staying in character. According to Goffman (1959), the back stage is "where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude" (p. 113). Tedeschi (1986) made a distinction similar to front stage and back stage by comparing public behavior that is subject to observation with private behavior that is free from such scrutiny.

We often behave differently in public than in private (Baumeister, 1986). Singing is a common example of a backstage behavior. Many people are too embarrassed to sing in front of others (in the front stage) but, when pressed, admit to singing in the shower or in their cars (which are backstage regions). In a similar vein, hygienic activity, despite its universality, is reserved for backstage regions. Relationships also determine if we are frontstage or backstage. When people are with their closest friends or significant others, behaviors that typically are reserved for the back stage are moved to the front stage. You might not swear in public but you do so with your closest friends. Our close friends and family members are backstage, so they get a more authentic and unrehearsed version of us. Again, we are reminded of Carolina's Instagram page. Many of the pictures she posts are in backstage settings (with friends, at home, etc.) but are presented on frontstage and viewed by whoever visits the page. This mixing of backstage and frontstage images on web pages changes that identity management game.

### **Role, Audience, and Context**

Whether behaviors occur in the front stage or back stage depends on the role enacted, the audience being targeted, and the context in which the activities are performed. For instance, you might feel free to sing in front of strangers at a karaoke bar in another city but not in a bar that you hang out in regularly in your own town. Similarly, some teenagers curtain



their use of swearing with parents or other adults to display a proper and respectful identity. With their friends, by contrast, they might convey a carefree, rebellious, and “cool” identity that is bolstered by swearing. The only viable criterion on which performance success is judged is whether it successfully advances the image that the performer desires to present to a particular audience (Baumeister, 1982; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980). When a performance threatens the image that one wants to convey to a certain audience, it is reserved for the back stage.

Think about Carolina’s Finsta page. She blocked her ex-boyfriend from viewing it, but a mutual friend might give him access. If so, Carolina might feel her privacy was violated. Her Finsta is reserved for her closest friends and contains pictures that are less polished and sometimes less appropriate than what she posts on her regular Insta account. For Carolina, her Instagram account is frontstage while her Finsta is more backstage. When unauthorized people like her ex view her Finsta, it threatens the more carefully constructed public image that she projects on her main Insta account.

Finally, it is important to note the audience’s role in the impression management process. When self-presentation is successful, the audience and “actor” interact to help each other validate and maintain their identities. After all, we can work hard to establish an identity, but it depends on the audience to accept or reject our self-presentation. In fact, Goffman (1967) argued that the validation of another person’s identity is a “condition of interaction” (p. 12). In other words, we expect other people to accept our identities and to help us save face when we accidentally display an undesired image. Goffman (1967) called people who can watch another’s “face” being damaged without feeling sorrow, hurt, or vicarious embarrassment “heartless” human beings (p. 11). Moreover, research shows that people who fail to help others save face are often disliked and shunned (see Cupach & Metts, 1994; Schlenker, 1980). Most people know how it feels to be made fun of after an embarrassing event, so instead of laughing, they try to relieve the distress that the embarrassed person is feeling. This leads to the next theory of impression management: politeness theory.

## Politeness Theory and Facework

As an extension of Goffman’s work, P. Brown and Levinson (1987) developed politeness theory, which focuses on the specific ways that people manage and save face using communication. A large portion of their theorizing was a distinction they made between positive face and negative face.

### Positive Face and Negative Face

**Positive face** is the favorable image that people portray to others and hope to have validated by others. It essentially reflects our desire to be liked by others. Some scholars have noted that there are at least two specific types of positive face: **competence face**, which refers to presenting oneself as having positive characteristics such as intelligence, sensitivity, and honesty; and **fellowship face**, which refers to wanting to be included and accepted by others (Redmond, 2015). **Negative face**, on the other hand, reflects our desire to “be free from imposition and restraint and to have control over [our] own territory, possessions, time, space, and resources” (Metts & Grohskopf, 2003, p. 361). Put another way, our positive face is the “best face” we put forward so that others see us as likeable, whereas our negative face is the part of us that wants to do what we want to do or say, without concern about what others would like us to do or say.

#### **Positive face:**

The favorable image that people hope to portray to others and to have validated by others. The best face we put forward so that others will like us.

#### **Competence face:**

A type of positive face that refers to presenting oneself as having positive characteristics such as intelligence, sensitivity, and honesty.

#### **Fellowship face:**

A type of positive face that involves wanting to be included and accepted by others.

#### **Negative face:**

The part of us that wants to be free from imposition and restraint and to have control over our own resources.

Managing positive face and negative face is an inherent part of social interaction. People have to deal with a constant struggle between wanting to do what they want (which satisfies their negative face needs) and wanting to do what makes them look good (which satisfies their positive face needs). On some occasions, the same action can satisfy both aspects of face. Suppose your best friend asks you to help prepare food for a party he or she is giving. You might agree to help your friend, which supports your positive face needs because it makes you look good. But if you happen to love cooking, your negative face needs also would be satisfied because you are doing exactly what you wanted to do. However, it is much more likely that a behavior will fall somewhere between the two face needs or that supporting one face need may threaten the other. For instance, you may agree to help a friend move despite your desire to relax at home. If you attend to your negative face needs by staying home, you will come across as a poor friend and threaten your positive face needs.

### Actions as Validating or Threatening to Face

One of the key principles of politeness theory is that “we depend upon other people to accept and validate our face through a process called facework” (Redmond, 2015). **Facework** involves our attempts to maintain our own face as well as our attempts to help others maintain face. In most interactions, both partners implicitly understand the social expectations that help them maintain each other’s face needs.

**Face-validating acts** occur when a person’s behavior and the receiver’s response to that behavior support the individual’s desired image. For example, if your significant other is having a particularly busy week at work, you might respect her or his request for space. This would validate your significant other’s negative face as well as your positive face as a supportive partner. At the end of the week, you could validate your identity as a caring partner further by treating your significant other to an unexpected dinner. In return, your partner may validate your identity as a caring partner by saying how much surprises like special dinners are appreciated.

When a person’s behavior is at variance with the identity that a person desires to convey, a face-threatening situation occurs. **Face-threatening acts** are behaviors that detract from an individual’s identity by threatening either their positive or their negative face desires (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). Imagine that instead of honoring your significant other’s request for extra space during a busy week, you are constantly nagging and complaining about not spending any time together. This act threatens your partner’s negative face (i.e., your significant other is not able to do what he or she needs to do without your interference) while also threatening your positive face (as a supportive and caring partner). Your partner may further contribute to this face threat by telling people in your social network that you are being controlling and needy. Of course, not all behaviors are equally face threatening. Certain behaviors cause people to lose more face and lead to more negative personal and relational consequences than others. Yet recent research on online communication shows that even minor face-threatening acts lead to negative feelings and retaliatory aggression (Chen, 2015).

At least six factors affect the degree to which a face-threatening act is perceived to be severe. The first three factors, identified by Schlenker and his colleagues (Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992), focus on behaviors that threaten a person’s own face. The remaining three factors, from P. Brown

**Facework:** The attempt to maintain our identity and support the identity of other people.

**Face-validating acts:** Behavior that supports an individual’s desired image.

**Face-threatening acts:** Behaviors that detract from an individual’s identity by threatening either that person’s positive or negative face desires.

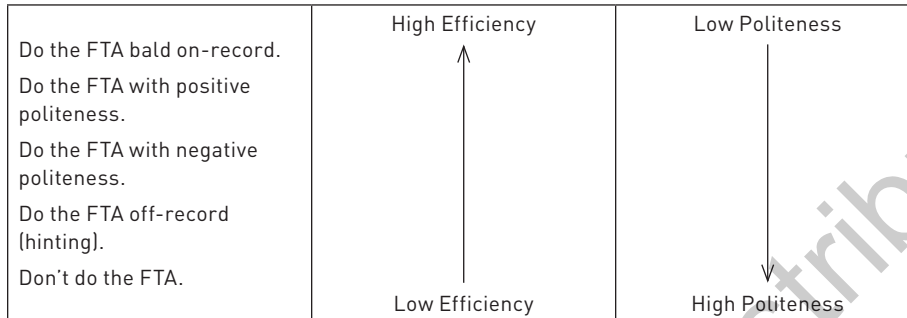
and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, focus on behaviors that threaten either one's own or one's partner's face.

1. ***The more important the violated rule, the more severe the face-threatening act.*** For example, forgetting your relational partner's birthday is a greater rule violation than forgetting to call your partner to say you will be late coming home from work.
2. ***The more harm the behavior produces, the more severe the face-threatening act.*** If you trip and lose your balance, you may feel loss of face; if you trip, fall, and tear your outfit, however, the loss of face will be greater. Similarly, if you get caught telling a lie about something that has serious implications for your relationship, the loss of face will be greater than if you get caught telling a "little white lie."
3. ***The more the actor is directly responsible for the behavior, the more severe the face-threatening act.*** If a store clerk refuses to accept your credit card because the expiration date is past, it is much less face threatening than if the clerk phones in your card number and is asked to confiscate your card and cut it up because you are late on your payments.
4. ***The more of an imposition the behavior is, the more severe the face-threatening act.*** You would be more concerned about your negative face if someone asked you to move furniture (a major imposition on your time) than if someone asked you to write down their new phone number (hardly an imposition).
5. ***The more power the receiver has over the sender, the more severe the face-threatening act.*** If you make a silly comment that your boss misconstrues as an insult, you will probably be more worried than if you make the same silly comment to a friend.
6. ***The larger the social distance between sender and receiver, the more severe the face-threatening act.*** You will probably worry less about threatening the face of your best friend than that of an acquaintance, because the friendship is more solid and less susceptible to harm from face threats.

Although research has generally supported the validity of these factors, the sixth factor, which relates to the social distance between receiver and sender, may not always be true. Holtgraves and Yang (1990, 1992) suggest that in many cases, instead of being *less* concerned about threatening the identity of those close to us, we are actually *more* concerned about doing so. The point is that identity management concerns become more salient as the consequences of impression management failure increase.

### Strategies for Engaging in Face-Threatening Acts

Although a considerable portion of our communication is face validating, sometimes we have to engage in a face-threatening act. We might need to break up with someone, tell a friend he or she is doing something wrong, or give into someone's request even though we do not really want to. So how do we engage in such acts in ways that minimize damage to our face? Politeness theory offers five general options available to individuals (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). As shown in Figure 2.4, these strategies vary in terms of the extent to which they accomplish a face-threatening task and manage face concerns.

**FIGURE 2.4** ■ Options for Dealing With Face-Threatening Acts

Source: We thank Sandra Metts for providing this graphic and granting us permission to use it in this book.

Note: FTA = face-threatening act.

**Bald on-record strategy:**

Communication strategy that involves primary attention to task through direct communication, with little or no attention to helping the partner save face.

**Positive politeness strategy:**

A strategy addressing the receiver's positive face while still accomplishing the task.

**Negative politeness strategy:**

A set of tactics intended to save the receiver's negative face while still accomplishing the task.

**Going off-record strategy:**

A strategy that involves giving primary attention to face and little attention to task.

**Decide not to engage in the face-threatening act:**

Avoiding the topic so that a potential receiver's face is not threatened.

The **bald on-record strategy** is characterized by primary attention to task and little attention to helping the partner save face. It is the most efficient strategy but also the most face threatening. P. Brown and Levinson (1987) offered the examples of a mother telling her child, "Come home right now!" or someone in need of assistance telling a bystander, "Lend me a hand here!" Bald on-record strategies are typically used when maximum task efficiency is important or where a large difference in power or status exists between actors.

The **positive politeness strategy** is intended to address the receiver's positive face while still accomplishing the task. It includes explicit recognition of the receiver's value and the receiver's contributions to the process and couches the face-threatening act (often a request) as something that does not threaten the identity of the receiver. For example, if you want a friend to help you write a résumé and cover letter, you might say, "You are such a good writer. Would you help me edit this?" This would bolster your friend's positive face to counterbalance the threat to negative face.

The **negative politeness strategy** tries to address the receiver's negative face while still accomplishing the task. The key is that receivers not feel coerced into complying but feel that they are performing the act of their own volition. Often, negative politeness also involves deference on the part of the sender to ensure not being perceived as coercive. You might say to a friend, "I suppose there wouldn't be any chance of your being able to lend me your car for a few minutes, would there?" P. Brown and Levinson (1987) noted that requests phrased this way clearly emphasize the freedom of the receiver to decline.

The **going off-record strategy** is characterized by primary attention to face and little attention to task. It is an inefficient strategy for accomplishing tasks, but given the importance of face, it may serve the participants well. Examples include hinting, using an indirect nonverbal expression, or masking a request as a joke. For instance, if you want your partner to take you on a vacation, you might comment, "I've always wanted to go on a Caribbean cruise" or "It would be great to get away and go somewhere tropical."

Finally, people can **decide not to engage in the face-threatening act**. P. Brown and Levinson (1987) noted that individuals often choose to forgo face-threatening tasks completely in favor of preserving face. For example, even if you are upset because your

roommate's partner spends the night at your apartment, you might decide to say nothing for fear of embarrassing or angering your roommate (particularly if you do not want your roommate to move out). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), people perform a cost-benefit analysis when deciding what type of strategy to use. Bald on-record strategies are the most efficient but also the most damaging to face and as such may be most damaging to the relationship. However, by going off record, people run a much greater risk that the receiver will not recognize the request or will simply ignore it.

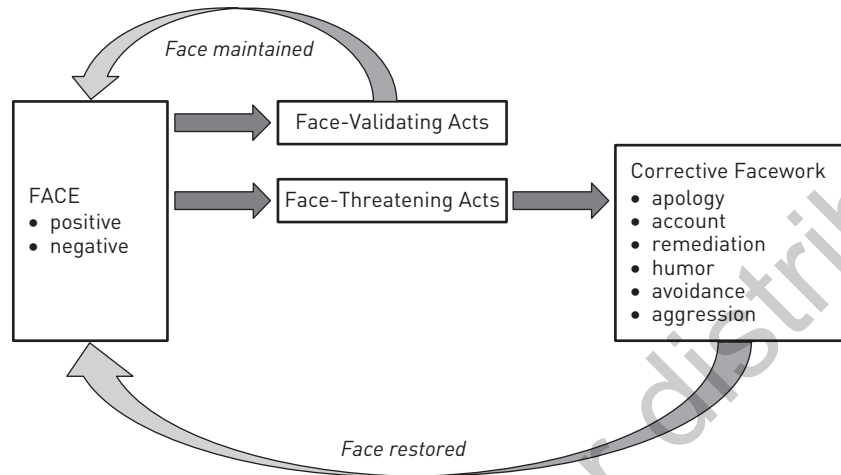
Metts (1992) applied this logic to the predicament of breaking up with a romantic partner. The act of breaking up is face threatening in many ways (see Chapter 15). Suppose that when Carolina told her ex-boyfriend, Alex, that she wanted to end their relationship. Alex did not want to break up. This act threatened Alex's negative face because he was being forced to do something he did not want to do. Alex's positive face also was threatened because Carolina's request suggested that he was no longer a desirable relational partner. Carolina's positive face was also threatened because she worried that Alex (and perhaps other people) would see her as selfish, egotistical, or uncaring. Her negative face was also threatened right after the breakup; she wanted to change her relationship status and take their pictures off her social media immediately, but out of respect to Alex she thought she should probably wait a while before doing so. According to Metts (1992), Carolina would have used different strategies depending on how face threatening she thought the breakup would be for both herself and Alex. If she thought the breakup would be highly distressing, she would have likely used an on-record-with-politeness strategy. Conversely, if Carolina thought the breakup would be fairly amicable, she would have likely used an off-record strategy (e.g., avoiding the person) or a bald on-record strategy (e.g., blunt statements about wanting to break up).

### Corrective Facework

The strategies reviewed previously focus on ways people can engage in face-threatening acts. But what happens when someone loses face? What can people do to correct or restore face so others still have a positive image of them? Work on **corrective facework** answers that question. Before reviewing some of the specific types of corrective facework, it is helpful to think about how the various concepts we have been discussing work together. To that end, take a look at Figure 2.5. In this model, you can see that people all have a face or image that they wish to project. In most interactions, people protect their images and engage in face-validating acts that maintain face. When face-threatening acts occur, however, these acts trigger responses designed to save face called corrective facework. Put another way, corrective facework involves efforts to *repair* an identity that has been damaged by something that was said or done. Corrective facework may be performed by the person whose face was threatened, or by others who are assisting in the protection or repair of the person's face.

Many situations involve face-threatening acts. You might be at a small party and find out almost everyone there but you is on a large group chat. You would probably feel excluded and lose positive face, especially because most people there would know you were not on it. When Carolina breaks up with Alex, people might think she is too picky and always ends things with great guys, and when she takes all their pictures off her Instagram some people might think that is a cold and heartless act and that she should keep at least some pictures up. All of these actions threaten Carolina's positive face. If people perceive you as "whipped"

**Corrective facework:** Efforts to repair an identity damaged by something that was said or done.

**FIGURE 2.5 ■ Basics of the Facework Process**


or “clingy” in your relationship, these perceptions threaten both your positive face (in terms of your desired personality identity) and your negative face (because you are acting dependent rather than autonomous). Embarrassing moments are an instance of another situation that often lead to corrective facework. As Cupach and Metts (1994) argued, people become embarrassed when they are perceived to have acted incompetently—that is, when behavior is judged to be “inappropriate, ineffective, or foolish” (p. 18).

These are just a few of an almost endless list of possible face-threatening acts that likely require corrective facework. So what can people do to try to restore face in these situations? Researchers have described six general corrective strategies for repairing a damaged face, as listed next (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). If you are curious about which of these you might be prone to using, take the quiz in the Put Yourself to the Test box before reading on.

1. **Avoidance:** The common thread underlying avoidance behaviors is the goal of distancing oneself or one’s partner from the act. Often, distancing occurs when individuals pretend that the act never happened or ignore its occurrence. For example, continuing to walk down the aisle after knocking over a display in a grocery store or glossing over a Freudian slip are instances of avoidance. The hope is that the audience may pay less attention to the act if the actor avoids reference to it.
2. **Humor:** When the consequences of the face-threatening act are relatively small, people often use humor as a way to deal with the threat, a strategy that shows poise and competence in repairing their damaged faces. Sometimes it is best to laugh at yourself so others will laugh with you, not at you. You might laugh at your own clumsiness and say “that would only happen to me” or admit that “sometimes I do dumb things” while smiling and shaking your head.
3. **Apologies:** Apologies are “admissions of responsibility and regret for undesirable events” (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992, p. 162). In that sense, they may help repair

some of the damage to face by emphasizing the actor's nature as a moral individual who intends to take responsibility for the action. Unlike avoidance, where actors deny responsibility, apologies tie the incident directly to the actor and, as such, may further threaten face—especially if the apology is deemed insincere. For Carolina, any apologies she gave to Alex would need to seem heartfelt so that he understood that she really did feel bad about breaking up with him and is a kind person.

4. **Accounts:** Accounts, or attempts to explain the face-threatening act, come in the form of excuses or justifications. Excuses are explanations that minimize personal responsibility of the actor for the actions. For example, if you engage in a silly fraternity or sorority prank that causes you to lose face, you might excuse your behavior by saying that your friends pressured you into action or that you had consumed too much alcohol. With justifications, actors do not try to distance themselves from the act but instead “reframe an event by downplaying its negative implications” (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 10). Arguing that your behavior at the fraternity or sorority party was “not that big of a deal” or that the prank did not really hurt anyone are examples of justifications.
5. **Remediation:** This strategy involves attempts to repair physical damage. You might quickly clean up a coffee spill on the table, or you might zip up your pants once you recognize that your fly is open. Carolina might go into her archives and repost a couple old pictures with Alex or send him a follow request after blocking him. Relational partners, especially if sympathetic, often engage in physical remediation as well. For example, if you see a food smudge on your partner's chin, you might wipe it off before other people see it.
6. **Aggression:** In some cases, individuals feel the need to repair their damaged face by using physical force. For instance, people may start a physical altercation in response to a put-down or personal attack. Unfortunately, research shows that dating violence often follows a perception of face threats (Gelles & Cornell, 1990). People may also become aggressive when they are embarrassed or violate a norm. For example, if you accidentally bump into someone while walking through a crowded shopping mall, you might angrily say, “Watch where you're going.”

Of course, several of these strategies may be combined in efforts to repair a damaged face. Perhaps, after spilling coffee on the boss's desk, you might say you are sorry (apology), explain that you were distracted by the boss's inspiring presentation (account), and then clean up the mess (physical remediation). Indeed, the more face threatening the act is, the more energy will be expended in multiple repair attempts.

In less serious cases, people are more likely to ignore face threats or to respond with humor. This is especially likely when face-threatening acts are expected. For instance, embarrassing and face-threatening actions are more expected and accepted at wedding and baby showers. Common activities at baby showers include having people guess how big the mom-to-be's stomach is or what she weighs; at wedding showers, the bride-to-be often receives revealing lingerie. Braithwaite (1995) observed behavior at coed wedding and baby showers to investigate the tactics people used to embarrass others and what tactics people used to respond to face threats. She found that wedding and baby showers are contexts where embarrassment is expected, so these actions are not as face threatening as in other

contexts. Yet the dance between embarrassment-producing face threats and face-repairing responses was still evident.

Of course, depending on the situation, some types of corrective facework are more effective than others. Although the arrow in the model (see Figure 2.5) goes from corrective facework back to restoring face, sometimes corrective facework is not successful. This is typically the case when aggression is used or when accounts makes things worse rather than better. Carolina might try to explain why she broke up with Alex, but in explaining that she “lost feelings” and “it was me, not him” her friends might think she is being cliché and fickle. In some cases, there is nothing you can do to repair the damage caused by a face-threatening act. No matter what Carolina says, she might not be able to repair the damage to her positive face with Alex and his close circle of friends and family.

## PUT YOURSELF TO THE TEST

### HOW DO YOU ATTEMPT TO REPAIR FACE?

Imagine yourself in the following situation. You are assigned to work in a group of four students to complete a class project. A number of personal issues interfere with your ability to get things done as quickly and effectively as you usually do, and you fall behind the rest of the group. Midway through the semester, one of the other group members puts you on the spot

by saying, “You haven’t been doing your share, so I’m afraid that if we give you something important to do, you won’t get it done on time or you won’t do it well.” How would you respond to this face-threatening comment? Answer the questions using the following scale: 1 = you would be very unlikely to react that way, and 7 = you would be very likely to react that way.

	Very Unlikely			Very Likely			
1. I would ignore it.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I would apologize.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I would explain why I hadn’t been able to do my fair share.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I would say something sarcastic or rude to the person who made the comment.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I would promise to do more than my fair share in the future.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I would laugh it off and say that I’ve always been a procrastinator.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I would change the subject.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I would admit that I had not done my fair share.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I would tell everyone why I wasn’t able to put forth my best effort.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I would say something to put down the person who made the comment.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7



	Very Unlikely				Very Likely		
11. I would take on a task no one else wanted to do to “make it up” to everyone.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. I would make fun of myself and my lack of time management.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
To obtain your results, add your scores for the following items:							
<i>Avoidance:</i> Items 1 + 7 = _____							
<i>Apology:</i> Items 2 + 8 = _____							
<i>Account:</i> Items 3 + 9 = _____							
<i>Aggression:</i> Items 4 + 10 = _____							
<i>Remediation:</i> Items 5 + 11 = _____							
<i>Humor:</i> Items 6 + 12 = _____							

Higher scores indicate a stronger likelihood of using a particular type of corrective facework in this type of situation. How might your use of

corrective facework differ on the basis of the situation or the relationship you share with the people around you?

## SUMMARY AND APPLICATION

Our desire to present particular images of ourselves shapes our social interactions and influences our relationships. In this chapter, we outlined the factors that influence identity and the ways in which we communicate this identity to others during initial encounters and in established relationships. A person's identity is based on a complex theory of self that incorporates expectations, self-fulfilling prophecies, and feedback from others. People project a particular identity to the world, and that identity is either accepted or rejected by the audience, causing the identity to be either reinforced or modified. In this chapter, we also emphasized the ways in which other people help us maintain our public identities.

It is important to note that this chapter covered only a small portion of the literature on identity and impression management. Research looking at psychological processes such as self-esteem and self-concept are also relevant to identity and impression

management. In this chapter, our focus was on identity management in social and personal relationships. Other researchers have studied self-presentation within different contexts, such as first impressions during employment interviews, a manager's brand in his company, or self-presentation strategies used by teachers in classrooms. The information posted on Carolina's social media functions for both established and new relationships. Her social media serve to maintain relationships with friends who can click and see all Carolina's pictures in which they are featured; her Instagram and Twitter serve as an introduction for new friends, acquaintances, and classmates who don't yet know Carolina very well.

Interpersonal communication researchers have also studied identity and impression formation within the attraction process. People are attracted to those who convey a positive self-identity while appearing to be modest and approachable. Physical

appearance, which plays a key role in impression management, is also one of several bases for attraction in close relationships (see Chapter 3). Carolina's social media reflects some of the characteristics that people find attractive, including sociability and popularity. The pictures she and others have posted show viewers what she and her friends look like and also give viewers an idea of what kinds of activities she and her friends enjoy. The people viewing Carolina's public accounts will perceive her differently depending on how they evaluate the identity she has portrayed. Some people might have a positive impression of Carolina as a popular person who is bilingual and visits exotic places such as Rome. Other people, however, may perceive Carolina as a superficial, narcissistic person, more concerned about her large social network

than developing high-quality close relationships. Viewers' perceptions would be influenced by their own identities and the characteristics they value in themselves and others. If Carolina learns that some people she cares about have a negative impression of her when they view her social media, she might change her postings.

Finally, identity can be expanded and protected within close relationships. Self-expansion theory suggests that relationships provide a venue for one's broadening identity and growing as a person. Facework is also important to project one's own desired image and to protect the positive and negative faces of a relational partner. Indeed, an awareness of the importance of face can go a long way toward helping people understand the development and deterioration of relationships.

### KEY TERMS

attractiveness deception (p. 47)	face-threatening acts (p. 52)	negative politeness strategy (p. 54)
Baby Boomers (p. 33)	face-validating acts (p. 52)	politeness theory (p. 28)
bald on-record strategy (p. 54)	facework (p. 52)	positive face (p. 51)
broadcasters (p. 36)	fellowship face (p. 51)	positive politeness strategy (p. 54)
communication theory of identity (p. 30)	generation X (p. 33)	self-expansion theory (p. 41)
competence face (p. 51)	generation Z (p. 33)	self-fulfilling prophecy (p. 44)
corrective facework (p. 55)	generational identity (p. 33)	self-presentation (p. 27)
decide not to engage in the face-threatening act (p. 54)	going off-record strategy (p. 54)	sexual scripts (p. 31)
digital natives (p. 35)	Greatest Generation (p. 33)	Silent Generation (p. 33)
display rules (p. 47)	identity (p. 28)	social identity theory (p. 29)
dramaturgical perspective (p. 28)	identity management (p. 28)	spies (p. 37)
emotional labor (p. 47)	interactors (p. 37)	theory of self (p. 40)
	Millennials (p. 33)	vision of self (p. 40)
	negative face (p. 51)	

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Most college students today are Gen Zers or Millennials. Do you see a difference between these two generations in terms of their identities and communication? If so, what are the most important differences you see? If not, how are these two generations different from one of the generations (Generation X or the Baby Boomers) above them?
2. In this chapter, we discussed the issue of when identity management crosses over into being deceptive or manipulative. Based on your experiences with friends, what behaviors related

to self-presentation do you think are authentic representations of different facets of their identities versus “fake” or “inauthentic” ways of presenting themselves? Give examples.

3. Share a time when you engaged in a face-threatening act. How did the act threaten your

positive or negative face, and what corrective facework did you use? Looking back, evaluate the effectiveness of the corrective facework you used and reflect on what you might have done differently to better restore your positive image.

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