2.3: Perceiving and Presenting Self

Learning Objectives

1. Define self-concept and discuss how we develop our self-concept.
2. Define self-esteem and discuss how we develop self-esteem.
4. Discuss how social norms, family, culture, and media influence self-perception.
5. Define self-presentation and discuss common self-presentation strategies.

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

Self-Concept

Self-concept refers to the overall idea of who a person thinks he or she is. If I said, “Tell me who you are,” your answers would be clues as to how you see yourself, your self-concept. Each person’s self-concept is influenced by context, meaning we think differently about ourselves depending on the situation we are in. In some situations, personal characteristics, such as our abilities, personality, and other distinguishing features, will best describe who we are. You might consider yourself laid back, traditional, funny, open minded, or driven, or you might label yourself a leader or a thrill seeker. In other situations, our self-concept may be tied to group or cultural membership. For example, you might consider yourself a member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity, a Southerner, or a member of the track team.
Men are more likely than women to include group memberships in their self-concept descriptions.

Our self-concept is also formed through our interactions with others and their reactions to us. The concept of the looking glass self explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people’s reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us (Cooley, 1902). This reflective process of building our self-concept is based on what other people have actually said, such as “You're a good listener,” and other people’s actions, such as coming to you for advice. These thoughts evoke emotional responses that feed into our self-concept. For example, you may think, “I'm glad that people can count on me to listen to their problems.”

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons to other people. Social comparison theory states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people. Social comparisons are based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference (Hargie, 2011). In terms of superiority and inferiority, we evaluate characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn’t appropriate. Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. If a person wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, s/he may be discouraged by his/her difficulty keeping up with the aerobics instructor or running partner and judge her/himself as inferior, which could negatively affect his/her self-concept. Using as a reference group people who have only recently started a fitness program but have shown progress could help maintain a more accurate and hopefully positive self-concept.

We also engage in social comparison based on similarity and difference. Since self-concept is context specific, similarity may be desirable in some situations and difference more desirable in others. Factors like age and personality may influence whether or not we want to fit in or stand out. Although we compare ourselves to others throughout our lives, adolescent and teen years usually bring new pressure to be similar to or different from particular reference groups. But social comparison can be complicated by perceptual influences. As we learned earlier, we organize information based on similarity and difference, but these patterns don’t always hold true. Even though students involved in athletics and students involved in arts may seem very different, a dancer may also be very athletic, perhaps even more so than a
member of the football team. As with other aspects of perception, there are positive and negative consequences of social comparison.

We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won’t stop until they get the high score on the video game or set a new record in a track-and-field event. Some people strive to be first chair in the clarinet section of the orchestra, while another person may be content to be second chair. The education system promotes social comparison through grades and rewards such as honor rolls and dean’s lists. Although education and privacy laws prevent me from displaying each student’s grade on a test or paper for the whole class to see, I do typically report the aggregate grades, meaning the total number of As, Bs, Cs, and so on. This doesn’t violate anyone’s privacy rights, but it allows students to see where they fell in the distribution. This type of social comparison can be used as motivation. The student who was one of only three out of twenty-three to get a D on the exam knows that most of her classmates are performing better than she is, which may lead her to think, “If they can do it, I can do it.” But social comparison that isn’t reasoned can have negative effects and result in negative thoughts like “Look at how bad I did. Man, I’m stupid!” These negative thoughts can lead to negative behaviors, because we try to maintain internal consistency, meaning we act in ways that match up with our self-concept. So if the student begins to question his academic abilities and then incorporates an assessment of himself as a “bad student” into his self-concept, he may then behave in ways consistent with that, which is only going to worsen his academic performance. Additionally, a student might be comforted to learn that he isn’t the only person who got a D and then not feel the need to try to improve, since he has company. You can see in this example that evaluations we place on our self-concept can lead to cycles of thinking and acting. These cycles relate to self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are components of our self-concept.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is a more specifically an evaluation of the self (Byrne, 1996). Like self-concept, self-esteem has general and specific elements. Generally, some people are more likely to evaluate themselves positively while others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively (Brockner, 1988). More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our life span and across contexts.

How we judge ourselves affects our communication and our behaviors, but not every negative or positive judgment carries the same weight. The negative evaluation of a trait that isn’t very important for our self-concept will likely not result in a loss of self-esteem. For example, I am not very good at drawing. While I appreciate drawing as an art form, I don’t consider drawing ability to be a very big part of my self-concept. If someone negatively critiqued my drawing ability, my self-esteem wouldn’t take a big hit. I do consider myself a good teacher, however, and I have spent and continue to spend considerable time and effort on improving my knowledge of teaching and my teaching skills. If someone negatively critiqued my teaching knowledge and/or abilities, my self-esteem might be hurt. In professional contexts, people with higher self-esteem are more likely to work harder based on negative feedback, are less negatively affected by work stress, are able to handle workplace conflict better, and are better able to work independently and solve problems (Brockner, 1988). Self-esteem isn’t the only factor that contributes to our self-concept; perceptions about our competence also play a role in developing our sense of self.
Self-Efficacy refers to the judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context (Bandura, 1997). As you can see in Figure 2.2 “Relationship between Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, and Self-Concept”, judgments about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which influences our self-concept. The following example also illustrates these interconnections.

Figure 2.2 Relationship between Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, and Self-Concept

Pedro did a good job on his first college speech. During a meeting with his professor, Pedro indicates that he is confident going into the next speech and thinks he will do well. This skill-based assessment is an indication that Pedro has a high level of self-efficacy related to public speaking. If he does well on the speech, the praise from his classmates and professor will reinforce his self-efficacy and lead him to positively evaluate his speaking skills, which will contribute to his self-esteem. By the end of the class, Pedro likely thinks of himself as a good public speaker, which may then become an important part of his self-concept. Throughout these points of connection, it’s important to remember that self-perception affects how we communicate, behave, and perceive other things. Pedro’s increased feeling of self-efficacy may give him more confidence in his delivery, which will likely result in positive feedback that reinforces his self-perception. He may start to perceive his professor more positively since they share an interest in public speaking, and he may begin to notice other people’s speaking skills more during class presentations and public lectures. Over time, he may even start to think about changing his major to communication or pursuing career options that incorporate public speaking, which would further integrate being “a good public speaker” into his self-concept. You can hopefully see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles. While some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives.

The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affect our feelings of self-efficacy and our self-esteem. As we saw in Pedro’s example, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future (Hargie, 2011). Obviously, negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves and negative feedback does the opposite, which ultimately affects behaviors and creates the cycle. When
feedback from others is different from how we view ourselves, additional cycles may develop that impact self-esteem and self-concept.

Self-discrepancy theory states that people have beliefs about and expectations for their actual and potential selves that do not always match up with what they actually experience (Higgins, 1987). To understand this theory, we have to understand the different “selves” that make up our self-concept, which are the actual, ideal, and ought selves. The actual self consists of the attributes that you or someone else believes you actually possess. The ideal self consists of the attributes that you or someone else would like you to possess. The ought self consists of the attributes you or someone else believes you should possess.

These different selves can conflict with each other in various combinations. Discrepancies between the actual and ideal/ought selves can be motivating in some ways and prompt people to act for self-improvement. For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so. Discrepancies between the ideal and ought selves can be especially stressful. For example, many professional women who are also mothers have an ideal view of self that includes professional success and advancement. They may also have an ought self that includes a sense of duty and obligation to be a full-time mother. The actual self may be someone who does OK at both but doesn’t quite live up to the expectations of either. These discrepancies do not just create cognitive unease—they also lead to emotional, behavioral, and communicative changes.

When we compare the actual self to the expectations of ourselves and others, we can see particular patterns of emotional and behavioral effects. For example, if your ideal self has no credit card debt and your actual self does, you may be frustrated with your lack of financial discipline and be motivated to stick to your budget and pay off your credit card bills.

When our actual self doesn’t match up with other people’s ideals for us, we may not be obtaining significant others’ desires and hopes, which can lead to feelings of dejection including shame, embarrassment, and concern for losing the affection or approval of others. For example, if a significant other sees you as an “A” student and you get a 2.8 GPA your first year of college, then you may be embarrassed to share your grades with that person.

When our actual self doesn’t match up with what we think other people think we should obtain, we are not living up to the ought self that we think others have constructed for us, which can lead to feelings of agitation, feeling threatened, and fearing potential punishment. For example, if your parents think you should follow in their footsteps and take over the family business, but your actual self wants to go into the arts, then you may be unsure of what to do and fear being isolated from the family.

Finally, when our actual self doesn’t match up with what we think we should obtain, we are not meeting what we see as our duties or obligations, which can lead to feelings of agitation including guilt, weakness, and a feeling that we have fallen short of our moral standard (Higgins, 1987). For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so due to the guilt of reading about the increasing number of animals being housed at the facility. The following is a review of the four potential discrepancies between selves:

- **Actual vs. own ideals.** We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining our desires and hopes, which leads to feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration.
- **Actual vs. others’ ideals.** We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining significant others’ desires and
hopes for us, which leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment.

- **Actual vs. others’ ought.** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting what others see as our duties and obligations, which leads to feelings of agitation including fear of potential punishment.

- **Actual vs. own ought.** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting our duties and obligations, which can lead to a feeling that we have fallen short of our own moral standards.

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**Influences on Self-Perception**

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

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**Social and Family Influences**

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

Parents and peers shape our self-perceptions in positive and negative ways. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can lead to positive views of self (Hargie, 2011). In the past few years, however, there has been a public discussion and debate about how much positive reinforcement people should give to others, especially children. The following questions have been raised: Do we have current and upcoming generations that have been overpraised? Is the praise given warranted? What are the positive and negative effects of praise? What is the end goal of the praise? Let’s briefly look at this discussion and its connection to self-perception.
Some experts have warned that overpraising children can lead to distorted self-concepts.

Figure (PageIndex{3})): "Participation Award" (CC BY-ND 2.0; Rain0975 via Flickr)

Whether praise is warranted or not is very subjective and specific to each person and context, but in general there have been questions raised about the potential negative effects of too much praise. Motivation is the underlying force that drives us to do things. Sometimes we are intrinsically motivated, meaning we want to do something for the love of doing it or the resulting internal satisfaction. Other times we are extrinsically motivated, meaning we do something to receive a reward or avoid punishment. If you put effort into completing a short documentary for a class because you love filmmaking and editing, you have been largely motivated by intrinsic forces. If you complete the documentary because you want an “A” and know that if you fail your parents will not give you money for your spring break trip, then you are motivated by extrinsic factors. Both can, of course, effectively motivate us. Intrinsic motivation is more substantial and long-lasting than extrinsic motivation and can lead to the development of a work ethic and sense of pride in one’s abilities. Intrinsic motivation can move people to accomplish great things over long periods of time and be happy despite the effort and sacrifices made. Extrinsic motivation dies when the reward stops. Additionally, too much praise can lead
people to have a misguided sense of their abilities. College professors who are reluctant to fail students who produce failing work may be setting those students up to be shocked when their supervisor critiques their abilities or output once they get into a professional context (Hargie, 2011).

There are cultural differences in the amount of praise and positive feedback that teachers and parents give their children. For example, teachers give less positive reinforcement in Japanese and Taiwanese classrooms than do teachers in US classrooms. Chinese and Kenyan parents do not regularly praise their children because they fear it may make them too individualistic, rude, or arrogant (Wierzbicka, 2004).

Research has also found that communication patterns develop between parents and children that are common to many verbally and physically abusive relationships. Such patterns have negative effects on a child’s self-efficacy and self-esteem (Morgan & Wilson, 2007). In general, abusive parents have unpredictable reactions to their children’s positive and negative behavior, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child that can lead to lower self-esteem and erratic or aggressive behavior. The cycles of praise and blame are just two examples of how the family as a socializing force can influence our self-perceptions. Culture also influences how we see ourselves.

Culture

How people perceive themselves varies across cultures. For example, many cultures exhibit a phenomenon known as the self-enhancement bias, meaning that we tend to emphasize our desirable qualities relative to other people (Loughnan et al., 2011). A review of many studies in this area found that people in Western countries such as the United States were significantly more likely to self-enhance than people in countries such as Japan. Many scholars explain this variation using a common measure of cultural variation that claims people in individualistic cultures are more likely to engage in competition and openly praise accomplishments than people in collectivistic cultures. The difference in self-enhancement has also been tied to economics, with scholars arguing that people in countries with greater income inequality are more likely to view themselves as superior to others or want to be perceived as superior to others (even if they don’t have economic wealth) in order to conform to the country’s values and norms. This holds true because countries with high levels of economic inequality, like the United States, typically value competition and the right to boast about winning or succeeding, while countries with more economic equality, like Japan, have a cultural norm of modesty (Loughnan, 2011).

Race also plays a role in self-perception. For example, positive self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to be higher in African American adolescent girls than Caucasian girls (Stockton et al., 2009). Self-perception becomes more complex when we consider biracial individuals—more specifically those born to couples comprising an African American and a white parent (Bowles, 1993). In such cases, it is challenging for biracial individuals to embrace both of their heritages, and social comparison becomes more difficult due to diverse and sometimes conflicting reference groups. Since many biracial individuals identify as and are considered African American by society, living and working within a black community can help foster more positive self-perceptions in these biracial individuals. Such a community offers a more nurturing environment and a buffer zone from racist attitudes but simultaneously distances biracial individuals from their white identity. Conversely, immersion into a predominantly white community and separation from a black community can lead biracial individuals to internalize negative views of people of color and perhaps develop a sense of inferiority. Gender intersects with culture and biracial identity to create different experiences and challenges for biracial men and women. Biracial men have more difficulty accepting their potential occupational limits, especially if they have white
fathers, and biracial women have difficulty accepting their black features, such as hair and facial features. All these challenges lead to a sense of being marginalized from both ethnic groups and interfere in the development of positive self-esteem and a stable self-concept.

Biracial individuals may have challenges with self-perception as they try to integrate both racial identities into their self-concept.

Figure \(\PageIndex{4}\): "End of Summer Innocence" (CC BY-SA 2.0; Javcon117 via Flickr)

There are some general differences in terms of gender and self-perception that relate to self-concept, self-efficacy, and envisioning ideal selves. As with any cultural differences, these are generalizations that have been supported by research, but they do not represent all individuals within a group. Regarding self-concept, men are more likely to describe themselves in terms of their group membership, and women are more likely to include references to relationships in their self-descriptions. For example, a man may note that he is a Raiders fan, a boat enthusiast, or a member of the Rotary Club, and a woman may note that she is a mother of two or a loyal friend.

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

Media

The representations we see in the media affect our self-perception. The vast majority of media images include idealized representations of attractiveness. Despite the fact that the images of people we see in glossy magazines and on movie screens are not typically what we see when we look at the people around us in a classroom, at work, or at the grocery store, many of us continue to hold ourselves to an unrealistic standard of beauty and attractiveness. Movies, magazines, and television shows are filled with beautiful people, and less attractive actors, when they are present in the media, are typically portrayed as the butt of jokes, villains, or only as background extras (Patzer, 2008). Aside from overall
attractiveness, the media also offers narrow representations of acceptable body weight.

Researchers have found that only 12 percent of prime-time characters are overweight, which is dramatically less than the national statistics for obesity among the actual US population (Patzer, 2008). Further, an analysis of how weight is discussed on prime-time sitcoms found that heavier female characters were often the targets of negative comments and jokes that audience members responded to with laughter. Conversely, positive comments about women’s bodies were related to their thinness. In short, the heavier the character, the more negative the comments, and the thinner the character, the more positive the comments. The same researchers analyzed sitcoms for content regarding male characters’ weight and found that although comments regarding their weight were made, they were fewer in number and not as negative, ultimately supporting the notion that overweight male characters are more accepted in media than overweight female characters. Much more attention has been paid in recent years to the potential negative effects of such narrow media representations. The following “Getting Critical” box explores the role of media in the construction of body image.

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

Advertising in particular encourages people to engage in social comparison, regularly communicating to us that we are inferior because we lack a certain product or that we need to change some aspect of our life to keep up with and be similar to others. Messages tell us to fear becoming old or unattractive, selling products to keep our skin tight and clear, which will in turn make us happy and popular.

“Getting Critical”

Body Image and Self-Perception

Take a look at any magazine, television show, or movie and you will most likely see very beautiful people. When you look around you in your daily life, there are likely not as many glamorous and gorgeous people. Scholars and media critics have critiqued this discrepancy for decades because it has contributed to many social issues and public health issues ranging from body dysmorphic disorder, to eating disorders, to lowered self-esteem.

Much of the media is driven by advertising, and the business of media has been to perpetuate a "culture of lack" (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). This means that we are constantly told, via mediated images, that we lack something. In short, advertisements often tell us we don’t have enough money, enough beauty, or enough material possessions. Over the past few decades, women’s bodies in the media have gotten smaller and thinner, while men’s bodies have gotten bigger and more muscular. At the same time, the US population has become dramatically more obese. As research shows that men and women are becoming more and more dissatisfied with their bodies, which ultimately affects their self-concept and self-esteem, health and beauty product lines proliferate and cosmetic surgeries and other types of enhancements become more and more popular. From young children to older adults, people are becoming more aware of and oftentimes unhappy with their bodies, which results in a variety of self-perception problems.

1. How do you think the media influences your self-perception and body image?
2. Describe the typical man that is portrayed in the media. Describe the typical woman that is portrayed in the media. What impressions do these typical bodies make on others? What are the potential positive and negative effects of the way the media portrays the human body?

3. Find an example of an “atypical” body represented in the media (a magazine, TV show, or movie). Is this person presented in a positive, negative, or neutral way? Why do you think this person was chosen?

Self-Presentation

Self-presentation is the process of strategically concealing or revealing personal information in order to influence others’ perceptions (Human et al., 2012). We engage in this process daily and for different reasons. Although people occasionally intentionally deceive others in the process of self-presentation, in general we try to make a good impression while still remaining authentic. Since self-presentation helps meet our instrumental, relational, and identity needs, we stand to lose quite a bit if we are caught intentionally misrepresenting ourselves. In May of 2012, Yahoo!’s CEO resigned after it became known that he stated on official documents that he had two college degrees when he actually only had one. In a similar incident, a woman who had long served as the dean of admissions for the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology was dismissed from her position after it was learned that she had only attended one year of college and had falsely indicated she had a bachelor’s and master’s degree (Webber & Korn, 2012). Such incidents clearly show that although people can get away with such false self-presentation for a while, the eventual consequences of being found out are dire. As communicators, we sometimes engage in more subtle forms of inauthentic self-presentation. For example, a person may state or imply that they know more about a subject or situation than they actually do in order to seem smart or “in the loop.” During a speech, a speaker works on a polished and competent delivery to distract from a lack of substantive content.

Consciously and competently engaging in self-presentation can have benefits because we can provide others with a more positive and accurate picture of who we are. People who are skilled at impression management are typically more engaging and confident, which allows others to pick up on more cues from which to form impressions (Human et al., 2012). Being a skilled self-presenter draws on many of the practices used by competent communicators, including becoming a higher self-monitor. When self-presentation skills and self-monitoring skills combine, communicators can simultaneously monitor their own expressions, the reaction of others, and the situational and social context (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002). Sometimes people get help with their self-presentation. Although most people can’t afford or wouldn’t think of hiring an image consultant, some people have started generously donating their self-presentation expertise to help others. A project called “Style Me Hired,” for example, has started offering free makeovers to jobless people in order to offer them new motivation and help them make favorable impressions and hopefully get a job offer.[1]

There are two main types of self-presentation: prosocial and self-serving (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002). Prosocial self-presentation entails behaviors that present a person as a role model and make a person more likable and attractive. For example, a supervisor may call on her employees to uphold high standards for business ethics, model that behavior in her own actions, and compliment others when they exemplify those standards. Self-serving self-presentation entails behaviors that present a person as highly skilled, willing to challenge others, and someone not to be messed with even though that may not be accurate. For example, a supervisor may publicly take credit for the accomplishments of others or publicly critique an employee who failed to meet a particular standard. In summary, prosocial strategies are aimed at benefiting others, while self-serving strategies benefit the self at the expense of others.
In general, we strive to present a public image that matches up with our self-concept, but we can also use self-presentation strategies to enhance our self-concept (Hargie, 2011). When we present ourselves in order to evoke a positive evaluative response, we are engaging in self-enhancement. In the pursuit of self-enhancement, a person might try to be as appealing as possible in a particular area or with a particular person to gain feedback that will enhance one’s self-esteem. For example, a singer might train and practice for weeks before singing in front of a well-respected vocal coach but not invest as much effort in preparing to sing in front of friends. Although positive feedback from friends is beneficial, positive feedback from an experienced singer could enhance a person’s self-concept. Self-enhancement can be productive and achieved competently, or it can be used inappropriately. Using self-enhancement behaviors just to gain the approval of others or out of self-centeredness may lead people to communicate in ways that are perceived as phony or overbearing and end up making an unfavorable impression (Sosik, Avolio, & Jung, 2002).

“Getting Plugged In”

Self-Presentation Online: Social Media, Digital Trails, and Your Reputation

Although social networking has long been a way to keep in touch with friends and colleagues, the advent of social media has made the process of making connections and those all-important first impressions much more complex. Just looking at Facebook as an example, we can clearly see that the very acts of constructing a profile, posting status updates, “liking” certain things, and sharing various information via Facebook features and apps is self-presentation (Kim & Lee, 2011). People also form impressions based on the number of friends we have and the photos and posts that other people tag us in. All this information floating around can be difficult to manage. So how do we manage the impressions we make digitally given that there is a permanent record?

Research shows that people overall engage in positive and honest self-presentation on Facebook (Kim & Lee, 2011). Since people know how visible the information they post is, they may choose to only reveal things they think will form favorable impressions. But the mediated nature of Facebook also leads some people to disclose more personal information than they might otherwise in such a public or semipublic forum. These hyperpersonal disclosures run the risk of forming negative impressions based on who sees them. In general, the ease of digital communication, not just on Facebook, has presented new challenges for our self-control and information management. Sending someone a sexually provocative image used to take some effort before the age of digital cameras, but now “sexting” an explicit photo only takes a few seconds. So people who would have likely not engaged in such behavior before are more tempted to now, and it is the desire to present oneself as desirable or cool that leads people to send photos they may later regret (DiBlasio, 2012). In fact, new technology in the form of apps is trying to give people a little more control over the exchange of digital information. An iPhone app called “Snapchat” allows users to send photos that will only be visible for a few seconds. Although this isn’t a guaranteed safety net, the demand for such apps is increasing, which illustrates the point that we all now leave digital trails of information that can be useful in terms of our self-presentation but can also create new challenges in terms of managing the information floating around from which others may form impressions of us.

1. What impressions do you want people to form of you based on the information they can see on your Facebook page?

2. Have you ever used social media or the Internet to do “research” on a person? What things would you find favorable and unfavorable?

3. Do you have any guidelines you follow regarding what information about yourself you will put online or not? If so, what are they? If not, why?
Key Takeaways

• Our self-concept is the overall idea of who we think we are. It is developed through our interactions with others and through social comparison that allows us to compare our beliefs and behaviors to others.

• Our self-esteem is based on the evaluations and judgments we make about various characteristics of our self-concept. It is developed through an assessment and evaluation of our various skills and abilities, known as self-efficacy, and through a comparison and evaluation of who we are, who we would like to be, and who we should be (self-discrepancy theory).

• Social comparison theory and self-discrepancy theory affect our self-concept and self-esteem because through comparison with others and comparison of our actual, ideal, and ought selves we make judgments about who we are and our self-worth. These judgments then affect how we communicate and behave.

• Socializing forces like family, culture, and media affect our self-perception because they give us feedback on who we are. This feedback can be evaluated positively or negatively and can lead to positive or negative patterns that influence our self-perception and then our communication.

• Self-presentation refers to the process of strategically concealing and/or revealing personal information in order to influence others’ perceptions. Prosocial self-presentation is intended to benefit others and self-serving self-presentation is intended to benefit the self at the expense of others. People also engage in self-enhancement, which is a self-presentation strategy by which people intentionally seek out positive evaluations.

Exercise

1. Take one of the socializing forces discussed (family, culture, or media) and identify at least one positive and one negative influence that it/they have had on your self-concept and/or self-esteem.

References


