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## 2

## SELF-CONCEPT, IDENTITY, AND SELF-PRESENTATION

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to

- 2.1 Describe self-concept, explaining its influence on interpersonal communication.
- 2.2 Discuss the roles reflected appraisal theory, social comparison theory, and confirmation, rejection, and disconfirmation play in shaping self-conceptions.
- 2.3 Define self-fulfilling prophecy, demonstrating the importance of periodically reexamining and revising your self-concept.
- 2.4 Illustrate the influence that cultural diversity and gender have on the self.
- 2.5 Describe how media and technology affect self-concept.
- 2.6 Identify how you can change and strengthen your self-concept.

The curtain rises, and here you are! As you approach life's stage, do you position yourself center stage, on the stage's periphery, or backstage? Taking in the scene's details, you ask yourself these questions: "Who am I really?" "What 'face' should I present to others participating with me in this interaction?" "Should I do my best to show the same 'face' when engaging with others online and off?" And then you think about yourself immersed in the online world and wonder: "What do I feel as I compare what's going on in my life with what's happening in the lives of others in my network?" And then this thought occurs to you: "If the Greek myth about Narcissus were being recast today, would we find Narcissus falling in love with his Instagram or Facebook feeds rather than with his reflection?"<sup>1</sup> Might we also find Narcissus, because of his feelings of insecurity, counting his followers or friends as many of us now do and falling out of love with himself should he decide that he does not measure up? Interestingly, when surveyed, young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 reported thinking that their generation was narcissistic.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter offers you the opportunity to develop **self-awareness**,<sup>3</sup> to reflect on your own strengths and weaknesses and impact on others, as you consciously think about and monitor your physical and digital presence. Your focus is on your existence in both the real world and online, including when using social media when interacting with others within communicator-generated, highly immersive, shared environments.<sup>4</sup> Take this opportunity to think about the nature of the self and identity; to analyze how culture, gender, media, and technology influence self-concept; and to examine how the intrapersonal level of communication (the individual level, the communicating you do with yourself) influences your behavior and relationships.

Before delving deeper into the nature of self-concept and its impact on interpersonal communication and relationships, which of the following statements do you believe to be true, and which do you believe to be false?

1. People with high self-esteem are less likely to be bullies. T F
2. Your perceived self is the one others see. T F

3. Engaging in face-work improves your looks. T F
4. Positive expectations have no impact on performance. T F
5. Childhood experiences influence our ideas about gender. T F

Read the chapter and see the answer key at the end to discover if you're right or if you've made any erroneous assumptions.



How we see ourselves and how we imagine others see us affects our communication presence and relationships.

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## SELF-CONCEPT: YOUR ANSWER TO WHO YOU ARE

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- 2.1** Describe self-concept, explaining its influence on interpersonal communication.

The poet–philosopher Alan Watts noted, “Trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth.”<sup>5</sup> Exactly how confident are you that you really know the real you? And how willing are you to try to get to know yourself better? Who you think you are and how you think about yourself in relationship to others leaves its mark on every one of your interpersonal contacts. What you think of yourself is your baseline, your starting point for communication. Think about how well you know yourself, how satisfied you are with those aspects of yourself that you

present to others, and when evaluating yourself, on- and offline, whether you characteristically give yourself a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down.

Where does self-concept come from? While we are not born with a self-concept, over time we certainly develop one.<sup>6</sup> The day a child first says “me,” the day there is recognition of the self as separate from one’s surroundings, life begins to change as a child strives to fit into the world as they see it. In short order, our concept of self—that relatively stable set of perceptions each of us attributes to ourselves—becomes our most important possession.

Beginning in childhood, the **self-concept** is a composite of everything we think and feel about ourselves. It is the *perceived self*—our self-identity—and it has two key components: self-image and self-esteem (see Table 2.1). Related to self-concept, **self-image** is the mental picture you have of yourself—it sums up the kind of person you *think* you are. It is a composite of the roles you claim and the attitudes and beliefs you use to describe who and what you are to others and your understanding of how others see you. Another related concept, **self-esteem**, is your self-evaluation—your estimation of your self-worth. In many ways, it is an indication of how much you like and value yourself, including your feelings, positive and negative, about your abilities, character, and feelings.

With this as background, it becomes apparent that self-concept affects communication presence and behavior, including what we think possible. As a result, it is important to use every opportunity to think carefully about self-concept.

**TABLE 2.1** ■ Looking at Yourself

<b>Self-concept</b>	Everything you think and know about yourself
<b>Self-image</b>	Your mental picture of you
<b>Self-esteem</b>	Your estimation of your self-worth

Begin the exploration of your self-concept by answering the following question: *Who am I?* Come up with a minimum of 10 different ways to complete this sentence: “I am \_\_\_\_.” We can conceive of ourselves in reference to our gender, religion or spirituality, race, nationality, physical attributes, roles, attitudes and emotions, mental abilities, or talents. How you answer, and the categories into which your answers can be grouped, offers clues to your self-concept, including your self-image and self-esteem. For example, you can give information about personal traits, such as, “I am spiritual,” “I am attractive,” or “I am friendly” You also can describe your social identity, such as “I am a Christian” or “I am Chinese.”

Taken together, your answers describe the elements or specific beliefs that constitute your self-concept. For example, on the series finale of the once popular television series *How to Get Away with Murder*, the character Annalise tried to explain who she was to the jury that would be deciding if she should be judged innocent or guilty of committing a series of murders. Annalise said, “I’m ambitious, black, bisexual, angry, sad, strong, sensitive, scared, fierce, talented and exhausted. And I am at your mercy.”<sup>7</sup> Look back at your answers. What do they suggest regarding your definition of self? What roles do you see yourself playing? How do you

describe yourself socially? As you completed the sentences, to what extent, if any, did social comparisons influence your responses? In what ways, if any, did past successes and failures as well as other people's judgments play their part in your answers? Keep in mind that identity is a work in progress.<sup>8</sup>

The words we use to express our self-perceptions reveal what we think we are like. In many ways, our answers represent a construct that we have built to make sense of who we are. Remember, however, that our self-concept is not necessarily the same as the self.

## ANALYZE THIS

### The Clown

After reading "The Clown" by Teri Gamble, consider these questions: What do you think is the significance of the clown's omnipresent rainbow smile? Like the poem's subject, do you ever "play" to people around you? Like the clown, do you ever wonder who you really are?

*The rubber man in the spotlight*

*Propels himself*

*Beyond the reach*

*Of reality.*

*Midway between today and tomorrow*

*He pauses*

*Suspended in his reverie by the crowd.*

*The rubber man in the spotlight*

*Warmed by laughter*

*Finds a face*

*To play to.*

*Dancing upon an ever-turning spindle*

*He plays to another*

*And another, and another.*

*The rubber man in the spotlight*

*Sweeps up the dreams*

*That remind him*

*Of yesterday.*

*Then tumbling out of the ring*

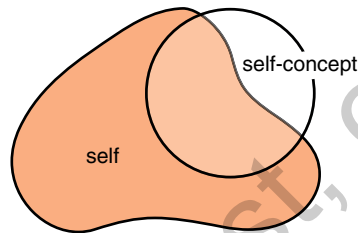
*His face frozen in a rainbow smile*

*He wonders who he is.*

## How Are the Self and Self-Concept Related?

The self and the self-concept differ from each other in a number of ways. First, the self is very fluid, multifaceted, and in a state of constant change, whereas the self-concept is more highly structured and difficult to change (see Figure 2.1). Second, a portion of the self-concept may not actually be included in the self; this area represents the part of ourselves that we invent. Third, there is much more to the self than is included within the self-concept; this area represents our untapped potential. For example, you may think of yourself as friendly and outgoing, while others see you as snobbish and reserved. You may have the potential to become a leader, but because of your inability to convince others that you would like to work with them, you might not have the opportunity to demonstrate this talent.

**FIGURE 2.1** ■ The Self and the Self-Concept



Do you see yourself as others see you?

Imgorthand/E+/Getty Images

To put it another way, the self-concept is a “map” that we create to chart the “territory” that is the self.<sup>9</sup> Our map or mental picture is, at least in part, a result of our interpretations of the messages others send us. As such, it may be accurate or inaccurate, positive or negative. The self-concept is depicted in Figure 2.1 as a rigid, geometric design to indicate that we like to make sense to ourselves. Experiencing uncertainty about the self is not a comfortable state for us, and so we work to develop consistency in the way we perceive ourselves.

### How Accurate Is Your Self-Concept?

Although change is a constant in life, the thirst for constancy can lead us to cling to outdated self-notions even in the face of evidence that renders them obsolete. Instead of revising our self-concept to conform to new information, we are likely instead to do our best to acquire information that confirms what we already believe is true. Our reluctance to let go of set ideas allows outmoded notions about the self to persist.

It is understandable that we might resist changing an inaccurate self-concept when the new information available to us is negative, because our self-concept could become more negative. For example, this could happen when we are no longer considered to be as bright or hardworking as we once were. It is harder to comprehend why we similarly resist changing when the information is positive and would enhance our self-concept, such as when we are no longer perceived to be gawky or unfriendly. By rejecting such information, we deny ourselves a chance for growth and self-renewal.

Defending an unrealistic negative or positive self-concept keeps us from redefining ourselves. Our cognitive conservatism keeps us from seeing the real need for change and allows us to continue deluding ourselves. Refuting new information that could lead us to change limits us and obscures our view of how others see us. Conducting a reality check is necessary to validate or invalidate who we think we are. Have you conducted one recently?

### Self-Esteem: Assessing Self-Worth

When we feel good about our achievements, we tend to value and feel good about ourselves. Self-esteem, our positive or negative evaluation of our self-concept, is important because it can either nurture and feed success or make succeeding more difficult. We build self-esteem when we exhibit determination to overcome obstacles, acquire specific skills or achievements, or are given increased responsibilities. Feeling good about the self and what we are capable of contributes to our performing well.

According to researcher Chris Mruk, self-esteem has five dimensions that affect your feelings about yourself and your communication with others:

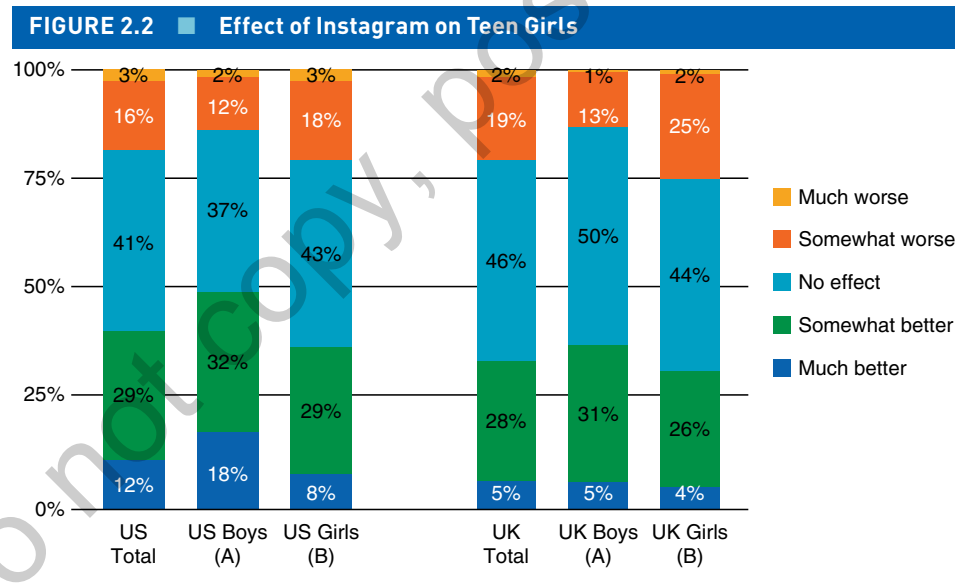
- Competence (your beliefs about your ability to be effective)
- Worthiness (your beliefs about the degree to which others value you)
- Cognition (your beliefs about your character and personality)
- Affect (your evaluation of yourself and the feelings generated by your evaluation)
- Stability (your assessment of how much beliefs about yourself change)<sup>10</sup>

We carry our self-esteem with us from one interpersonal experience to another. What is more, we relay our level of self-esteem to others by how we interact with them.

### High versus Low Self-Esteem

People with high self-esteem differ from those with low self-esteem in communication style, displaying different eye contact, posture, and facial expression. Individuals with high self-esteem often think better of others, expect others to like them, evaluate their own performance favorably, perform well in front of others, work hard for those who demand it, feel comfortable interacting with superiors, and defend themselves against others' negative appraisals. When we perceive ourselves as successes, we are more apt to act confidently and in ways that bring about success. Every success we have helps build our self-esteem.

In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem often disapprove of others, expect others not to like them, evaluate themselves unfavorably, perform poorly in the presence of others, feel threatened by their superiors, and find it hard to defend themselves against those who view them critically, equating criticism with rejection.<sup>11</sup> When we perceive ourselves as failures, we are more likely to present ourselves and behave in ways that cause us to fail. In 2021, Facebook acknowledged that an internal study had shown that Instagram was toxic for teen girls. Hours of exposure to the seemingly perfect bodies and lives of others had led to girls feeling worse, not better, about themselves.<sup>12</sup> (See Figure 2.2.)



Source: Pew Research, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>

Think about your friendly and romantic relationships. What role does your opinion of your self-worth play in them?



## Self-Esteem and Personal Performance

When self-esteem is not aligned with personal performance, it can be self-defeating. Feeling good about yourself when you have no reason to—that is, when you have not added to your achievements or competencies—can lead to your developing a favorable self-appraisal that will not be matched by others' views of you. Thus, when undeserved, there are downsides to high self-esteem: people tend to ignore their own weaknesses; they suffer from an inflated sense of their worth displaying an inappropriate overconfidence in their abilities.<sup>13</sup> Unprepared for criticism, they quickly fall apart if told that they are wrong or lacking in some ability.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, when we talk about the importance of developing self-esteem, we are not talking about simple cheerleading. Rather, we are talking about opening yourself to opportunities that will help you develop your skills and abilities to their fullest potential.<sup>15</sup>



Belief in yourself shapes what is possible for you.

Toshe\_O/E+/Getty images

So, here's another note of caution: research reveals that individuals with high self-esteem may pose more of a threat to others than people with low self-esteem.<sup>16</sup> In fact, research indicates that overemphasizing the importance of self-esteem in those who possess an unrealistically inflated self-appraisal can precipitate a culture of bullying. These findings have led some to argue for balance in the amount of praise given, to prevent inflated perceptions of self-importance in already self-centered individuals.<sup>17</sup> Researchers advise that instead of fostering self-esteem, we should be fostering resilience, because resilience helps people recover from personal disappointments and defeats.<sup>18</sup> By learning to cope with personal setbacks, we may help optimize our behavior.

On the other hand, people with normally high self-esteem tend to be happier<sup>19</sup> and less affected by peer pressure than those who have low self-esteem.<sup>20</sup> Individuals with healthy self-esteem are not self-absorbed. Rather than filling themselves with “unwarranted self-regard,” they have a realistic sense of their abilities.<sup>21</sup> In touch with both their strengths and their weaknesses, they display **grit**—a combination of passion and perseverance for a singularly important goal, together with resilience and a tolerance for feeling frustrated.<sup>22</sup> Expecting a positive outcome, they persist in spite of failure. They are both confident and resilient, traits necessary for success.<sup>23</sup> To build resiliency and increase your chances of adjusting positively to change or disappointments, try the following:

- Limit negative self-talk. In lieu of telling yourself that “I’m a loser,” think, “I did something foolish, but I can fix it.”
- To regain composure after a disappointment, place yourself figuratively or physically in another setting for a few moments.
- To improve your mood and productivity, relax your posture, put a smile on your face, and engage others with a warm tone of voice.
- Seek a friend to spend time with, even if it’s just to take a walk.

Having a friendly relationship increases satisfaction and energy.<sup>24</sup>

Researchers contend that high self-esteem is an effect of good performance, rather than its cause. According to J. D. Hawkins, former president of the National Self-Esteem Association, “Self-esteem is more than just feeling good about yourself. It’s about being socially and individually responsible.”<sup>25</sup>

## OTHERS HELP SHAPE OUR SELF-CONCEPT

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- 2.2** Discuss the roles reflected appraisal theory, social comparison theory, and confirmation, rejection, and disconfirmation play in shaping self-conceptions.

While experience helps to shape self-concept, self-concept, in turn, helps to shape experience. How we see ourselves in relation to others guides our behavior. Probably, you behave differently depending on who you are with. You may be outgoing when with one friend but be intimidated by another. You may feel like a star in art class but inferior in chemistry, or vice versa. At any given moment, the nature of the self is affected by the nature of the situation in which we find ourselves. And your interactions shape your view of yourself. Consequently, your language, attitudes, and appearance are apt to change as you move from one set of conditions to another. In a way, you become different selves as you adapt to perceived changes (see Table 2.2).

**TABLE 2.2** ■ Theories Reveal How Others Help Shape Us

<b>Reflected appraisal theory</b>	We build a self-concept that reflects how we think others see us.
<b>Social comparison theory</b>	We assess how we measure up against others.

### We Reflect Others' Appraisals

More than a century ago, psychologist William James put it this way: “A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind.”<sup>26</sup> In similar fashion, in his **reflected appraisal theory**, psychologist Charles Cooley described the mirror-like image we derive from our contacts with others and then project into our future experiences. In other words, we build a self-concept that reflects how we think others see us.<sup>27</sup> According to Cooley, the self we present is in large part based on the way others categorize us, the roles they expect us to play, and the behaviors or traits they expect us to exhibit. Cooley believed that by reflecting back to us who we are and how we come across, other people function as our mirrors. In fact, he coined the term “looking glass self” to represent the self that comes to us from others. For example, if others see you as a capable and outgoing leader, you may reflect their appraisals by viewing yourself in those ways. Of course, the roles we play and how we play them affect both how and with whom we communicate. They all influence the content, objectives, and frequency of our communication contacts.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, not all messages others send us about how they see us carry the same weight. Those sent by our significant others and by individuals whose opinions we respect and trust normally exert more influence on us than do the opinions of strangers and mere acquaintances.

### We Compare Ourselves with Others

According to **social comparison theory**, we compare ourselves to others to develop a feel for how our talents, abilities, and qualities measure up to theirs.<sup>29</sup> In other words, to learn more about ourselves, we use others as measuring sticks, evaluating ourselves against them. As we compare ourselves to others, we form judgments of our skills, personal characteristics, and so on. We can, for example, decide whether we are similar or different, better or worse, stronger or weaker, or more or less creative than those with whom we compare ourselves. Often, as we assess our similarities and differences, we also make decisions regarding the groups we fit into. Generally, we are most comfortable interacting with others we perceive to be like us.<sup>30</sup>

Our self-esteem suffers if we continually feel we fall short when gauging ourselves in relation to others. When this happens, however, it could be because we have chosen to compare ourselves to an inappropriate reference group. For example, if we compare our looks with those of a supermodel, our musical ability with those of the winner of *The Voice*, or our athletic prowess with that of an Olympian, we probably are making an unfair comparison and, as a result, will develop an unrealistic assessment of our appearance, talent, or ability. If we compare ourselves with members of a more appropriate reference group, we might be able to inflate rather than deflate our sense of self. However, as we noted earlier, when it comes to social media such as Instagram, with their focus on body and lifestyle, the tendency is to share only the best moments, which contributes to participants' image of themselves spiraling downward.<sup>31</sup>

Our accuracy in assessing our self-concept and self-esteem depends on how successful we are at processing experience and receiving feedback. If we pay more attention to our successes than to our failures and to positive reactions than to negative ones, we could end up overinflating our sense of self. On the other hand, if we pay more attention to our failures and give more credence to negative reactions, then our sense of self could deflate. In neither instance would our sense of self conform to reality.

## TRY THIS

### Popular Culture, Social Media, and Attitudes toward Self

Popular culture and social media have been referred to as “self-esteem breakers,” meaning they cause people to develop doubt about their self-worth, leaving them wondering if they can measure up. In the face of messages received from these mediated sources, what can we do to build self-esteem and stay true to ourselves? Answer the following questions to explore how pop culture and social media affect you.

1. In what ways, if at all, have celebrities, on- and offline, affected your picture of yourself? For example, how has your self-evaluation been influenced by exposure to the lifestyles and standards of living experienced by pop culture icons such as *The Housewives of New York*, *Beverly Hills*, *Atlanta*, and everywhere else? To what extent have you been influenced by makeup or other self-help videos posted by both YouTube vloggers and Instagram stars receiving in excess of 600,000 likes?
2. When texting or messaging friends, many now use a personal emoji, often a self-caricature. Typically, while the emoji we create may resemble us, and we may even make it lightly mocking, many actually make it more physically pleasing—as if it represents their “better self.” If you haven’t done so, download the Bitmoji app and create one to represent you. Explain the ways in which this selected public image represents an extension of yourself and what you hope it communicates to others.<sup>32</sup> Also explain what it suggests about your online level of honesty.
3. Consider how you feel after spending time on social media and immersed in virtual worlds. Do you ever find yourself suffering from FOMO (fear of missing out) after discovering your friends at an event or playing a game without you? In general, do you feel better or worse about yourself once you log off? Be specific. To what do you attribute these feelings?
4. Age and ability also affect notions of self-worth. Media and society send powerful messages about the capability and worth of people depending on their backgrounds, including affectional orientation, age, and physical and mental ability. How do you think your view of yourself would change if you were 30 to 40 years older? How would you feel reporting to someone younger than yourself in your workplace? How do you imagine you would feel about your appearance if instead of being able-bodied, you suddenly had to use a wheelchair or vice versa? Based on what you see in media and online, how do you suppose physical appearance might affect your potential to find friends, a love interest, or a good job?
5. Research and identify steps to take to foster resilience in yourself when you are faced with forces that challenge your self-conceptions.

## We Have Perceived, Ideal, Possible, and Expected Selves

Each of us possesses a perceived self, an ideal or possible self, and an expected self. Sometimes, these self-views conflict with one another. The **perceived self** is a reflection of your self-concept. It is the person you believe yourself to be when you are honest with yourself. Usually, there are some aspects of the perceived self that you wish to keep secret from others. For example, you might hesitate to let others know that you do not think you are good-looking or intelligent, that you are fixated on becoming wealthy, or that you are more concerned for your own welfare than theirs. To accomplish this, you engage in **impression management**; you exercise control over your behavior in an effort to elicit the desired reaction.<sup>33</sup> The **possible self** is the self you might become one day—the one you think about becoming. You may, for instance, want to be a passionately loved self, an accomplished self, or a rich self. The **expected self** is the one others assume you will exhibit. It is based on behaviors they have seen you display in the past or stereotypes they hold. Your **ideal self** is an idealized version of you—the person you wish to be and admire in your role models. For example, you may want to be likable, and so you try to be a likable person. If your ideal self is very different from you, then you might feel dissatisfied with your life. What we see on television and our social media feeds influences our conceptions of our ideal self, shaping what we wear, what we eat, and how we desire to live.<sup>34</sup>

### Goffman's Dramaturgical Approach

Through his concept known as the dramaturgical approach to human interaction, Erving Goffman explains the role that the skillful enacting of impression management plays in person-to-person interaction.<sup>35</sup> If you've ever been afraid of *losing face*, you likely adopted a *game face*, doing your best *to save face*. If we consider social interaction a performance and the setting in which interaction occurs the stage, then the actors (the people interacting) play their parts to manage the impressions of others sharing the stage with them, so that they, the actors, may achieve their personal objectives. They seek to accomplish this by putting on a *front* when in the presence of those whom they wish to impress. The more skillful the actors, the more effectively they convince others that they are knowledgeable and trustworthy and that they possess a charisma that makes them attractive to others. Other times, when they're by themselves, their *back region* or *backstage self* takes over, which may contrast quite dramatically with the front they assume around others.

We can use several other dramatic elements to make the best impression in any given scene. First, we can employ *framing*, specifically defining a scene or situation in a way that helps others interpret its meaning in the way we desire. Picture this: on a first date, you go on stage when you arrive to meet your date at a restaurant. You are seated and employ *framing* when you decide how to look and what to do while waiting for your date to arrive. You also use *scripting*, when you go through standard small talk upon your date's arrival. As you chat, you are convincing your date to play their role too. Of course, you use *engaging dialogue*—storytelling together with colorful and descriptive language and effective use of nonverbal cues—to guide your date's responses. Together, these elements underlie your *performance*.

When performing, we can also choose from among a number of techniques to encourage others to see us as we wish to be seen. For example, we may use *exemplification*, in which we serve as an example or act as a role model for others; *promotion*, in which we elucidate our personal skills and accomplishments and/or a particular vision; *face-work*, in which we take steps to protect our image by reducing the negative aspects of ourselves visible to others; or *ingratiation*, in which we employ techniques of agreement to make others believe us to be more attractive and likable and less threatening, harmful, or pernicious.

As you consider your performances and the performances of others, ask yourself these questions: How do you define authenticity? What does the word mean to you? If **authenticity** is the quality of being genuine or real, in your opinion, can a person who decides to act authentically still be authentic? Do you know anyone who engages in “calculated authenticity,” consciously managing others’ impressions of them? Such a person effectively turns human interaction into a staged performance. Is this what we try to do on Facebook or Instagram—brand ourselves in such a way that others find us authentic? Think about various performances, face-to-face or online, that you or others you know have enacted in an effort to come off as authentic. How did they turn out? Were you or the other person truly authentic? How do you know? Look back at your activity last week on Facebook or Instagram. What messages do you think your posts sent to others regarding your self-image and authenticity? Might there be a benefit to opening yourself up to other possibilities of who you are and who you might grow into in the future?

### Reactions to You: Confirming, Rejecting, and Disconfirming Responses

As we interact with others, how we feel about ourselves changes. Some people we interact with provide **confirmation** of our opinion of ourselves, communicating with us in ways consistent with our own appraisal of ourselves. How they treat us during our interactions with them reflects the way we think we are. For example, if you believe yourself to be intelligent, confirmers might reflect this by asking you to tutor them.

Others with whom we interact signal **rejection** of our self-appraisals by treating us in ways inconsistent with our sense of self—whether that is good or bad. For example, if you believe yourself to be hardworking, but rejecters treat you as if you are lazy, over time, their treatment of you might cause you to revise your picture of yourself.

Still others provide **disconfirmation** of our self-appraisals by sending us messages that tell us that, as far as they are concerned, we are not even important enough for them to think about; in their eyes, we do not exist—we are irrelevant. Someone who disconfirms you ignores you and goes about their business as if you were not present. By treating other human beings like nonentities, consistent disconfirmers may eventually rob others of their sense of self, without which it becomes virtually impossible for them to relate to the world effectively.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, those around us help shape our self-concepts in both positive and negative ways. Virtually every interpersonal contact we share sends a message regarding our importance, our capabilities, and how others view both our potential and our inadequacies.<sup>37</sup> (See Table 2.3.)

**TABLE 2.3** ■ The Self in Relationships

<b>Confirming response</b>	Supports self-appraisal
<b>Rejecting response</b>	Negates self-appraisal
<b>Disconfirming response</b>	Robs the individual of a sense of self

## THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- 2.3** Define self-fulfilling prophecy, demonstrating the importance of periodically reexamining and revising your self-concept.

Do you tend to be pessimistic or optimistic? Optimists believe eventually they will succeed, and so they persevere; pessimists, expecting failure, tend to give up when confronted with challenges. Consequently, pessimists fail more frequently than do optimists. Optimists are resilient; they have feelings of **self-efficacy**, a positive belief in their abilities and competence.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, the pessimist's outlook and lack of resilience may lead to failure even as success is within reach. In many ways, both pessimists and optimists live out self-fulfilling prophecies.

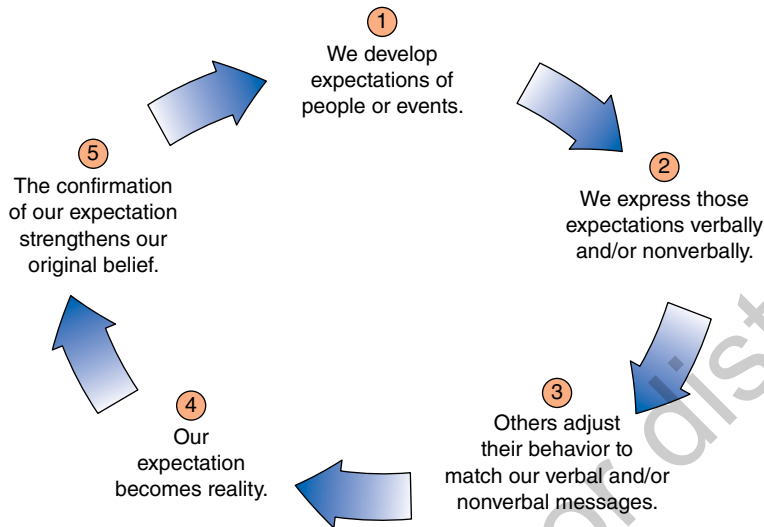
### It's a Cycle

A **self-fulfilling prophecy** occurs when we verbalize a prediction or internalize an expectation that comes true simply because we act as if it already were. For example, have you ever been invited to a function you did not want to attend because you expected to be bored? Were you? If you were, to what extent is it possible that your prediction of boredom increased the likelihood of its occurrence?

There are five basic steps in the self-fulfilling prophecy cycle (see Figure 2.3).<sup>39</sup> First, we form expectations of ourselves, others, or events—for example, “Monica won't like me.” Second, we communicate the expectation by exhibiting various cues—“so I'll keep my distance from Monica.” Third, others respond to the cues we send by adjusting their behavior to match our messages—Monica tells herself, “Ed is stuck up. I don't even want to talk to him.” Fourth, as a result, our initial expectation comes true—“I was right; Monica does not like me.” Fifth, our interpretation of the actions of others strengthens our original belief—“Every time I see Monica, I am reminded that she does not like me.”

A self-fulfilling prophecy can be either self-imposed or other-imposed. When your own expectations influence your behavior, the prophecy is self-imposed. When the expectations of others help direct your actions, the prophecy is other-imposed. Either way, we exhibit behavior that we or another person expects.

FIGURE 2.3 ■ The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Story



### The Pygmalion Effect

Among the most widely reported examples of the self-fulfilling prophecy is that used by psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson in their classic study *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, named for George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. In the play, later adapted into the musical and film *My Fair Lady*, Henry Higgins transforms Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle into a duchess by believing that he can help her learn to speak and act like one.

Rosenthal and his associates informed a number of teachers that certain of their students were expected to “bloom”—that is, perform exceptionally well—during the following academic year. The teachers were unaware that the student names had actually been selected randomly, and there was no basis for predicting who would succeed. Despite this, the students who were singled out to bloom did so, improving their IQs and performing at higher levels than would otherwise have been expected.<sup>40</sup> Apparently each teacher had functioned as a **positive Pygmalion**, causing the students to live up to the labels placed on them.

The teachers gave the “about to bloom” students extra positive verbal and nonverbal reinforcement, waited patiently for the students to respond if they hesitated, and did not give them negative feedback when they offered incorrect answers. Thus, the teachers' behavior influenced the students' perceptions of their own abilities. The “about to bloom” responded to the teachers' prophecies by fulfilling them. Like Eliza Doolittle, the students acted like the people others perceived them to be.





How often do you compare yourself to others?

MixMike/E+/Getty Images

The Pygmalion effect, as this form of the self-fulfilling prophecy has come to be known, influences performance in a variety of settings, from work related to educational to social, and it does so in both positive and negative ways. When others have high expectations for a person, their opinions tend to result in enhanced performance, but when a **negative Pygmalion** has low expectations for others, the result is typically diminished performance. Consequently, managers' expectations can help or hinder worker production, and teachers' expectations can boost or deflate student grades. We live up to—and down to—expectations—including those expectations we have for ourselves.

### The Galatea Effect

What about the messages you send yourself? A variation of the Pygmalion effect is the *Galatea effect* (Galatea is the name Pygmalion gave his statue once it was brought to life), which refers to the expectations we have for ourselves, rather than the ones others have for us. We react to the internal messages that we continually send to ourselves. Our feelings about our competence and abilities influence our behavior in much the same way that our performance can be influenced by others' high or low expectations for us. Thus, our answer to the question “Who are you?” affects how we behave.

## Revising Your Self-Concept: Reexamining Impressions and Conceptions

How others treat us and how we treat ourselves influence the person we think we are. Thus, if we wish to change our self-concept, we need to update the way we think about ourselves and assess the accuracy of our self-concept. Figuratively speaking, we need to turn on a light inside ourselves so we become more self-aware, recognize the kinds of messages others send us, and be cognizant of messages we typically ignore, discount, or purposefully misinterpret.

### REFLECT ON THIS

#### Changes



davidf/E+/Getty Images

How does growing older affect views of the self? Consider your own experiences, the experiences of family members, and those you read about here to answer this question.

1. In *Uh-Oh*, philosopher and author Robert Fulghum comments on when and how self-conceptions change.

Ask a kindergarten class, “How many of you can draw?” and all hands shoot up. Yes, of course we can draw—all of us. What can you draw? Anything! How about a dog eating a fire truck in a jungle? Sure! How big you want it?

Do you like to act in plays? Yes! Do you play musical instruments? Yes! Do you write poetry? Yes! Can you read and write and count? Yes! We’re learning that stuff now.

Their answer is Yes! Over and over again, Yes! The children are confident in spirit, infinite in resources, and eager to learn. Everything is still possible.

Try those same questions on a college audience. A small percentage of the students will raise their hands when asked if they draw or dance or sing or paint or act or play an instrument. Not infrequently, those who do raise their hands will want to qualify their response with their limitations: “I only play piano, I only draw horses, I only dance to rock and roll, I only sing in the shower.”

When asked about the limitations, college students answer that they do not have talent. . . .

What went wrong between kindergarten and college?

What happened to YES! Of course, I can?

To what extent, if any, do your experiences support Fulghum’s observations? What factors cause us to change our answers to Fulghum’s questions as we age? What advice would you give today’s kindergarten and college students? As you approach the second part of this activity, keep Fulghum’s insights in mind.

2. To what extent, if any, do you think that being older in the United States is likely to contribute to feelings of isolation and less positive attitudes toward the self? To find out, interview a male relative and a female relative, both of whom are older. Ask them these questions:
  - A. Who are you? What roles do you perform? What adjectives describe you?
  - B. How has the way you see yourself today changed from how you saw yourself when a child?
  - C. How do you believe the ways your family and friends see you have changed through the years?
  - D. Is there any time of your life you desire to repeat? Why?

The following quotations reveal the self-perceptions of two older people. These quotations are not meant to characterize all older people; rather, they are meant to illustrate two individuals’ views on how aging affects self-perception:

Person 1: The young want everything to move fast. They let their impatience show in their eyes. When you are hard of hearing it is worse. People get impatient when you try to join in. They yell in your face. Finally, they just give up on you and act like you are not there because it is too much trouble to try and keep you in the flow of things.<sup>41</sup>

Person 2: You ask me if I enjoy remembering things from the past. Well I do. . . . It is as if there are reels of movies in my head, all starting at different eras. I can go back and start one up any time. Different people, dressed differently, living in rooms and houses without electricity. And all starring a different me, of course . . . the past—what I did and accomplished and endured and loved—are all part of who I am.<sup>42</sup>

Compare and contrast the answers your interviewees provided to the questions listed above with the perceptions of these two people. To what extent, if any, are you able to reconcile Fulghum’s insights with the reflections of both older people?

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Source: Robert Fulghum, *Uh-Oh*, New York: Villard Books, 1991, pp. 228–229.

## Can You Reinvent Yourself?

While we tend to hold on to our existing self-concept—even when it is proved false—this does not mean that we cannot change it. We just have to work to overcome our natural resistance. To combat the tendency to cling to an erroneous self-concept, we need to develop the willingness and skills to reevaluate or reinvent ourselves. That way, we will be better able to shed outdated conceptions.

To start this process, we need to understand how we manage to maintain a self-image that others may regard as unrealistic. Perhaps because we are overly concerned with how we come across to others, we put all our energy into presenting ourselves in as favorable a light as possible. When we focus on ourselves, however, we are less likely to notice others' reactions to us, and we may miss feedback revealing how they really see us. Sometimes, however, others are reticent to provide accurate feedback for fear of hurting our feelings. Other times, we base our assessment of ourselves on obsolete information, clinging to memories rather than face current realities.

We can also be our own worst critics and view ourselves more harshly than others. For example, we might convince ourselves that we are fat despite others insisting we are a perfect weight. Why do we do this? We might be acting on information that was true at one time but is no longer. Or we might receive distorted feedback from an overly critical friend that warps our view of ourselves. Or we might criticize ourselves simply because we believe that society prefers we own up to our inadequacies, while downplaying our strengths.

When you visualize yourself, do you see a person who can achieve anything or a person with limitations who is likely to fail? To change your self-concept, assess your strengths and shortcomings honestly, freeing yourself to reshape your self-image and grow.

## DIVERSITY AND CULTURE IN RELATIONSHIPS: HOW IMPORTANT IS THE "I"?

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

2.4 Illustrate the influence that cultural diversity and gender have on the self.

Individuals in most, if not all, cultures have notions about the self, viewing themselves and their gender roles based on the cultural lessons they have been taught. Of course, specific notions about the self vary across cultures, affecting person-to-person interactions in subtle to dramatic ways.<sup>43</sup>

### The Self in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

In many North American and Western European cultures including the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, the word *self* reigns supreme, reflecting the importance individuals place

on realizing their personal goals. Members of such **individualistic cultures**, in which individual identity is paramount, value uniqueness and personal identity. They tend to believe in themselves, seek to do their own thing, and shun conformity. In contrast, in the **collectivistic cultures** of Asia (represented by countries including China, Japan, and South Korea), Africa (Egypt, for example), and Central and South America (Guatemala and Brazil), group goals are given a higher priority.<sup>44</sup> Japanese parents, for example, typically refrain from lavishing praise on their children, believing that children who are overpraised are likely to end up being self-centered and not focused enough on the group's needs.

For the members of collectivistic cultures, the self is not the center of the universe. For them, the group—not the individual—is the primary social unit. Where individualistic cultures link success with personal achievement, collectivistic cultures link it to group cohesion and loyalty. Members of collectivistic cultures gain a sense of identity through their group memberships, not by promoting themselves, as members of Western cultures are apt to do.<sup>45</sup> Thus, while some of us have been raised to call attention to ourselves and develop ourselves at the group's expense, others of us have been reared to avoid such behavior by nurturing the *interdependent self* instead.<sup>46</sup>

People who are primarily individualistic in their thinking and behaving have an **idiocentric orientation**. Those who are primarily collectivistic in the way they think and behave have an **allocentric orientation**.<sup>47</sup> To which group do you belong?

## TRY THIS

### Are You an “I” or Part of a “We”?

Evaluate how much the statements in Categories A and B below reflect how you think and act in regard to yourself and others. Rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being *not at all important* and 5 being *very important*.

#### Category A

1. I want to demonstrate my personal worth. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. I want to be me. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. I want others to consider me an asset. \_\_\_\_\_
  4. I want to achieve my personal goals. \_\_\_\_\_
- Total \_\_\_\_\_

#### Category B

1. If I hurt you, I hurt myself. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. I want harmonious relationships. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. I put the welfare of others before my own welfare. \_\_\_\_\_
  4. I act in accordance with tradition. \_\_\_\_\_
- Total \_\_\_\_\_

Compare your totals. The higher your Category A total, the greater your idiocentric tendencies. The higher your Category B total, the greater your allocentric tendencies.



Aflo/Score by Aflo/Getty images



Do you think American culture is becoming more individualistic or more communal?

Darrin Klimeck/The Image Bank/Getty Images

Unique personal experiences and shared group membership influence self-definitions. Together with culture, these factors play integral parts in forming the self-concept. Still, care

should always be taken against rigidly categorizing people from any given culture, whether individualistic or collectivistic in orientation. Keep in mind that variations occur within countries. For example, in the United States, people from the South exhibit higher levels of collectivism than do people living in the West.<sup>48</sup> In addition, after people from the Western and Eastern worlds interact with each other, their cultural orientations moderate.

### The Self in High- and Low-Context Cultures

People from different cultures also exhibit different communication style preferences. Individuals belonging to **high-context cultures**, such as Japan, China, and South Korea, tend to be very polite and indirect when interacting with others, while people from **low-context cultures**, such as the United States, Canada, and Northern European countries, typically exhibit a more direct communication style.<sup>49</sup> When meeting someone for the first time, a person from a low-context culture is likely to ask direct questions in an effort to gather background information and get to know the person; their priority is the discovery and expression of individual uniqueness.

People from high-context cultures, however, hesitate to ask direct questions, preferring to rely on nonverbal, contextual information. They value silence and reticence, believing that people of few words are thoughtful, trustworthy, and respectable. As a result, they also are likely to find unsolicited self-disclosures inappropriate. And because they would view such behavior as a sign of disrespect or disloyalty, they are less likely than people from low-context cultures to criticize one another publicly. When their words hurt another person, they believe they hurt themselves as well.

### The Self in High- and Low-Power-Distance Cultures

Attitudes toward the self also differ along the dimension of **power distance**, or the extent to which individuals are willing to accept power differentials. People from high-power-distance cultures, such as Saudi Arabia, India, and Singapore, perceive power as a fact of life. In these cultures, people in low-power positions are apt to defer automatically to people in authority. In contrast, people from low-power-distance cultures, such as the United States, Israel, and Sweden, are more likely to emphasize and value their independence even when superiors are present.<sup>50</sup> A general feeling of equality prevails in such cultures (see Table 2.4).

**TABLE 2.4** ■ Culture and Influences on the Self

<b>People with individualistic orientations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conceive of the individual as the basic social unit</li> <li>Make individual goals a priority</li> <li>Link success and individual achievement</li> </ul>
<b>People with collectivistic orientations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conceive of the family/group as the basic social unit</li> <li>Make interdependence/group goals a priority</li> <li>Link success and group achievement</li> </ul>

(Continued)

**TABLE 2.4** ■ Culture and Influences on the Self (*Continued*)

<b>People from high-context cultures</b>	Exhibit an indirect communication style Make face-saving a consideration
<b>People from low-context cultures</b>	Exhibit a direct communication style Seldom think of face-saving
<b>People from high-power-distance cultures</b>	Defer to superiors
<b>People from low-power-distance cultures</b>	Value independence

### Loneliness and Self-Discontent across Cultures

Even though their cultures may differ, young people throughout the world are likely to share common perceptions regarding the self. Most hope to develop and sustain social relationships, especially with their peers, and most are optimistic regarding their abilities to assume responsibilities for themselves in the future. Despite the optimism of a majority of young people, between 25 and 30 percent of them also describe themselves as lonely, overwhelmed by life's problems, and frequently sad,<sup>51</sup> although the percentage varies widely from country to country. Among Japanese teens, 55 percent reported frequently feeling sad, and 39 percent reported feeling lonely.<sup>52</sup> Britain also has a loneliness problem, with some 9 million Brits reporting in a 2017 report that they often or always feel lonely. Now the country has appointed a minister for loneliness.<sup>53</sup> Of course, during the Covid-19 pandemic, feelings of loneliness increased due to a decrease in social contacts, personal losses, and the existential threats people experienced globally.<sup>54</sup>

Those who find themselves with fewer people to talk with or share thoughts and experiences with more frequently report feeling lonely. Loneliness does not discriminate; it affects all whose opportunities for person-to-person contact are diminished, perhaps because of a fear of being rejected or the belief that they don't fit in. Many people who are lonely wish they had a larger network of people to contact, yet, even when they do, for one reason or another, they avoid reaching out, which can cause their feelings of social isolation to spiral out of control. To combat the tendency some of us have to isolate ourselves when feeling lonely, try the following:

- **Accept.** When isolated, connection becomes difficult. Accept opportunities for connection even if you don't want to go out.
- **Plan.** Scatter potential opportunities to connect socially across your calendar. If you need to, plan something and invite one or more others to join you.
- **Join.** Think of things you love to do and find others who share your passion. If you love reading, join a book club. If you love running, try road-runners.
- **Think positively.** Feelings of loneliness or isolation can lead to our misinterpreting others' words and actions. Give others the benefit of the doubt. They may not be rejecting you. They may just be having a bad day.<sup>55</sup>



Might being in a minority or marginalized group contribute to feelings of isolation and less positive attitudes toward the self? Over three decades ago, clinical psychologists Darlene Powell Hopson and Derek Hopson reported that African Americans expressed discontent with the self, finding that as early as the age of 3, Black children expressed the desire to be white, even expressing a preference to play with white dolls.<sup>56</sup> While a later study did not find that African Americans had negative attitudes toward the self because of skin tone,<sup>57</sup> and a more recent study concluded embracing racial identity boosted self-image,<sup>58</sup> what role might adding diversity to dolls play in influencing self-perception? If you're white, seeing people who look like you in toys and media offerings isn't unusual. Historically, those who aren't white have had to search for prosocial cultural representations resembling themselves. Being able to relate to such representations is necessary, not only to feel seen and valued, but to challenge institutional bias.<sup>59</sup> In 2016, the Mattel Corporation diversified the 57-year-old Barbie doll by adding new body types with diverse ethnicities to the doll options. In 2021, they added vitiligo and hairless models in their continuing effort to boost diversity.<sup>60</sup> Film and television also has seen an uptick in non-white characters and creators, exemplified by the *Black Panther* film, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and *Us*, and *Shang-Chi*, the first Marvel superhero movie with an Asian lead.

### Gender and Self-Concept

If you awoke one day to discover that you were a different gender, how would that affect you? In what ways, if any, would this alteration change your plans for the day? The week? The month? The year? What impact do you imagine it would have on the rest of your life?

As we noted in Chapter 1, *sex* refers to the biological characteristics that define men and women. *Gender*, in contrast, refers to the socially constructed roles and behaviors that the members of a given society believe appropriate for boys and men, girls and women, and gender-diverse people. Thus, gender is a variable that influences how others treat us and how we treat them. For example, if you were assigned male at birth and identify as male, or assigned female at birth and identify as female, then you are **cisgender**—your identity is in sync with your assigned gender. Our gender becomes integrated into our self-concept, providing us with a **gender identity**, our individual perception and subjective experience of gender. Gender identity guides **gender expression**, each person's unique means of communicating their gender to others. The experiences we have during our formative years influence how we define ourselves in terms of gender. As people internalize gender attributes, whether maleness, femaleness, or going beyond the gender binary, what they come to believe about gender affects their self-conceptions. The very word **transgender** describes those who feel their assigned gender at birth and the gendered expectations connected to it do not adequately reflect their gender identity.<sup>61</sup> Transgender people place value on the spaces in between, affording themselves more range within which to perform gender.<sup>62</sup>

Keep in mind that the **gender spectrum** refers to the belief that there are many gender identities. It is a way of affirming that individuals do not have to conform to the gender binary. People across the gender spectrum see and describe themselves differently. Cisgender men, for example, generally characterize themselves as possessing initiative, control, and ambition. In

contrast, cisgender women see themselves as sensitive, concerned for others, and considerate. While appearance plays a major role in the self-image of women, until recently, it was not considered integral to the self-image of a man.<sup>63</sup> Young women are still teased about both their looks and their weight more often than are young men, but the macho male, muscular and fit, is making a comeback, placing pressure on men to “bulk up” or be thought of by some people as unmanly.<sup>64</sup>

Unfortunately, in our society, social and cultural expectations can do damage to self-esteem, in part because of the many conflicting and confused messages people receive.<sup>65</sup> For example, U.S. society expects those who are feminine to be nurturing, unassertive, sensitive, caring, deferential, and emotional. As a result of such expectations, society rewards young women for having a pleasing appearance, revealing their feelings, being forgiving, and being nice or helpful to others. In contrast, it expects men to be strong, ambitious, in control of their emotions, and successful, rewarding men for displaying these qualities and achieving results.<sup>66</sup> What if people fail to measure up, though? For example, what happens to the self-image of a young person who is told “to man up,” or “be a man?” The implication is that if the person fails to do what’s required or expected of them, they will lose their manhood. Such a construct is potentially damaging to self-esteem. Similarly, most young women cannot live up to the stereotypical images of femininity, with their disillusionment also adversely impacting their self-esteem. Of course, as times change, what individuals believe to be “appropriate or desirable behavior” will also change.

Also significant is the finding that U.S. society values male characteristics more highly than female characteristics. Thus, men typically feel better about themselves than do women. The upshot is that many women try to attain success by attempting to be it all and do it all. The comedian Carol Leifer perhaps put it best in her act when she said, “I just had a baby an hour ago and I’m back at work already. While I was delivering, I took a course in tax-shelter options.” Of course, the “me too” movement has provided women with role models and a movement within which to combat unhealthy gender stereotypes, particularly when it comes to sexual harassment.

More recently, in the effort to reflect the affectionality spectrum, DC comics had “the strongest superhero in comics,” Superman, come out as bisexual. Writer Tom Taylor noted that everyone deserves to see themselves reflected in their heroes. Continuing to break away from binary notions of gender and sexuality extends self-affirmation boundaries.<sup>67</sup>

## THROUGH THE MEDIATED AND TECHNOLOGICAL LOOKING GLASS

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

**2.5** Describe how media and technology affect self-concept.

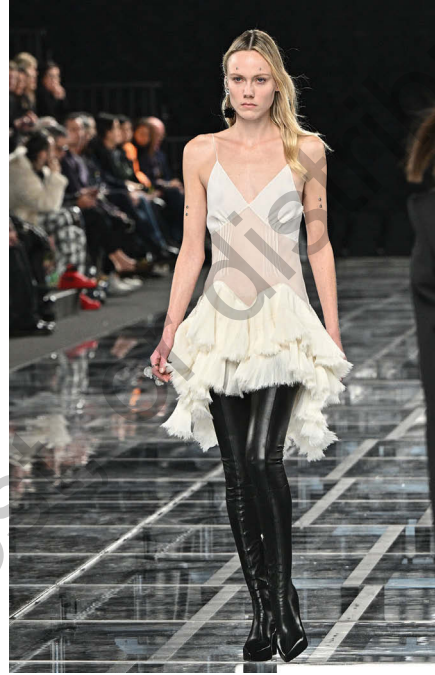
Entertainment programs, films, music, platforms, and applications help us forge our identities, sense of self, and who we want to be. They teach us how to dress, look, interact, and consume. We learn who has power and who does not, who has followers and who does not. The websites and media we frequent also influence our sense of ethnicity and race, gender, and class.

## REFLECT ON THIS

### Beauty Standards and Dying to Be Thin



Gotham/GC Images/Contributor



Stephane Cardinale—Corbis/Contributor

In “The Girl Who Could Never Be Thin Enough: One Family’s Tragedy,” written three decades ago, we learn about Stacy Asbury, a teenager suffering from anorexia nervosa who sadly succumbed to the disorder. Her father, Tom, was left heartbroken at his inability to help his daughter overcome its ravages. Estimates are that more than 30 million Americans, both male and female, struggle with an eating disorder during their lifetime. More women than men suffer from eating disorders like anorexia nervosa. Because of a desire to be thin and the distorted images they have of their own bodies, 3 to 5 percent of sufferers starve and exercise themselves to death, as Stacy did.

In “A Thin Fad Is Becoming Life-Threatening for Chinese Women,” written in 2021, we learn that the pressure to be thin has not abated and is now threatening the physical and mental health of an entire generation of Chinese women, leading many to suffer from anorexia nervosa or bulimia. Thin bodies persist in dominating the mainstream media as do thin influencers. People continue to judge themselves by their body shapes.

1. In your opinion, is it appropriate for any industry to send the message that beauty and thinness are requisites for success?
2. What role do the cosmetic and diet industries play in feeding a person’s longing to attain a self that mirrors the ideal presented in media?

3. In what ways, if any, are the messages the media send about people across the gender spectrum any different from the messages they send women about thinness and beauty, and the messages they send men regarding athleticism and the ideal muscular build?
4. Should we blame the media and technology for individuals' feelings of inferiority or inadequacy?
5. What, if anything, can we do to counter the effects of media messages and campaigns featuring gender ideals? For example, why do you think Facebook removed "feeling fat" from its list of status update emoticons?<sup>68</sup> What effect, if any, has "fat talk" had on you or others?

Source: Gene Wojciechowski, "The Girl Who Could Never Be Thin Enough: One Family's Tragedy," special to *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 1993. See also Roxanne Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* New York: Harper, 2017, and Viola Zhou, "A Thin Fad Is Becoming Life-Threatening for Chinese Women," *Vice*, September 20, 2021.

### The Image and the Mirage

Media depictions help us assess the general public's preferred patterns of behavior and appearance. They help shape our opinions about how our bodies should look, how men and women should interact, and the meaning of success. The way we interpret their offerings reinforces or negates our own sense of self by influencing our sense of who we are as compared to who we should aspire to be.

Often, we are not conscious of the extent of the media's influence, of how much they are "make-believe media"—that is, they make us believe.<sup>69</sup> Our concepts of what we should be like or, for that matter, what our relationships should be like, or even more specifically what African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and men and women are supposed to be like, are conveyed to us via the media, so much so that some critics complain that the media preempt real life, offering us fabricated views of the world in its place.

Among the media's messages are that violence against women is commonplace; that men are hard, tough, and independent; and that minorities and women are less visible than men. Women, for example, have been underrepresented in film (especially aging women), which features fewer female than male protagonists and female characters who are younger than the male characters. Women also have been less likely than men to be portrayed as leaders and more likely to be identified by their marital status.<sup>70</sup> Other inaccurate media messages popularized through the years are that African American men are either athletes or unlawful, that Asian men are awkward, and that Muslim men are terrorists. Such messages often distort how we see ourselves and influence our perception of what is normal and desirable behavior. In addition, media models adversely affect our evaluations of ourselves as attractive, successful, or smart. And all too often, the thirst the media develop in us to attain some ideal turns into painful and enduring feelings of inadequacy when we are unable to acquire what we covet.<sup>71</sup>

Not only media, but social media in particular, influence our sense of presence and personal identity. When interacting on social media, we also make comparisons between ourselves and

others. These comparisons can leave us feeling less positive about ourselves because of others' consciously managing their self-presentations—posting images that make them seem happier, more popular, and more fulfilled than they actually are.<sup>72</sup> Our profiles on the sites we frequent, the posts others leave, our actual activities and accomplishments compared with the activities and accomplishments of others using the same sites, our likes, their likes, our friends, their friends—all influence how we look at the self. Focused on self-promotion, research reveals that we try to put our best digital foot forward when using social media. In fact, social media have made it easier for us to be and find narcissists. According to theorists, instead of allowing the self to develop internally, it is now being externally manufactured and virtually packaged in our effort to influence others' views of us.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT 2.1: MY ONLINE POSTS AND PRESENCE

Your online photos and posts may offer an image of you that is more positive than it is reflective of the real “you.” To try and figure out the impressions others are likely to form of you based on your posts and photos, conduct a self-inventory by reviewing the last 10 posts and photos uploaded.

Using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents *absolutely false*, 2 represents *pretty much false*, 3 represents *neutral*, 4 represents *pretty much true*, and 5 represents *absolutely true*, rate each of the following descriptive statements.

### Questions/Statements

	<i>Absolutely False</i>	<i>Pretty Much False</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Pretty Much True</i>	<i>Absolutely True</i>
1. I was pleased with everything about me that I reviewed online.	1	2	3	4	5
2. My real life makes me feel more anxious about myself than do my online posts.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I would have no problem with my significant other seeing what I posted about myself online.	1	2	3	4	5

Questions/Statements					
	<i>Absolutely False</i>	<i>Pretty Much False</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Pretty Much True</i>	<i>Absolutely True</i>
4. One or more of the visual images that I posted of myself presented me in a less than flattering light.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Based on what I saw, I think that, in general, others should judge me positively.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I'm disappointed with myself because based on my posts, I'm only playing to the crowd.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Scoring Calculation</b>	Explore the total scores for the odd numbered items. This represents your responses to statements 1, 3, and 5 together. The higher your score, the more positive your impression of your online image is.  Then explore the scores for the even numbered items. This represents your responses to statements 2, 4, and 6 together. In this case, the higher your score, the more your online presence presents concerns you.				
<b>Feedback</b>	How well do you think you have been managing impressions that others are likely to form of you online?  How authentic do you believe your online image is? How authentic would you like it to be?				

### Technological Transformations

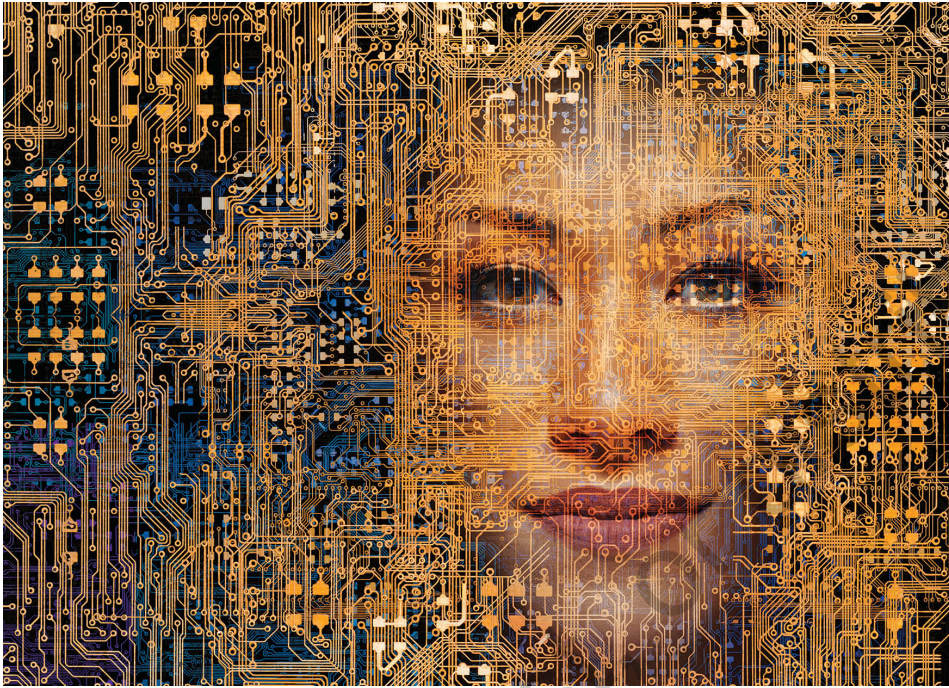
Mark Zuckerberg is the entrepreneur who gave us Facebook. As one writer observed, Zuckerberg created *Facebook*, not *Footbook* or *Elbowbook*.<sup>73</sup> Zuckerberg was acting on the belief that it is human for people to want to know what is going on in each other's lives. And have we proven him correct! You may be among the 225 million people living in the United States who use Facebook.<sup>74</sup> People are not just Facebook's users, however. They are also Facebook's products. We log on, post selfies that display ourselves as attractively or enticingly

as possible, and update our lives for others to share by the minute if we're obsessed, by the hour if we're driven, and by the day if we're typical users. What motivates our participation on Facebook and other social networks? The answer is the same factors that motivate our desire to make connections in the physical world: a deep interest in each other and a desire to be noticed. We feel the urge to tell about a new shirt, car, promotion, hairstyle, significant other, or status change. Many of us long for connection and attention—to have rich virtual lives in addition to our real-world lives. Zuckerberg and platform creators like him understand that we want others to know about us. They understand that showing our face helps us validate our identity—and our concept of self.<sup>75</sup> The question is, do the real and virtual platforms we use to engage with others have positive or negative influences on our concept of self? What do you think?

In 2021, Zuckerberg renamed Facebook's parent company *Meta*—short for the metaverse. As we use technology, we participate in the creation of new worlds and new ways of finding out about ourselves. Interacting digitally and with the aid of AI and virtual reality headsets, we can hang out with others, while engaged in an alternate existence, some game-like, but others placeless and stateless. We can be ourselves or someone else—that is, we can exist as personas. For some of us, the lives we live are more virtual than real. Some of us regularly inhabit virtual worlds, participating in simulations and assuming different personas. Media, particularly digital media, have the ability to immerse us in the real world, augment the real world, or help us escape it. It's inevitable that future media will be a blend of the realverse and the metaverse. Are you eager to interact in the metaverse, a persistently virtual world, where things escape our two-dimensional screens to take their place in our three-dimensional world?<sup>76</sup>

We not only can enter alternate AI worlds online but also can use a number of e-mail and Twitter accounts and various screen names and avatars as we use the digital domain to experiment with multiple identities—while concealing our real identities from both friends and strangers with whom we interact online.<sup>77</sup> We might, for example, pose as a member of the opposite sex, conceal our age or ethnicity, hide physical characteristics, or otherwise pretend to be someone we are not. In other words, online we can be genderless, raceless, rankless, and appearanceless.<sup>78</sup> The question we need to ponder is: once we immerse ourselves in the metaverse, will we be able to get out?<sup>79</sup>

We already can create parallel identities that facilitate the exploration of murkier aspects of the self, something very different from being an employee part of the day, a student another part of the day, and a family member at home. As psychologist Sherry Turkle notes, “The obese can be slender, the beautiful plain, the ‘nerdy’ sophisticated” due to the construction of an identity that is not part of their authentic selves. Turkle asserts that instead of developing internally, as a result of our being overly influenced by the opinions of others, the self is being externally manufactured. She contends that when we tweet and communicate via Facebook or Instagram, we are playing to the crowd—presenting a self that is based on what others respond to positively.<sup>80</sup>



How do manufactured images affect your sense of self?

John Lund/Stone/Getty Images

Research shows that we try to present ourselves in as positive a light as possible online—especially, as we noted earlier in this chapter, when using a social networking site such as Facebook. In effect, we psychologically boost our ego, enhancing our self-esteem.<sup>81</sup> Some researchers, however, believe that Facebook has a dark side, in that it feeds users' narcissistic tendencies by providing opportunities for self-promotion, access to shallow relationships and detached communication, and numerous self-solicitations for support.<sup>82</sup> Other researchers disagree, contending that frequency of Facebook use is not associated with narcissism—a trait they assert applies only to those Facebook users who gather unrealistically inflated numbers of friends—but rather with greater openness and lower concern regarding privacy.<sup>83</sup> For avid online game players, spending too much time online can result in depression and anxiety, because failing in game playing becomes as real as failing in real life.<sup>84</sup>

Researchers continue to weigh in on how life in the digital domain influences thoughts about identity. A 2017 survey of 1,500 young people aged 14 to 24 suggests that social media platforms affect their sense of self, including their body image—but in different ways. YouTube was found to have the most positive impact. In contrast, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram demonstrated negative effects—with Instagram being the most negative, particularly because of its ability to cause young women to compare themselves with curated,



photo-shopped, unrealistic versions of reality.<sup>85</sup> Among the most prevalent negative effects of social media was their tendency to contribute to feelings of anxiety and depression, leading to a lack of sleep, unhappiness with one's appearance, increased bullying, FOMO (fear of missing out) or not being present at social events that others frequented. Together, these contributed to decreased feelings of adequacy.<sup>86</sup>

Does your communication presence change when you go online? Does frequenting social media tend to make you more or less social? More or less inhibited? Do you act more or less authentic? Do you assume multiple identities, negotiate identities, or stay true to yourself? What have you learned about yourself by interacting with others online?

## ANALYZE THIS

### MediaMe

In *Network*, written by Paddy Chayefsky, the main character, a television news anchorman, speaks these words to his audience:

Television is not the truth. We lie like hell. . . . We deal in illusions, man. None of it is true. But you people sit there day after day, night after night. . . . We're all you know. You're beginning to think that the tube is reality and your own lives are unreal. You do what the tube tells you to do. You dress like the tube, you eat like the tube, you raise your children like the tube. In God's name, you people are the real thing; we're the illusion.

1. What does the preceding quotation suggest about our relationship with media, including digital media? Substitute the words *the Internet*, *social networks*, or *metaverse* for *the tube*. Does the quotation still ring true? Why or why not?
2. Compare and contrast the image you have of each of the following with the image portrayed in the media, including the metaverse. Which image do you prefer and why?
  - A nurse
  - A lawyer
  - The police
  - A corporate executive
  - The wealthy
  - Arabs
  - Teenagers
  - Older people
3. Divide your life into three approximately equal segments. For example, if you are currently 21 years old, divide your life into the following segments: ages 1 to 7, 8 to 14, and 15 to 21. From each life segment, select a television program or film, song, book, and app or social networking site that you believe exerted a significant influence on your self-perception and interaction with others. For each of your selections, explain its significance and what it reveals about you.
4. If you could trade places with any media/YouTube/Instagram/TikTok character personality or influencer, who would it be and why?

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Source: Quote from *Network*, written by Paddy Chayefsky, MGM and United Artists, 1976.

## GAINING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND SKILLS: WAYS TO STRENGTHEN SELF-CONCEPT AND COMMUNICATION PRESENCE

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

**2.6** Identify how you can change and strengthen your self-concept.

We all carry a visualized “selfie” of the person we think we are wherever we go. Our selfie is a collage of merged images: what we think we were like in the past, what we wish we had been like, what we think we are like right now, and what we expect to be like in the future. It is a composite of how we see ourselves, how we wish we saw ourselves, and how we imagine others see us. Use the following suggestions to improve your mental picture-taking ability and to develop a clearer sense of self.

### Update Your Selfies

Although changing your mental image of yourself is not easy, it is possible. To do it, remind yourself that a selfie captures but a moment in time linked to a particular environment and communication context. Photos are frozen in time. We are not. Thus, while our memories are important and help us construct our sense of who we are, we need to keep the mental picture we carry with us current. By doing this, we will be better able to discount images that no longer accurately represent us and thereby avoid focusing on regrets—“the lost lives, lost selves a person could have lived or been if s/he had done a few things differently.”<sup>87</sup>

### Conduct an Image Review

Watch yourself in action. Review your images, periodically taking time to reassess the roles you perform, the statements you use to describe yourself, and the extent to which you approve of your own values and behavior. Are you satisfied as you scroll through them? Do you have realistic goals? It takes courage and open-mindedness to do this.

### Explore Others' Impressions of You

The people we interact with regularly often see the strengths or weakness we tend to overlook or underplay. While we need not become what others think we are, if we are willing to explore others' perceptions of us, we at least open ourselves to the possibility of change. If we are receptive to how others see us, we may be able to make adjustments and become more effective in other person-to-person contacts.

### Picture Infinite Possibilities

The self is flexible and changeable. In a constant transitional state, it has the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and conditions. By asking yourself, “Who am I now?” instead of “Who am I always?” you will be able to take picture after picture of a changing you, someone who

opens themselves to the possibilities that today and tomorrow offer. As a Xerox executive said in a speech aptly titled “Butterflies, Not Pigeonholes”:

In a knowledge-driven economy, self-confidence means a willingness to champion new ideas and the resilience to roll with the punches when ideas turn out to be better in the abstract than in reality. Plus, self-confidence provides the persistence to try again from another angle. Self-confidence enables an individual to withstand the criticism of colleagues, to live with the fact that not everyone will like everyone else.

And it gives one the ability to listen to others, to work as part of a team, to be willing to let others share the load . . . and the spotlight, confident that one’s contribution to the success of the whole will be recognized.

In short, self-confidence enables people to feel comfortable outside the pigeonholes, to contribute in an ever-changing environment. Without it, the most gifted individual can toil in the shadows, their gifts never fully realized.<sup>88</sup>

Isn’t it better to picture yourself as a butterfly, and free, than it is to see yourself as stuck in a pigeonhole?

## CONNECT THE CASE

### The Case of Aisha’s Term Paper

“I’ll never be able to pass this course,” Aisha moaned to herself as she sat at Starbucks staring at her laptop with her text opened beside her. “I’ve been trying to write this paper all weekend, and I’m still on the first page.” She sighed deeply and then rose to get another cup of coffee.

As Aisha sipped her coffee, she began to thumb through the Sunday paper. She stopped to read an article about the Efficacy Institute, a school that provides students with instruction on self-concept. The article noted that studies on “efficacy” suggest that any person can succeed if they are motivated and work hard. Efficacy programs help students believe in themselves by repeatedly delivering messages such as “Work hard!” “Think you can!” “Believe in yourself!”

Aisha began to think about her own situation. She had dropped out of college years earlier and had only recently reenrolled. Now she found herself stuck in the same old trap—she didn’t think she could do the work. Aisha wondered—should she also enroll at the Efficacy Institute? Aisha remembered how bad she had felt after dropping out of college, and now she was experiencing those same feelings of failure—all because of this paper. Then she had a brainstorm. She typed the following lines on her laptop and posted them on her Facebook wall:

### Recipe for Success in College

1. Believe in your abilities to succeed.
2. Work hard on all assignments.
3. You can do it!

She stared at the words. Then she started writing. Her head was filled with so many new ideas that her fingers could barely keep up. Could all these ideas have come from the simple lines she had just posted?

Aisha didn't dwell on the question. She was working too hard and writing too fast to ponder that possibility.

### What Do You Think?

1. Do you believe that improving a college student's self-esteem will enable them to earn better grades? Why or why not?
2. Are there recipes for success you believe a student should follow to succeed in college? What about in the world of work? In life? If so, describe them, comparing and contrasting your various success recipes.
3. Does *self-talk*—that is, what you tell yourself—influence your chances of succeeding? Explain.

## REVIEW THIS: CHAPTER SUMMARY

### 2.1 Describe self-concept, explaining its influence on interpersonal communication.

Self-concept, the baseline for communication, is that relatively stable set of perceptions we attribute to ourselves. Composed of everything we think and feel about the self, it guides our communicative behavior. By watching ourselves in action, we see the effect that our communication presence has on others.

Self-esteem is our positive or negative evaluation of our self-concept. We carry it from one interaction to another. Self-esteem that is high nurtures success, while low self-esteem makes its attainment more difficult. When self-esteem is not connected to personal performance, however, it can be self-defeating.

### 2.2 Discuss the roles reflected appraisal theory, social comparison theory, and confirmation, rejection, and disconfirmation play in shaping self-conceptions.

According to reflected appraisal theory, our self-concept reflects how we believe others see us.

According to social comparison theory, we compare ourselves to others to develop a feel for how we measure up to them. *Confirmation* supports our self-appraisal, *rejection* negates our self-appraisal, and *disconfirmation* reveals a total disregard for us as a person, suggesting that for the other person, we do not exist, robbing us of a sense of self.

### 2.3 Define self-fulfilling prophecy, demonstrating the importance of periodically reexamining and revising your self-concept.

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a prediction that increases the likelihood that an anticipated outcome will occur. A positive Pygmalion has positive expectations and fosters

positive change in us, while a negative Pygmalion has low or no expectations and fosters diminished performance in us.

We need to develop the willingness and skills to reevaluate or reinvent ourselves. Only by doing this are we able to shed outdated conceptions.

#### 2.4 Illustrate the influence that cultural diversity and gender have on self-concept.

Cultural differences influence our self-notions. Whether we are from an individualistic or a collectivistic culture, display an idiocentric or an allocentric orientation, or ascribe to masculine or feminine gender prescriptions, we are guided by the lessons our society and culture teach us.

#### 2.5 Describe how media and technology affect self-concept.

Media and technology provide us with information about preferred patterns of behavior and appearance, sometimes causing us to develop unrealistic expectations for ourselves and at times either adversely or positively affecting our feelings of adequacy.

#### 2.6 Identify how you can change and strengthen your self-concept.

To strengthen our feelings of self-worth, we need to reassess the nature of our self-concept periodically, visit and revisit others' perceptions of us, and keep ourselves open to the possibility of change.

### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Can you identify the components of self-concept and then use them to describe yourself?
2. Can you describe how the social comparisons you make with others influence your thoughts about yourself? How does reflected appraisal theory play out in your own life?
3. Can you name individuals who have served as positive and negative Pygmalions in your life, making you feel better or worse about yourself?
4. Can you explain how living in an individualistic or collectivistic culture affects a person's self-concept? What about living in a social media-obsessed culture?
5. Can you identify steps you can take to strengthen your self-concept?

### KEY TERMS

Allocentric orientation (p. 65)

Authenticity (p. 58)

Cisgender (p. 69)

Collectivistic cultures (p. 65)

Confirmation (p. 58)

Disconfirmation (p. 58)

Expected self (p. 57)

Gender expression (p. 69)

Gender identity (p. 69)

Gender spectrum (p. 70)

Grit (p. 54)

High-context cultures (p. 67)

Ideal self (p. 57)

Idiocentric orientation (p. 65)

Impression management (p. 57)  
Individualistic culture (p. 65)  
Low-context culture (p. 67)  
Make-believe media (p. 72)  
Negative Pygmalion (p. 61)  
Perceived self (p. 57)  
Positive Pygmalion (p. 60)  
Possible self (p. 57)  
Power distance (p. 67)  
Reflected appraisal theory (p. 55)

Rejection (p. 58)  
Self-awareness (p. 46)  
Self-concept (p. 48)  
Self-efficacy (p. 59)  
Self-esteem (p. 48)  
Self-fulfilling prophecy (p. 59)  
Self-image (p. 48)  
Social comparison theory (p. 55)  
Transgender (p. 69)

### ANSWER KEY

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

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