



Communication and the self: past, present, and future

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Abstract

This essay serves as an introduction to the special issue on “Communication and the Self.” For over a century, scholars have been intensely interested in how communication intersects with the self, including foci on impression management, identity, and self-esteem. In recent years, new developments in technology and changing societal structures have prompted researchers to consider how traditional theories fare when applied in new contexts. In this introductory essay, we begin with a discussion of the theoretical and pragmatic importance of this topic to researchers across the field of communication. We then introduce each of the five manuscripts included in the special issue and pose overarching themes. We conclude by identifying ongoing challenges to the study of communication and the self and offering suggestions for strategies to approach these topics moving forward.

Keywords: self; identity; communication; special issue introduction

The study of communication as it relates to the self boasts a rich scholarly history. Dating back over a century, this topic has roots in the early years of the social sciences (e.g., Cooley, 1902; James, 1890/1981; Mead, 1934). It encompasses a wide range of theories and concepts that describe and explain how individuals think, feel, and communicate about themselves. Today, the related scholarship is focused on face-to-face communication as well as on communication that involves some kind of medium or technology. The rise of digital technologies, ranging from social media to virtual reality and artificial intelligence, has increased the relevance of some established processes and phenomena (e.g., social comparisons, Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017; McComb et al., 2023) and has added new challenges (e.g., virtual body ownership illusions, Döllinger et al., 2024; Kalyanaraman & Bailenson, 2019). At the same time, communication researchers are faced with recognizing and accounting for societal shifts in interpersonal networks (Mijs & Roe, 2021; Sanner et al., 2020) and changes in the political and legal landscape (Löffmann, 2024; Ng et al., 2025). Given the rich, yet often fragmented, nature of the literature, this special issue is a space dedicated to work that sheds light on the multifaceted ways in which communication both influences and reflects aspects of the self in online and offline contexts.

Our call for this special issue asked authors to submit theoretically informed proposals that enhance our insight and understanding of the study of communication as it relates to the self. We encouraged proposals focusing on a wide range of social, relational, cultural, and organizational contexts from various theoretical traditions, and explicitly welcomed all methodological approaches. Empirical research reports and theoretical or conceptual essays were welcomed, and we asked for submissions from authors that reflect global experiences. We solicited abstracts beginning in January 2024, with a deadline of March 1, 2024. We received 180 unique

abstracts in response to our call. Both co-editors reviewed each abstract submission. In early April 2024, we invited the authors of 18 abstracts to submit full papers for consideration. Following a round of review by three to four peers, we invited authors of five manuscripts to revise and resubmit their manuscripts. Each of these five papers is included in the special issue.

Overview of the special issue articles

Our call was inclusive in terms of methodology and communication subdisciplines, and we welcomed authors from across the globe to submit their work. We kept diversity in mind when selecting abstracts, inviting researchers from multiple paradigms, subdisciplines, and countries of origin to submit full papers for consideration. Despite casting this wide net, the papers that passed peer review and constitute this special issue are primarily quantitative, focus on mediated communication, and three of the five are first-authored by scholars in the United States. We are aware of and appreciate the multitude of voices studying communication and the self, and we note that while the papers included in this volume are fantastic, as a body, they do not represent the entire field of self-focused communication research as we envision it.

Two papers in this volume report longitudinal data examining bidirectional effects of media and identity (Kim et al., 2025; Saleem & Ismail, 2025). Kim et al.'s three-wave study examines how South Korean social media users' choice of embodied 3D characters influences, and is influenced by, characteristics of the self. They found support for a media-to-identity link but not an identity-to-media link. Saleem and Ismail (2025) report on data from a 3-year longitudinal study of Muslim adolescents' media exposure and their identity. Like Kim et al., they observed stronger media-to-identity

links than identity-to-media links. Some of the effects of media use were positive, whereas others were negative. Ultimately, Kim et al. (2025) and Saleem and Ismail's (2025) work highlights the complexity of relationships between different forms of media use and aspects of identity.

Vendemia et al. (2025) report on an intensive daily study of the effects of social media use on body image. They tested dominant theories of body image and observed a small negative effect of daily time spent on social media on body image satisfaction. However, they also observed variability in person-specific daily effects, such that not all women were negatively impacted by daily social media use in the same way. Their work emphasizes the need to examine both between- and within-person effects of media use on the self.

Liao et al. (2025) report two studies conducted to bring conceptual and theoretical clarity to self-transcendent media experiences by differentiating between biographical and existential resonance, extending biographical resonance theory. They employ mixed methods to examine how the moral self may be developed, reflected, and reinforced through media, with results highlighting how existential resonance experiences relate to the moral self. Finally, Saucier and Walter (2025) report two studies designed to unpack motivations behind the adoption of conspiracy theories, drawing on self-affirmation theories. Though the authors did not find consistent answers to their questions about what drives people to engage with conspiracy theories, their work suggests several fruitful avenues for research on this topic.

Common themes and challenges

As we reviewed the excellent papers adopted for this special issue, we noted two broad, cross-cutting themes—one theoretical and the other methodological. First, across the board, these papers provide a new take on “old” theories of self and identity; that is, theories largely developed in the context of traditional media consumption and face-to-face interaction. For example, Kim et al. (2025) test aspects of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) to consider relationships between the “real” self and the “ideal” self depicted in embodied avatars. Saleem and Ismail (2025) employ social identity gratification theory (Harwood, 1999) to examine relationships between Muslim adolescents' media use and facets of identity; and Saucier and Walter (2025) leverage self-affirmation theories to unpack motivations for engaging with conspiracy theories. Support was found for many traditional theoretical tenets, but authors also identified cases where theories may need to be reconsidered to accommodate modern communication practices. For example, Kim et al. (2025) note that traditional theories may not fully explain how people with different self-views use anonymous embodied 3D avatars to express themselves and how such expression feeds back to their self-concept.

Second, the accepted papers all exhibit a high degree of methodological and statistical sophistication. Three manuscripts analyzed longitudinal data (Kim et al., 2025; Saleem & Ismail, 2025; Vendemia et al., 2025), one of which involved daily collection of mobile data donations and self-report data (Vendemia et al., 2025). The remaining two manuscripts report on multiple studies (Liao et al., 2025; Saucier & Walter, 2025), with one employing mixed methods (Liao et al., 2025).

The increasing sophistication of social scientific methods is commendable, but also poses a challenge to everyone involved. Eminent theories suggest that aspects of the self and of communication in interpersonal or mediated/technological contexts mutually influence each other (Cohen et al., 2019; Slater, 2015). Excellent empirical research should reflect this interdependence. At the same time, the methodological sophistication needed to capture these interdependencies empirically is substantial. Like Vendemia et al. (2025), researchers need to report their methods and results in a way that is intelligible to a diverse range of scholars. Methodological sophistication should go hand in hand with open science practices. Transparency at all stages of the research process is required, and fellow researchers need to be enabled to re-analyze the data. We are happy that for most of the papers in this special issue, the data are publicly available. As part of the methodological sophistication of the field, researchers further need to consider replicating their research in one and the same paper (McEwan et al., 2018). This procedure calls for accepting patterns of results that are more difficult to interpret by authors, reviewers, editors, and readers, as Saucier and Walter (2025) have done in this special issue.

As a second challenge to the field, we wish to highlight the fast-paced changes in the technological and macro-level societal contexts that, we assume, will have a profound impact on communication and the self in the future, including the research areas covered in this special issue. Digital environments have become more and more tailored to individuals (e.g., Hutmacher & Appel, 2023), and the rise of machine intelligence has provided new (para)social interaction partners that will increasingly affect how we think about ourselves and the world (Sundar, 2020). At the same time, political macro-level contexts have changed rapidly in many countries in the world. Researchers may feel pressured to follow some theoretical paths and not others. Scholarship on the topics covered in this special issue could be affected by these processes.

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Data availability

No new data were created or analyzed for this article. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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