Contemporary Approaches to Interpersonal Communication

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Didem ÖZŞENLER

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To my beloved niece, the apple of my eye, who came into this world just three months ago and brought so much light into our lives

Güneş Helen Alkan

PREFACE

Interpersonal communication constitutes one of the fundamental means through which individuals make sense of themselves and others, establish relationships, and sustain those relationships over time. For many years, interpersonal communication was primarily understood in terms of face-to-face interaction between individuals sharing the same physical environment, with concepts such as intimacy, reciprocity, feedback, and the co-construction of meaning largely explained through this mode of interaction. However, the rapid development of information and communication technologies has significantly transformed the environments in which interpersonal communication takes place, the ways in which relationships are established, and even what it means for communication to be interpersonal.

Today, relationships are no longer established and maintained solely through face-to-face encounters. Messaging applications, social media platforms, video calls, online communities, and AI-supported communication environments have become integral components of everyday relationships. Within the same relationship, individuals may use different communication channels sequentially or simultaneously; physical and digital interactions complement and transform one another and, at times, blur the boundaries between them. Interpersonal communication has therefore acquired an increasingly hybrid, multichannel, and continuously connected character that can no longer be adequately explained through a simple distinction between face-to-face and online communication.

This transformation does not require abandoning the fundamental concepts of interpersonal communication; rather, it calls for their reconsideration within contemporary communication conditions. Classical concepts such as intimacy, privacy, self-disclosure, trust, uncertainty, conflict, relational maintenance, and interpersonal accommodation remain relevant today, yet they take on new forms within different technological affordances and communication practices. A message being seen but left unanswered, the use of an emoji, remaining online without initiating communication, making a relationship visible through social media, or shifting communication from one platform to another have all become behaviors capable of generating meaning in contemporary interpersonal relationships. Technology, therefore, is no longer merely a tool that facilitates interpersonal communication; it has become part of the relational context itself,

shaping the rhythm, expectations, boundaries, and processes through which communication is interpreted.

The impact of digitalization on interpersonal communication is not limited to the migration of human interaction across different platforms. The increasing integration of artificial intelligence technologies into everyday life has introduced new and more complex questions into the field of interpersonal communication. Individuals exchange information with AI systems, seek advice and emotional support from them, disclose personal information to them, and, in some cases, develop social or emotional bonds with them. These developments bring the question of "who constitutes a participant in communication?" back to the forefront. In this sense, the traditional boundaries of interpersonal communication are expanding not only spatially and temporally but also in terms of the actors involved in communication.

This book is grounded in the idea of building a bridge between the traditional intellectual foundations of interpersonal communication and contemporary communication practices. Its primary aim is neither to declare classical theories obsolete nor to portray technological developments as the beginning of an entirely new communication order. Rather, it seeks to explore how the established theoretical legacy of interpersonal communication can be reconsidered in light of contemporary developments such as digitalization, the network society, hybrid interaction, multichannel media use, and artificial intelligence. Although communication environments change, individuals' needs to be understood, establish intimacy, develop a sense of belonging, reduce uncertainty, maintain relationships, and express themselves to others continue to persist. What has changed are the communicative conditions under which these needs are expressed and negotiated.

For this reason, the contemporary transformation of interpersonal communication can be understood not so much as a process of "replacement," but rather as an expansion of its dimensions. Face-to-face communication has not disappeared, nor has digital communication simply taken its place. Instead, a hybrid relational structure has emerged in which physical and digital environments intersect and online and offline experiences continuously shape one another. Contemporary individuals no longer experience and make sense of their relationships within a single communicative environment; rather, they navigate across multiple communication channels in the course of relational life.

This book is the product of an effort to trace precisely this transformation. Moving from the traditional concepts and theories of interpersonal communication toward contemporary communication practices, it aims to offer readers an opportunity to understand not only how interpersonal communication has changed, but also which fundamental dynamics of human relationships continue to endure despite changing communication environments.

Technology continues to evolve, communication environments continue to multiply, and the boundaries of relationships continue to be redrawn; yet the human need to connect with others, to be understood, and to create meaning remains at the very heart of interpersonal communication.

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Chapter 1

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE MODERN AGE

Introduction

Interpersonal communication, in its simplest form, is the process through which individuals create meaning in interaction with one another, negotiate these meanings, and establish and maintain their relationships through communication. However, classical definitions of interpersonal communication have largely been built upon face-to-face interaction. Today, however, interpersonal communication has evolved into a form of interaction that unfolds over time, operates across multiple channels, and is often shaped by algorithmic processes through messaging applications, social media platforms, video calls, online communities, and mobile devices. Therefore, defining interpersonal communication solely as the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages between two individuals excludes a significant portion of contemporary communication practices (Ivan, 2023; Walther, 2017).

The emergence of digital communication technologies as an ordinary infrastructure of everyday life has transformed both the boundaries of interpersonal communication and the conceptual tools used to explain it. Closeness is no longer established only through physical proximity; being accessible online, frequently exchanging messages, visibility through social media, and sustaining contact across different platforms have also become parts of the experience of closeness. As Taylor and Bazarova (2021) demonstrate, the continuous contact maintained within a media ecosystem in close relationships fosters a sense of digital accessibility and security, referred to as "connected presence." This necessitates evaluating interpersonal communication not only in terms of content, but also through accessibility, timing, and combinations of communication channels.

The main argument in this chapter is that what is needed today in the field of interpersonal communication is not the abandonment of classical theories, but their reinterpretation in the context of digitalization, the network society, hybrid interaction, and multichannel relationality. Accordingly, this chapter is structured around four main themes: classical definitions of interpersonal communication; the network society and perpetual accessibility; the transition from face-to-

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Chapter 2

FROM CLASSICAL THEORIES TO CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

Introduction

The history of interpersonal communication theories has been shaped by efforts to explain how individuals initiate, develop, maintain, and terminate relationships. The theories developed during the classical period of the field focused on fundamental processes such as uncertainty reduction, self-disclosure, relational dialectics, social exchange, communication privacy, and social information processing, proceeding from the assumption that intimacy was established primarily through face-to-face interaction. These theories continue to constitute the conceptual backbone of the field today; however, the digitalization of everyday life, platform-based relationality, and multichannel communication practices necessitate the reinterpretation of this backbone within new contexts (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Altman & Taylor, 1973; Walther, 2011).

Recent developments in the interpersonal communication literature suggest not that classical theories have become obsolete, but that their explanatory power is being tested under new social and technological conditions. Assessments emphasizing that interpersonal communication in the information age operates on a plane where online and offline selves are increasingly intertwined reveal that, under the conditions of the network society and continuous connectivity, relationship formation now takes place within media ecosystems rather than through discrete channels (Ivan, 2023; Taylor & Bazarova, 2021). For this reason, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the transition from classical interpersonal theories to contemporary approaches not as a linear rupture, but as a process of theoretical expansion and contextual repositioning.

The chapter is structured around four main key areas. First, it provides a concise overview of classical interpersonal theories; second, it discusses the new problem areas that theories have been compelled to address in the wake of digitalization. Third, it examines the transformation of the concepts of intimacy, accessibility, and visibility; finally, it explains why the field requires theoretical renewal. In doing

contemporary contexts challenge and extend their explanatory capacity. This book adopts precisely this perspective: rather than drawing a sharp distinction between the "old" and the "new," it seeks to trace how classical interpersonal thought is being reinterpreted within a digital, hybrid, and visibility-oriented world.

Conclusion

The transition from classical theories to contemporary approaches does not represent a linear paradigm shift within the field of interpersonal communication. Rather, it reflects the reactivation of the field's core concepts within new communication ecologies. Classical concerns such as uncertainty, self-disclosure, privacy, commitment, relational tensions, and social support continue to persist; however, they now emerge within contexts characterized by multichannel media use, perpetual connectivity, platform-based visibility, and hybrid forms of interaction. Thus, contemporary interpersonal communication literature is concerned less with replacing classical theories than with bringing them into new socio-technological contexts (Ivan, 2023; Walther, 2017).

This chapter has sought to demonstrate why contemporary theoretical orientations have emerged within the field of interpersonal communication. While the map of classical theories explains the intellectual foundations of the field, the processes of digitalization and the transformations in intimacy and visibility reveal why these theories require reconsideration and renewal. Accordingly, the next chapter examines in greater detail several prominent theoretical frameworks that have come to shape contemporary interpersonal communication literature.

The following chapter makes it possible to examine more concretely how classical interpersonal communication is being reconfigured in contemporary contexts through specific theoretical examples. In particular, frameworks such as relational uncertainty, communication accommodation, media multiplexity, and interpersonal emotion regulation provide theoretical interpretations of the transformations discussed in this chapter.

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Chapter 3

RELATIONAL TURBULENCE THEORY

Introduction

Close relationships are often explained primarily in terms of love, intimacy, and reciprocity; however, one of their most defining characteristics is the continual oscillation between stability and fluctuation. Particularly during periods in which the direction of the relationship, the roles of the partners, and patterns of everyday interaction are changing, couples not only experience intense emotions but may also interpret even ordinary communicative events as exaggerated, hurtful, or threatening. Relational Turbulence Theory (RTT) is a contemporary interpersonal communication theory developed specifically to explain the emotional volatility and communicative sensitivity that emerge during such transitional periods in relationships (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon et al., 2016).

The distinctive contribution of the theory lies in its refusal to explain relationship difficulties solely through outcome variables such as conflict, jealousy, or dissatisfaction. Instead, it demonstrates how two underlying processes—relational uncertainty and interference from partner interdependence—can make everyday interactions turbulent. This approach is particularly effective in explaining why, during periods of relational transition, a delayed message, a routine criticism, or even a brief silence can generate disproportionately strong emotional reactions (Theiss & Solomon, 2006; Solomon & Brisini, 2017).

Although RTT was initially developed in the context of romantic relationships, subsequent research has demonstrated its explanatory value across a wide range of relational contexts, including marriage, cohabitation, the transition to parenthood, living with chronic illness, couple relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic, and parent–adult child relationships. A recent scoping review indicates that the theory has evolved into an expanding research program, particularly for understanding actor–partner interdependence effects, relationship management during transitional periods, and relationship maintenance in stressful contexts (Lağap & Güngör, 2025; Jones & Theiss, 2025).

This section first examines the emergence and fundamental assumptions of the theory and then discusses the concepts of relational uncertainty and interference

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Chapter 4

COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY

Introduction

One of the primary reasons interpersonal communication theories have regained visibility in contemporary literature is that classical explanations focusing on face-to-face interaction can no longer fully account for digital, hybrid, and multichannel communication environments. Within this transformation, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) provides a highly productive framework for explaining how individuals adjust their linguistic, nonverbal, and interactional behaviors in response to their communication partners in both interpersonal and intergroup interactions. Recent assessments by Howard Giles and his colleagues indicate that the theory has evolved beyond a narrow model focused solely on speech-style convergence and has developed into an overarching theoretical framework capable of encompassing a broad communication ecology that includes social identity, relationship management, perceived intentions, power, status, age, culture, and digital environments (Giles, Edwards, & Walther, 2023; Giles & Gardikiotis 2025).

The significance of CAT lies in its ability to interpret communication not only through the content of messages but also through adjustments in communicative style. Individuals may consciously or semi-consciously modify their speech rate, word choices, accents, vocal intensity, syntactic structures, use of humor, or distancing communication styles in response to the identity of their interlocutors, their expectations, and the interactional context. Such adjustments may serve either to reduce social distance or to emphasize identity boundaries. Therefore, the theory becomes highly useful for explaining the dynamics involved in the formation, maintenance, and interpretation of interpersonal relationships (Giles, 2016; Soliz & Giles, 2014).

The purpose of this chapter is to position CAT within the contemporary interpersonal communication literature and to demonstrate why the theory has regained importance, particularly in the context of increasingly digitalized interaction. This chapter first outlines the fundamental assumptions of the theory, then discusses the strategies of convergence, divergence, and maintenance, and

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Chapter 5

MEDIA MULTIPLEXITY THEORY

Introduction

For many years, interpersonal communication research tended to examine the effects of individual communication channels on relationships individually. In everyday life, however, relationships are rarely maintained through a single medium; instead, they are sustained through complex communication ecologies that integrate face-to-face interaction, phone conversations, text messaging, social media engagement, video calls, and multiple digital platforms. This transformation has demonstrated that explaining relational processes through a single communication channel or medium is increasingly insufficient. Media Multiplexity Theory (MMT) provides a powerful framework for explaining why interpersonal relationships extend across multiple communication channels. The main proposition of the theory is that stronger relationships tend to involve the use of a greater number of communication channels; in other words, as relational tie strength increases, the breadth of an individual's communication repertoire expands (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

5.1. The Main Propositions of the Theory

Media Multiplexity Theory was developed by Caroline Haythornthwaite within the field of social network research and focuses on the relationship between the strength of social ties and the range of communication channels individuals use. Haythornthwaite's research demonstrates that strong ties are characterized not only by more frequent communication but also by the use of a greater variety of communication media. According to the theory, channels such as face-to-face interaction, phone conversations, email, text messaging, social networking sites, and instant messaging should not be viewed as mutually exclusive alternatives; rather, they function as integrated resources that support different dimensions of relational closeness (Haythornthwaite, 2002, 2005).

The first fundamental proposition of the theory is that there is a positive relationship between tie strength and media multiplexity. Individuals with strong relational ties tend to communicate through a greater variety of channels, whereas

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Chapter 6

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND HYBRID COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Introduction

Digitalization represents not merely a domain concerned with technical communication tools in interpersonal communication research, but a fundamental context that transforms the ways in which individuals establish relationships, develop relational closeness, negotiate meaning, and evaluate communication competence. Today, individuals maintain relationships by moving seamlessly among face-to-face communication, instant messaging, video conferencing, organizational communication platforms, social media, and AI-assisted interfaces. Therefore, interpersonal communication competence can no longer be understood solely in terms of speaking skills, listening, empathy, and the provision of appropriate feedback. It now also encompasses competencies such as communication channel selection, timing management, the establishment of an appropriate digital tone, awareness of online visibility, and the ability to sustain relationships across hybrid communication environments (Ivan, 2023; Deschênes et al., 2024).

The literature indicates that communication competence is being redefined in digital environments at the intersection of technical, cognitive, and socio-emotional dimensions. As hybrid work and hybrid interaction become increasingly prevalent across professional, educational, and everyday contexts, individuals' ability to determine which communication channel to use, when to use it, and for what relational purpose has emerged as a key indicator of communicative competence (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025; Wuersch et al., 2024). The aim of this chapter is to examine digital communication competence and hybrid communication skills within the context of the contemporary interpersonal communication literature by providing an integrated discussion of the evolution of the concept of communication competence, digital etiquette and tone management, the sources of misunderstanding in written communication, hybrid competence in academic and professional settings, and the tensions among authenticity, speed, and automation.

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Chapter 7

CONTEMPORARY INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction

Romantic relationships constitute one of the most extensively studied domains in interpersonal communication research. This is largely because romantic relationships bring to the forefront the core issues of interpersonal communication, including intimacy, self-disclosure, trust, conflict, commitment, jealousy, and relationship maintenance. On the other hand, contemporary romantic relationships are no longer established and maintained solely through face-to-face interaction. Instant messaging applications, social media platforms, video calls, online dating applications, and algorithmic visibility mechanisms have transformed every stage of the relationship process, from initiation and maintenance to dissolution (Campbell, 2022; Taylor & Bazarova, 2021).

Therefore, understanding contemporary romantic relationships requires not abandoning the classical variables of interpersonal communication but rather reconsidering them within the new conditions created by digital and hybrid communication contexts. Indeed, the public visibility of relationships on social media, rising expectations of speed and accessibility in messaging culture, the triggering of jealousy through online visibility, and the emergence of constant connectedness as a new norm of intimacy in long-distance relationships have transformed romantic communication into a multilayered structure (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011; Atalay et al., 2024).

This chapter examines contemporary interpersonal communication in romantic relationships through six major themes. It begins by exploring the digitalization of courtship and contemporary practices of relationship initiation, followed by a discussion of uncertainty and expectation management. Up next, practices such as *ghosting*, *breadcrumbing*, and *seen culture*, which suspend relationships or create one-sided uncertainty, will be addressed. The fourth section focuses on jealousy, surveillance, and visibility dynamics; the fifth examines intimacy development and emotional labor; and the final section discusses long-distance relationships and constant connectedness. Collectively, these themes will

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Chapter 8

HUMAN-ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE RELATIONSHIPS: A NEW DOMAIN OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

Introduction

Interpersonal communication research has traditionally focused on processes of reciprocal meaning-making, relationship formation, and relationship maintenance between human actors. However, the rapid integration of digitalization, platformization, and generative artificial intelligence into everyday life has prompted a reconsideration of long-standing assumptions regarding the actors, mediators, and contexts of interpersonal communication. Today, users engage with chatbots, voice assistants, recommendation systems, and generative AI applications not merely as functional tools but, in many cases, as entities with which they experience emotional closeness, share personal and sensitive information, collaborate in decision-making, and even seek relational support. This transformation suggests that human–artificial intelligence interaction should be examined not only within the field of human–computer interaction but also as an emerging domain of interpersonal communication research (Boyd & Markowitz, 2026; Smith et al., 2025).

Recent theoretical developments suggest that artificial intelligence has evolved beyond the role of a mere technological tool to become an actor capable of generating relational experiences in human life. In particular, the framework proposed by Boyd & Markowitz (2026) argues that AI performs two fundamental relational roles: a *relational partner*, which interacts directly with users, and a *relational mediator*, which regulates interactions between people. This distinction indicates that human–AI communication should not be understood as a single use case but rather as part of a multilayered communication ecosystem. Moreover, research examining individuals' tendencies to form relationships with generative AI chatbots, engage in self-disclosure, and seek social support further demonstrates that artificial intelligence has become not only a technological phenomenon but also a psychosocial one (Smith et al., 2025; Koçyiğit& Darı, 2023).

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