My Crash Course in Communication Science: What Shapes Our Behavior?

By Lara Graves

Move-in. Welcome Week. Freshman year. Completely new environment. Completely new faces. All conversations a pre-written script: What's your name? Where are you from? What's your major? Around the room, I hear: "Computer Science." "Architecture." "Mechanical Engineering." The list sounds impressive.

Then it's my turn. I pause. "Communication," I say.
A beat.
Cue the polite nods and the "Oh cool," with a slight tilt of the head—like I just said I majored in finger painting.
Suddenly, I'm awkwardly scrambling to explain my major like I'm defending my life choices at a family dinner. I string together vague phrases like "media and stuff", "how people interact" or "like journalism or entertainment maybe?" but even I'm not totally convinced. The truth is, I didn't fully know what communication was either—at least not as a field of study.

But here's the thing: I've always been fascinated by communication. Not just talking, but the how and why behind the way people express themselves—through language, through art, through silence. Even before I learned any theory, I was the person overthinking what word would land best in a text, or mentally revising an email five times before hitting send. I'd notice how someone's tone said more than their words. I've always been hyper aware of the space between what people say and what they mean. But until this class, I didn't know that all of that language, culture, psychology, and context could actually be studied as a science.

Reflection on COMM 200

In COMM 200: Communication and Social Science, I learned that communication isn't just fluff. It's a complex social science that can be studied, critiqued, and applied. And it's not just about speech or writing. It's about how power flows through conversation, how technology changes our relationships, how our identities shape (and are shaped by) the way we communicate, and what it all reveals about our values, assumptions, and social systems.

A theory that really stuck with me was Face-Negotiation Theory. It explains how people from different cultures manage conflict and maintain self-image, or "face." During Welcome Week, I was living it. Constantly negotiating how I wanted to come across, how much of myself to reveal, how to handle that awkward pause after I said "communication." That moment of balancing honesty with the desire to be understood and respected was a face negotiation. I didn't have the language for it at the time, but I do now.

As the semester went on, I started seeing these theories everywhere. In my Application Paper, I wrote about Ugly Betty and how organizational assimilation and groupthink shape workplace dynamics. Through that process, I learned that communication isn't just about individuals. It's about systems. About how norms are passed down, how silence gets interpreted as agreement, how "fitting in" becomes more important than speaking up. That analysis helped me understand real workplaces I've been in, and made me more aware of how I want to show up in future ones.

In another assignment, I explored Communication Privacy Management Theory, a theory explaining people's decisions on the revealing or concealing of private information, using a deeply personal family situation. It helped me process not just what happened, but how we managed the information, how trust was negotiated, and how privacy boundaries shifted. It was academic, but also very applicable to life. I was able to understand why we misunderstand each other, what we value in conversations, and how to be more intentional in the ways we engage with others.

I also got a taste of academic research through the Research Paradigm assignment, where I analyzed a study on Japanese students' attitudes toward multiculturalism. That showed me that communication research can tackle big social questions like immigration, diversity, and national identity.

A Closer Look: Theory of Planned Behavior

Let's take a closer look at a theory that explains and predicts why people behave in certain ways: The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). This theory will help you identify antecedents to behavior so you can design effective tactics to change people's behaviors!

Developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), the theory originally started as the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), which stated that "there are two predictors of behavioral intention: attitudes and normative beliefs" (Dainton & Zelley, 2022). Later they asked, "Why don't people always act on their attitudes?" and added a third key factor: perceived behavioral control.

Here's how it works. TPB says your intention to do a behavior is the biggest predictor of whether you'll actually do it. You expect that your behavior will lead to a specific outcome, so you plan to act in certain ways. And your intention is shaped by three major factors:

1. **Attitude toward the behavior**
2. **Subjective norms**
3. **Perceived behavioral control**

Let's break this down with examples.

1. Attitude = What do I think about this behavior?

This isn't just your vibe toward it. It's built on two components:

- **Behavioral beliefs**: What do you believe will happen if you do this behavior? (e.g., “If I run regularly, it will impact my cardiovascular health.”)

- **Evaluation of outcomes**: How strongly do you think those results are good or bad? (e.g., “I strongly believe running will improve cardiovascular health.” → positive attitude; “I strongly believe running will worsen cardiovascular health.” → negative attitude)

If you believe a behavior will lead to a positive outcome, and that outcome matters to you, your attitude will likely be favorable.

2. Subjective Norms = What do other people expect me to do?
This is where social pressure comes in. Your intention is also influenced by:

- **Descriptive normative beliefs:** What do people like you do? (e.g., “Lots of people like me run to improve their cardiovascular health.”)

- **Injunctive normative beliefs:** What do people important to you think you should do? (e.g., “My friends and family think I should run more often.”)

- **Motivation to comply:** How much do you care about what they think?

If your family, friends, or mentors (aka your “valued others”) strongly support a behavior and you’re motivated to live up to those expectations, your intention to do it gets stronger.

3. Perceived Behavioral Control = Can I actually do this?
Even if you want to do something and others want you to do it, you also have to believe that you’re capable of following through. This has two parts:

- **Self-efficacy**: Do you believe in your ability to perform the behavior?

- **Controllability**: Are there external factors that might make it easier or harder to do?

Basically: Do I have the confidence and the conditions (e.g., time, tools, ability) to succeed? If both are yes, your intention gets stronger, and you’re more likely to follow through.

Summary of Example: Why People Run (Or Don’t)

We walked through a relatable example: running. Why do some people stick to a running routine, while others bail after two jogs?

- **Attitude**: They believe running will improve their health (behavioral belief) and they value that outcome (evaluation).

- **Subjective norms**: Their friends and family think running is a good idea (normative belief), and they care about those opinions (motivation to comply).

- **Perceived behavioral control**: They feel confident in their ability to run and believe they have the time and access to do it (self-efficacy + controllability).

If even one of these is missing, say they don't think they're athletic enough, or they feel too busy, the intention to run drops, and so does the likelihood they'll do it (Phelps, 2025).

A Personal Example: Cleanliness Culture in Japan

Let's apply this theory to something from my own life: the culture of cleanliness in Japan.

If you've ever been to Tokyo, you know the streets are absurdly clean. Trains are spotless. People are respectful. They only eat in designated areas. People carry their trash home if there's no bin. I grew up in this environment, and trust me, it's not because there's a secret army of janitors. How could TPB explain this?

- **Attitude**: From a young age, I was taught that public cleanliness is a sign of respect. Schools teach how to be clean and have daily clean up times where students clean their classrooms/communal areas.
    - Behavioral belief: Keeping shared spaces clean helps everyone. You don't want to cause disturbances and be a burden to anyone.
    - Evaluation: That outcome is valued across society. There's a sense of collective pride.

- **Subjective norms**:
    - Normative belief: Everyone from classmates to strangers expects you to do your part. You see your parents clean up after themselves too.
    - Motivation to comply: You do not want to be "that person" who leaves a mess. The silent judgment is real. You need to "save your face."

- **Perceived behavioral control**:
    - Self-efficacy: I was taught how to sort my trash, how to carry it with me, and how to clean up after myself.
    - Controllability: The infrastructure supports this behavior. There are guides, signs, even community cleaning days. There are sortable trash cans attached to vending machines and in every convenience store or train station. You're set up to succeed.

What this shows is that these behaviors aren't just about personal preference. They're socially supported, taught early, and fully managed by the environment. It's not random. It's intention-driven.

What TPB Could Do for USC

So how could TPB help us here in LA—at USC, specifically?
One example that comes to mind: getting students to compost or reduce waste. The bins are there, but let's be honest. People don't always use them right.

To increase composting behavior using TPB, we'd need to:

- **Attitudes**: Show that composting is easy, helpful, and worth it.
- **Subjective norms**: Get student leaders or clubs to promote it. Normalize it through peer influence.
- **Perceived control**: Make it clear what goes where, provide signage, and reduce confusion. Maybe even hand out "compost guides" during orientation.

If students believe composting makes a difference (attitude), see others doing it (norm), and feel confident in their ability to do it right (control)—then the behavior becomes more likely.

Final Thoughts: Communication as a Social Science

What the Theory of Planned Behavior helped me realize is that communication isn't just about expressing and sharing information. It's about understanding how influence, intention, context, and control interact. It's about understanding how people don't behave randomly, and how they are influenced by beliefs and values, the expectations and pressures they feel from their communities, and whether or not they feel empowered to make choices and act upon them. Like, sure, someone might say they care about sustainability or want to exercise more, but whether they actually do it depends on so many layered factors. TPB gave me a way to map those factors out.

TPB especially revealed how much of our behavior is social and situational, and not just personal. Whether it's voting, recycling, wearing masks, or cleaning up after yourself in a train station, there's always more going on around us. And if we can study those underlying patterns, we can create environments that support better outcomes not just through better messaging, but through better systems. Learning TPB made me more aware of the systems that influence our everyday choices and how effective communication isn't just about persuasion, but about meeting people where they are and addressing the beliefs and barriers that shape their actions.

If someone asks what communication is, I can now tell them it's the study of how people create shared meaning, how it is negotiated, and how that shapes the world we live in. COMM 200 gave me the tools to decode what's going on under the surface in everyday interactions.
Why do people shut down when you confront them too directly? Why are we more persuaded by stories than statistics? Why does one post go viral while another flops? Communication theories helped me move from "hmm that's interesting" to "here's what's actually happening."

And that shift from vague vibes to analytical understanding was one of the most empowering takeaways of the semester.

And when someone gives me that confused look, I won't just smile awkwardly anymore. Because now, I actually know what I'm talking about. So I didn't take a class on "how to talk." I took a class on how we build relationships, shape institutions, and navigate the social world through communication. Which, by the way, is kind of everything.

Works Cited

Dainton, M., & Zelley, E. D. (2022). *Applying communication theory for professional life* (5th ed.). Sage.

Phelps, A. (2025, April 17). Theory of Planned Behavior. Lecture presented at the University of Southern California. Los Angeles.