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Margaret Jane Pitts  
*University of Arizona*

Alice Fanari  
*Northeastern University*

R. Amanda Cooper  
*University of Connecticut*

Jian Jiao  
*Boise State University*

Sara Kim  
*University of Louisiana Monroe*

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## The Grounded Model of Communication Savoring: Theory Development and Age Cohort Study

Margaret Jane Pitts<sup>1</sup>  
*University of Arizona, AZ, USA*

Alice Fanari  
*Northeastern University, MA, USA*

R. Amanda Cooper  
*University of Connecticut, CT, USA*

Jian Jiao  
*Boise State University, ID, USA*

Sara Kim  
*University of Louisiana Monroe, LA, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*Savoring contributes to human flourishing by enabling individuals to optimize, enhance, and prolong pleasurable moments. One unique dimension of savoring, communication savoring, refers to the practice of mindfully attending to and elevating pleasurable or meaningful moments that are experienced in language and social interaction. The grounded model of communication savoring identified the types and phenomenological experiences of communication savoring. The purpose of this study is to continue grounded theoretical development of the communication savoring model by adding new cases to build and refine the model and by applying the model to a novel setting. Using a priori and emergent coding, we analyzed 268 communication savoring narratives from 107 emerging adults and 161 mature/older adults. Our findings demonstrate high fidelity across groups and suggest a refinement to one communication savoring type (i.e., extraordinary communication). Our novel application of the model also revealed generational similarities within the contexts for communication savoring (e.g., people and events) and generational differences regarding the valence (i.e., savoring the bittersweet) and target of communication savoring (i.e., giving vs. receiving). Our paper advances qualitative theory-building in positive social science and offers new insight into age differences in communication savoring.*

**KEYWORDS:** positive communication, model of communication savoring, savoring, grounded theory development, communication and aging.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Associate Professor, Department of Communication, University of Arizona.  
E-Mail: [mjpitts@arizona.edu](mailto:mjpitts@arizona.edu)

Savoring refers to the practice of noticing and enhancing positive experiences in one's life, being fully aware of the moment, and being able to identify positive emotions as they occur (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). As a scientific construct, savoring emerged from the positive psychology movement, which focuses on understanding the processes, practices, and traits that support human flourishing and make life worth living (Bryant, 1989; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). While previous research has shown that savoring leads to mindful awareness (Cheung & Ng, 2020), positive affect (Tirpak et al., 2019), and relational satisfaction (Borelli et al., 2015; Borelli et al., 2020), scholars are only beginning to understand the specific language and communication features that promote savoring in social interactions. Much of the goodness and growth that people experience occurs within their closest relationships (Lee et al., 2018). Connection and intimacy with others promote progress toward personal goals and ideals, health, and well-being (Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017), yet little is known about how this is accomplished through communication. One example is the grounded model of communication savoring (Pitts, 2019).

Seeking to integrate positive psychology and positive communication, Pitts (2019) initiated the first steps in a grounded model of communication savoring by investigating the experience of communication savoring among emerging adults. As a result, Pitts (2019) proposed communication savoring as a distinct construct defining it as: "The process of mindfully attending to pleasurable or meaningful social interaction in real, remembered, or anticipated/imagined encounters and enhancing or prolonging the positive affect" (p. 254). The initial investigation established the phenomenological experience of communication savoring, its conceptual and operational definitions, and initial typology of seven categories.

Still in its nascency, the model of communication savoring requires validation, refinement, and additional comparative analyses to strengthen its theoretical contribution to the field of positive communication. Qualitative theory development requires testing initial findings in additional samples and contexts, as well as searching for confirming and disconfirming cases (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, the aim of this paper is to engage in the theoretical refinement of the grounded model of communication savoring through validation and testing of the initial typology using a larger, demographically similar sample of emerging adults and a comparison sample of mature and older adults. Theoretical refinement is an important step in the development of the grounded model of communication savoring to identify its potential for transferability across age groups, as well as clarify its conceptual and operational definition (Busse et al., 2017).

## **Savoring**

In their groundbreaking work, Bryant and Veroff (2007) defined savoring as the "capacity to attend to, appreciate, and enhance the positive experiences in one's life" (p. 87). As a meta-cognitive activity, for savoring to occur, individuals must first become aware that they are enjoying or appreciating a moment, and then act to enhance the pleasure. This requires the individual to be free of stressors or distractions, to be fully present in the moment, and to be able to identify and optimize positive emotions as they occur (Bryant, 1989). Although savoring requires present-moment awareness, people can also savor past and future events through reminiscence and anticipation (Bryant et al., 2011; Chun et al., 2017).

Research on savoring has yielded many positive findings. Savoring practices help to maintain psychological resources such as resilience, optimism, hope, and self-efficacy in the face of daily stressors (Chadwick et al., 2021; Sytine et al., 2019; Tighe et al., 2022; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). Savoring has been shown to increase positive affect (Jose et al., 2012; Tirpak et al., 2019) and life satisfaction (Garland et al., 2017), and can mitigate negative experiences by decreasing negative affect and depression (Hurley & Kwon, 2012; Smith & Hollinger-Smith,

2015). Further, savoring can be optimized when done as a social/relational activity (i.e., relational savoring; Borelli et al., 2020). The act of sharing a cherished moment with others intensifies the individual's experience of savoring and may also promote savoring for the partner (Pitts et al., 2019). Savoring positive events in romantic relationships leads to increased relationship quality (Costa-Ramvalho et al., 2015) and enhances positive affect in long-distance relationships (Borelli et al., 2015).

### **Communication Savoring**

Narrower in scope than generalized savoring, communication savoring refers to the experience of recognizing and enhancing pleasurable or meaningful social interactions that may occur implicitly or explicitly through verbal or nonverbal messages. Pitts (2019) applied principles of phenomenology (Gallagher, 2022) and constructivist ground theory (Charmaz, 2014) to develop the first grounded model of communication savoring. The initial model was built from an analysis of narratives recounted by college students about a communication moment they savored and what that experience was like. Communication savoring emerged as a distinct phenomenon in which individuals savor specific and vivid communication moments by attending to, enjoying, and enhancing present, remembered, or anticipated interactions.

The grounded model of communication savoring centers on several key assumptions. First, people recognize and articulate specific communication moments they cherish and hold on to, suggesting that those interpersonal interactions could themselves become pleasurable experiences to be savored (Pitts et al., 2019). Like savoring, communication savoring necessitates purposive attention and mindfulness, does not occur under conditions of cognitive overload, and is related to but distinct from other types of positive communication constructs, including memorable messages (Knapp et al., 1981) and peak communication (Gordon, 1985; Mirivel, 2019; for a full review, see Pitts, 2019). In addition, communication savoring creates pleasure beyond pleasure, is rooted in social interactions, and features language that can encourage others to savor a particular experience. For example, listening to a person expressing gratitude can direct another to mindfully attend to and thus savor a specific event.

Pitts (2019) also highlighted the potential role of communication in amplifying and enhancing positive effects of individually savored experiences through social interactions and meaning making. Recently, communication scholars have started to examine the positive effects of communication savoring on subjective well-being. Jiao et al. (2021) suggest that one-time communication savoring interventions might be indirectly related to higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction through positive and negative affect. In addition to offering conceptual and operational definitions of communication, perhaps the most important outcome of Pitts' (2019) work was the development of the communication savoring typology. The typology describes seven communication experiences people savor either as a unique type or in combination: aesthetic communication, communication presence, nonverbal communication, recognition and acknowledgment, relational communication, extraordinary communication, and implicitly shared communication (see Table 1). Because the typology is at the center of the grounded model of communication savoring, we began our grounded theory development by focusing our attention there.

**Table 1**  
*Communication Savoring Typology*

Type of Communication Savoring	Definition
<b>Aesthetic communication</b>	Savoring “the beauty and playfulness of language,” such as colorful or unexpected language that creates a pleasurable emotional response.
<b>Communication presence</b>	Savoring moments in which individuals are fully immersed in an interaction and strongly connected to their conversation partners, often without being aware of time, presence of others, and other environmental stimuli.
<b>Nonverbal communication</b>	Savoring messages that are communicated through means other than talk, such as gaze, touch, vocal warmth, and space.
<b>Recognition and acknowledgment</b>	Savoring messages of praise and affirmation that are either sent or received.
<b>Relational communication</b>	Savoring talk that moves relationships “toward greater intimacy or better understanding.”
<b>Extraordinary communication*</b>	Savoring “‘landmark’ communication events or moments that are unique, special, or novel.”
<b>Implicitly shared communication</b>	Savoring a sense of collective bonding and connection that arises through mutual experience and a perception that explicit communication about the experience would dampen it.

*Note.* All direct quotes come from Pitts (2019, p. 244).

\* *Routine communication* emerged as a more nuanced dimension of *extraordinary communication*. We, therefore, suggest relabeling this type of communication savoring as *(extra)ordinary communication*.

## Validating, Refining, and Testing the Grounded Model of Communication Savoring

### *Validation through Qualitative Trustworthiness*

Consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), the primary purpose of this study was to begin qualitative validation of the grounded model of communication savoring. Thus, we tested the typology within the same population (i.e., emerging adults) and within a new population (i.e., mature/older adults). Replicating qualitative findings using a new sample from the same population is essential to demonstrate the trustworthiness and theoretical saturation of the initial categories while testing the model within a new sample helps to establish transferability and robustness of categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sousa, 2014). Specifically, we sought to meet Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) standard of *credibility* through persistent observation (i.e., returning to the original population sampled), peer debriefing (i.e., collaborative coding and decision-making), and negative case analysis (i.e., seeking data that do not fit within the typology, yet clarify its conceptual boundaries). We met the standard of *dependability* by replicating the procedures outlined in the initial study with a larger but demographically similar sample of emerging adults.

The standard of *transferability* refers to the degree to which qualitative findings can apply to cases, groups, and contexts outside of the initial study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish transferability and build additional cases for grounded theory development, we engaged in additional empirical testing by eliciting communication savoring moments from a novel comparison sample of mature/older adults to see how well their experiences were represented in the typology. Our replication process also established the *confirmability* of the communication savoring model. Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are grounded in the data and the robustness of theoretical categories with respect to clarity, explanatory power, and fit to data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following research question guided our validation.

**RQ1:** To what extent are the seven communication savoring types represented in (a) a demographically similar sample of emerging adults and (b) a sample of mature and older adults?

### ***Refining through Theoretical Sampling***

In addition to validating the typology, we also sought to test and refine the overall construct of communication savoring through theoretical sampling. Glaser and Strauss (1967) established *theoretical sampling* (i.e., an iterative process of data collection and analysis that takes place after the initial categories have been developed), as a key step in qualitative theory development. This process allows researchers to seek additional data that confirm or contradict initial findings with each round of data collection to further refine the theoretical construct (Glaser, 1978; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). According to Glaser (1978), “This process produces cumulatively *intense theoretical sensitivity* into one’s data as the integrative matrix of the emerging theory grows denser” (p. 36). Thus, we used theoretical sampling to search for novel and/or contradictory instances of communication savoring to test and refine Pitts’ (2019) initial theorizing. The following research question guided our refinement.

**RQ2:** What, if any, novel or contradictory types of communication savoring emerged in savoring accounts offered by (a) emerging adults and (b) mature/older adults?

### ***Extending through Comparative Thematic Analysis***

Beyond validating and refining, we also sought to test the model through a novel thematic analysis comparing two generational cohorts. Because communication and savoring are both developmental phenomena (Bryant et al., 2011; Pecchioni et al., 2005; Yingling, 2004), we compared the savoring accounts of emerging and mature/older adults to explore the potential for generational similarities and differences. Emerging and mature/older adulthood represent different developmental stages that may influence what communication events people savor. For example, emerging adults are in a developmental stage marked by periods of instability, self-focus, and identity exploration, where the primary focus is on navigating changing roles, relationships, and responsibilities (Arnett, 2004).

In comparison, mature/older adulthood is a developmental phase marked by generativity, established identities, long-term relationships, and a sense of place in the world (Erikson, 1963). Previous research has suggested broad generational differences in the psychology of savoring. For example, older adults have been found to savor less frequently than emerging and middle-aged adults, possibly due to a decreased desire for hedonic pleasure and high-arousal positive emotions (Palmer & Gentzler, 2019; Ramsey & Gentzler, 2014). While savoring can occur at any stage of

the life span (Bryant et al., 2011), the frequency, motivations, and strategies for savoring may differ (Marques-Pinto et al., 2020). Thus, our final research question begins to address the “great unrealized challenge ... to identify the life-span developmental stages and processes through which children and adults adopt, expand, and revise their savoring repertoire in relation to positive experiences throughout life” (Bryant et al., 2011, p.118).

**RQ3:** What are the similarities and differences between the central themes found in emerging adult and mature/older adult savoring accounts?

## Method

Data for this project were collected through open-ended narrative questionnaires and analyzed using a process of a priori coding, emergent coding, and constant comparison. We used a grounded approach to validating, refining, and testing the communication savoring model; first by establishing qualitative benchmarks of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), second through theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and third by conducting a novel comparative analysis of savoring practices between two generational groups (Charmaz, 2014).

**Table 2**  
*Participants’ Demographic Characteristics*

Characteristic	Emerging adults		Mature/older adults	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender				
Female	70	65.4	100	62.1
Male	37	34.6	61	37.9
Race or ethnicity				
White	77	72.0	112	69.6
Hispanic/Latinx	13	12.1	21	13.0
Black	4	3.7	7	4.3
Asian	3	2.8	5	3.1
Multiple selected	7	6.5	10	6.2
Other	3	2.8	6	3.7

*Note.* For gender, participants had the option to choose “Other” or “Prefer not to answer,” but these were dropped from this table because they were not selected by any participants. Similarly, no participant selected the race/ethnicity option “Pacific Islander,” so we dropped this option from this table. The option “Prefer not to answer” was also included for race/ethnicity; since this option was only selected by two mature/older adults, we included them in the “Other” category.

## Participants

Participants in this study were 107 emerging adults (18–25 years of age) and 161 mature/older adults (35–81 years of age).<sup>2</sup> The emerging adult participants had a mean age of 20.58

<sup>2</sup> In total, 137 emerging adults and 195 mature/older adults completed the survey, but 30 emerging adult responses and 34 mature/older adult responses were ultimately removed. Seven emerging adults and 19 mature/older adults were removed because they completed the survey in less than 8 minutes. Responses for nine participants (five emerging adults and four mature/older adults) were removed because they completed the survey more than once (we retained only their first responses). Ten emerging adults and 11 mature/older adults were removed because they did not report a communication savoring experience. Eight participants who reported being emerging adults were removed because they did not meet the age criteria.

years ( $SD = 1.08$ ), 65.4% ( $n = 70$ ) identified as female, and 34.6% ( $n = 37$ ) identified as male. The mature/older adult participants had a mean age of 51.31 years ( $SD = 8.76$ ), 62.1% ( $n = 100$ ) identified as female, and 37.9% ( $n = 61$ ) identified as male. See Table 2.

## Recruitment and Procedures

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board from the first author's institution, we used convenience network sampling techniques to recruit participants. Undergraduate students in communication courses were offered a small amount of course credit to assist with recruitment and participate in this study. These participants accessed the study via a weblink to an informed consent page. Upon giving their consent, the students were asked to invite at least two individuals in their social network who were 35 years of age or older to participate in the study, which automatically generated an electronic invitation to participate. After the referral process, students chose to terminate or to continue their participation by completing the narrative questionnaire. Consistent with the methods used in the original study, the questionnaire opened with a description of "communication savoring." Participants were then prompted to write descriptively about a communication moment they savored.<sup>3</sup>

## Coding and Analysis

We used NVivo 12 to organize the data and facilitate collaborative analysis. Data analysis proceeded in four phases, using inductive and abductive qualitative strategies that were most appropriate to answer each research question (Charmaz, 2014).

To address RQ1, we applied Pitts' (2019) communication savoring typology as an a priori coding scheme. In a priori coding, the scheme is created as an analytic guide before analyzing a dataset (Blair, 2015), so this technique was appropriate to validate the communication savoring typology in two unique samples. The coding process consisted of reading and rereading each narrative and, when relevant, assigning an a priori code representing one of the seven savoring categories. When a narrative reflected more than one type of savoring, we assigned the code for the most salient type. Salience was determined through collaborative discussion and based on cues such as vividness of language, primacy in the narrative, and whether the type of savoring appeared in the primary or ancillary narrative. We purposefully chose to retain only the most salient type of savoring to stay faithful to the coding procedures identified in Pitts' (2019) original study and to assess the degree to which each type of communication savoring represented a distinct category of savoring. We also wanted to avoid double-counting communication savoring types by assigning more than one savoring type per narrative (and thus inflating our frequencies). Finally, we chose to retain the most salient type of communication savoring because only a small number of narratives (less than 5% of the total sample) included more than one type of communication savoring (i.e., maximum two communication savoring types). During this process, we also searched for negative cases (i.e., cases that did not fit within the original communication savoring typology). When narratives did not fit into any of the a priori categories, we assigned a novel open

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<sup>3</sup> The exact text of the prompt was as follows: "In as many details as possible, tell me about a COMMUNICATION moment that you SAVORED. Try to capture everything from all the words that were said to all of the gestures and other non-verbal cues (touch, sounds other than talk, facial expressions, how close were people standing, what was the sensory experience like, etc.). Make sure to detail who was involved. Where and when did it occur? For how long? In your writing, try to bring me into the scene with you so that I can experience it myself. It might help if you think about writing it like a story or a movie script."

code (i.e., a short, unique label that captures the essence of the small chunk of data) specific to the data to be used during the second phase of analysis.

During the second phase of analysis, we engaged in open coding to identify novel or contradictory types of communication savoring (RQ2) and to explore similarities and differences in savoring between emerging and mature/older adults (RQ3). To begin, the novel open codes assigned during the first phase of coding were examined and combined using comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2014). We then conducted emergent open coding with the full data set, looking specifically for similarities and differences between the generational cohorts. We assigned open codes to each narrative using brief, descriptive, and meaningful labels specific to the data. The purpose of open coding was to look beyond a priori categories to make comparisons of communication savoring between the generational cohorts using a combination of inductive, deductive, and abductive thinking. Finally, we used constant comparison and analytical procedures consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to merge, collapse, and combine open codes into increasingly broader themes and categories where relevant. Overall, while a priori coding allowed us to validate the original typology (RQ1), open coding helped us to refine the typology (RQ2) and identify generational differences (RQ3).

Throughout data analysis, we used a collaborative coding technique with regular peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Collaborative coding involves an iterative process of group and individual decision-making, where agreement is achieved through “joint focus and dialogue ... to produce an agreed interpretation” (Cornish et al., 2014, p. 79). Collaborative coding strengthens credibility in qualitative data analysis by integrating multiple informed viewpoints that are “brought to bear on the analysis and interpretation of the data” (Cornish et al., 2014, p. 79). All four coders were trained by the first author through weekly collaborative sessions approximately two hours each. After several collaborative coding sessions, the team began to code in dyads and then independently until all the data were coded. The team met weekly to ensure consistency in the process by collectively reviewing each coder’s work, discussing preliminary categories, and developing final categories.

## Findings

The broad purpose of this study was to begin grounded theory development through refinement, validation, and extension of the grounded model of communication savoring. Toward this end, our first goal was to validate the communication savoring typology (RQ1). Our analysis of the a priori coding demonstrated high fidelity with both samples. Specifically, 96% ( $n = 103$ ) of the emerging adult narratives and 93% of the mature/older adult narratives ( $n = 149$ ) fit one of the seven communication savoring categories, thus validating the initial typology (see Table 3). For both emerging adults and mature/older adults, extraordinary communication occurred most frequently ( $n = 32$ , 30%; and  $n = 48$ , 30%, respectively). For emerging adults, aesthetic communication occurred least frequently ( $n = 6$ , 6%), and for mature/older adults, implicitly shared communication occurred least frequently ( $n = 8$ , 5%).

We also examined narratives for new, nuanced, and negative cases to expand or refine the typology (RQ2). By examining negative cases (i.e., instances in the data that appear to contradict emergent patterns), the analyst may deepen, broaden, or clarify preliminary categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although infrequent ( $n = 4\%$  among emerging adults;  $n = 7\%$  among mature/older adults), our analysis revealed savoring *routine communication* as a novel experience not accounted for in Pitts’ (2019) original typology. We coded instances as routine communication when participants savored interpersonal encounters that were recurrent, mundane, and ordinary, but became special and meaningful through recurrence. For example, one participant described a

routine visit to her grandparents as a “moment [that] brings so much joy and happiness ... that I will cherish for the rest of my life.” Savoring her routine conversations with friends, another participant stated, “Whenever I talk to my friends ... there is no specific conversation that stands out. ... We talk about a multitude of topics (the stock market, Russia, environmental issues) and have thoughtful and adult conversations that are meaningful.” Although these interactions may appear small or mundane, participants described experiencing them as extraordinary or special. For example, one mature/older adult explained:

*Some of my most favorite communication moments are the simplest, the easiest, and the most joyful. ... When my girls come home from college and we stand around the kitchen island just chatting, laughing, reminiscing, talking about life, faith, their opinions on world matters ... these are the moments of communication that I savor so much.*

Savoring routine communication did not achieve a level of saturation to suggest a new savoring type; rather, we treated routine communication as a refinement to the *extraordinary communication* category, the idea being that experiences of ordinary events can become extraordinary through mindful attention and purposive recurrence, a point we take up more in the Discussion.

Finally, with RQ3, we sought to extend the model through a novel thematic analysis comparing communication savoring accounts offered by emerging and mature/adults. Our analysis revealed four themes. Themes one and two demonstrate generational similarities in communication savoring. Themes three and four suggest generational differences.

**Table 3**  
*Frequencies of Communication Savoring Types*

Communication savoring type	Emerging adults		Mature/older adults		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Aesthetic communication	6	6	17	11	23	8.5
Communication presence	9	8	19	12	28	10.5
Nonverbal communication	8	7	14	9	22	8.0
Recognition and acknowledgment	15	14	28	17	43	16.0
Relational communication	17	16	15	9	32	12.0
Extraordinary communication	32	30	48	30	80	30.0
Implicitly shared communication	16	15	8	5	24	9.0
Routine communication*	4	4	12	7	16	6.0
Total	107	100	161	100	268	100

*Note.* For emerging adults, 96% of the narratives fit within the seven types identified by Pitts (2019). For mature/older adults, 93% of the narratives fit within the seven types identified by Pitts (2019). \**Routine communication* emerged as a new category of communication savoring.

### **Cherishing Communication within Close Relationships**

*Cherishing communication within close relationships* emerged as a predominant theme for both age groups. This theme centered on participants’ tendency to savor communication moments involving their closest and most important relationships. Parents, grandparents, siblings, childhood friends, romantic partners, and mentors were at the core of participants’ savoring narratives. The

prevalence of narratives featuring communication moments within close relationships suggests that, for emerging and mature/older adults, one’s interpersonal network provides a generative relational context for communication savoring.

Emerging and mature/older adults chose to report on a savored communication moment that occurred with people who make up their inner sphere, savoring moments of intimacy, connection, and vulnerability with their loved ones (see Table 4). For example, one mature/older adult explained the importance of savoring in these core relationships: “The moments I savor now are more meaningful because they take place with a family that I created, which is special. There’s no other relationship in life that compares to that of with your children.” Emerging adults recounted similar experiences: “I like savoring important communication events and the small ones as well; for example, savoring moments like making my mother laugh so hard. She means the world to me.” Overall, this theme demonstrates commonality between the two age groups with respect to savoring communication moments within core interpersonal relationships.

**Table 4**  
*Relationship in which Savoring Occurs Most Frequently*

Relationship	Example	Emerging adults		Mature/older adults	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Family	Parents, siblings, grandparents, children	64	60	99	61
Friendship	Friends, roommates, teammates	26	24	5	3
Romantic	Boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse, partner	12	11	42	26
Other	Celebrities, mentors, strangers	5	5	15	9
Total		107	100	161	100

**Savoring Parallel Experiences**

*Savoring parallel experiences* reflects participants’ tendency to savor similar communicative events, regardless of their age, but appropriate to their developmental stage. For example, across both cohorts, participants described savoring declarations of love, deep and vulnerable conversations, recognizing milestones and accomplishments, and extraordinary conversations. However, the specific experiences they savored were reflective of the participants’ place in the life span—metaphorically, their stories ran on parallel but separate tracks. For example, while both emerging and mature/older adults savored expressions of love from a romantic partner, emerging adults savored these moments with a new love interest and mature/older adults with a spouse or long-time partner. Describing their first declarations of love, an emerging adult said: “The butterflies multiplied and tried to fly harder than they ever have before. I could not control them, nor could I control my emotions and the smile on my face. ‘I love you too,’ I said.” Mature/older adults also savored declarations of love, but rather than focusing on first-time declarations, they recounted later life experiences, such as renewing marriage vows: “He took my hand and asked to remarry me. He said how much he loved me and wanted to renew our vows. ... It was a beautiful surprise.” These parallel experiences show that certain types of communication

events are likely to be savored across the life span, but they may be experienced differently at various stages.

### **Savoring the Bittersweet**

While the previous two themes highlight similarities between emerging and mature/older adults, the final two themes reflect differences. The theme *savoring the bittersweet* describes communication moments experienced through a complex blend of opposite yet complementary emotions: joy and sadness, gratitude and grief, hope and fear, and contentment and nostalgia. While these communication moments may appear difficult or unpleasant at face value, participants cherished them because they captured the meaning, emotional complexity, and significance of an event or conversation. As seen in the following exemplars, both emerging and mature/older adults described moments of savoring the bittersweet.

*Emerging adult: My mother and I spoke for about two hours [about the death of her brother at 37 years of age] and tears were shed, and memories were brought back to life. This moment helped bring my mother and I closer as well as giving me a newfound respect for the difficulty of losing her brother.*

*Mature/older adult: I kissed his [dying father's] forehead and then I touched my forehead to his, like I was trying to transfer my love to him. With tears in my eyes, I stepped back, but at the same time wanting to just hold on. I felt just thankful and blessed I got there in time to have one last moment.*

However, a generational trend emerged wherein mature/older adults described savoring bittersweet moments more frequently than emerging adults. Emerging adults mostly savored moments of “pure joy,” “glowing happiness,” “love,” and “bursting excitement” with friends and family, while mature/older adults also savored moments that were, in the words of one participant, “positive, heartfelt, humorous, and ... sometimes serious.” Mature/older adult narratives also included more serious communication moments, such as difficult conversations, farewells, or final moments with a loved one. The bittersweet narratives provided by mature/older adults captured the emotional complexity present in some contexts and highlighted the capacity to savor communication moments beyond simple pleasures. For example, one mature/older adult savored the atmosphere of unity, hope, and support at a fundraising event while listening to a speech about the terrible effects of Parkinson’s disease. Despite the pain and suffering filling the room, she was deeply moved: “I thought about all other negative possibilities, but then I thought, *this is a good thing*. Bringing people together and keeping spirits happy with some fun entertainment and meanwhile bringing awareness and raising money for research.” This quote highlights mature/older adults’ ability to recognize and savor both the joy and pain present in some communication moments.

### **Receiving versus Giving**

The final theme, *receiving versus giving*, captures a second generational difference. Emerging adults reported more *receiving* narratives, and older/mature adults reported more *giving* narratives. We assigned the *receiving* code when participants reported savoring communication

moments in which they were the direct recipient of positive or meaningful communication. We assigned the *giving* code when participants reported savoring communication moments in which they intentionally offered positive or meaningful communication to another, including praise, recognition, love, affection, or inspiration. Participants in both age groups savored giving and receiving messages such as compliments, emotional support, public acknowledgments, verbal and nonverbal displays of affection, eulogies, constructive feedback, tough love, and encouragement. However, as with savoring the bittersweet, a generational trend emerged wherein mature/older adults reported more instances of giving, and emerging adults reported more instances of receiving.

Emerging adult narratives tended to reflect experiences of deep pride and satisfaction in being recognized for their maturity, sense of responsibility, hard work, or personal growth, especially from their parents or mentor figure. One emerging adult reported savoring “my parents verbalizing how proud they are of me for doing so well in school. ... My parents’ approval means the world to me.” Mature/older adult narratives reflected a greater tendency to savor verbal and nonverbal moments of giving (e.g., offering undivided attention and emotional support, delivering a eulogy, writing a letter of recommendation, praising someone, or creating the perfect meeting at work). This was true across broader relationships, such as close family members, romantic partners, and mentor–mentee relationships, as well as patient–caregiver interactions, serendipitous encounters, and among acquaintances. For example, a mature/older adult savored the atmosphere of compassion, humility, and kindness she provided to a homeless patient:

*I thought of the old saying that one cannot judge a book by its cover and that compassionate acts, no matter how small they seem ... [such as] washing a foot and dressing a blister, can be so meaningful to the receiver of the act. This experience has shaped my patient interactions ever since. I am grateful for the man with the Hate tattoo.*

Participants also savored communication moments that involved both giving *and* receiving, suggesting that giving and receiving are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can be savored together. Mature/older adults were more likely to describe savoring moments of giving *and* receiving than emerging adults were.

## **Discussion**

### **Validation and Refinement of the Communication Savoring Typology**

This study advances qualitative theory-building in the positive social sciences through the continued development, refinement, and testing of the grounded model of communication savoring. In qualitative research, “‘theory generation’ implies a continuous process of elaboration of new knowledge in systems of established meaning, an active accumulative process of representation and the re-representation of scientific knowledge” (Sousa, 2014, p. 217). As a first step in validating the communication savoring model, we analyzed data from a demographically similar sample as the one analyzed in Pitts’ (2019) original study (i.e., emerging adults) and also data from a novel sample (i.e., mature/older adults). We used a priori coding and constant comparison between the two samples to measure the robustness of the original typology against new data. We found that the seven categories from the original typology were represented in 94% of the total narratives (96% for emerging adults and 93% for mature/older adults), thus establishing the validity of the typology. We also engaged in emergent, open coding to see if any new types of communication savoring were present. Although we did not identify a new category, we did

identify *routine communication* as an extension to the preexisting *extraordinary communication* type. Thus, with the small refinement addressed below, we are confident the typology is valid, robust, and ready for further empirical testing.

Using emergent coding, we sought contradictory or novel instances of communication savoring not captured in the initial typology. This process revealed *routine communication* as a promising finding in the new dataset, suggesting a subtle refinement to the original typology to include *ordinary* communication as part of the *extraordinary* category. We suggest relabeling *extraordinary* communication to *(extra)ordinary* communication. Participants not only savored novel communication moments (e.g., first-time experiences, graduation, end-of-life conversations), which Pitts (2019) labeled *extraordinary communication*; but also more mundane (*ordinary*) events happening in their daily lives, such as calling a grandparent on the way to work or anticipating conversations with college-age children returning home for the holidays.

Communication savoring narratives revealed that *ordinary* communication encounters become *extraordinary* through recurrence and anticipation. Indeed, simple acts of savoring, such as stopping to smell the roses, can infuse even the most mundane daily activities with positivity (Gregory et al., 2021). Daily positive events, such as those encountered in routine activities, have been associated with decreases in depressive cognitions over and above the effect of negative events (Nezlek & Gable, 2001). Savoring ordinary communication may be especially important for individuals who have fewer daily positive events to savor because those individuals receive the biggest benefit from savoring the positive experiences that do arise (Jose et al., 2012). And, although these data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, one outcome of pandemic-related restrictions was even greater recognition that savoring mundane events, such as going for walks, gardening, and pursuing hobbies, can be important sources of positive affect (Lades et al., 2020). Although savoring routine communication did not achieve data saturation to establish a separate category (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), its juxtaposition with savoring novel events suggests that savoring routine communication can be best understood as an extension to savoring extraordinary communication. Thus, we suggest incorporating routine communication into the extraordinary communication category and modifying the conceptual definition.

Extraordinary communication (Pitts, 2019): “*Landmark*” communication events or moments that are unique, special, or novel. [original]

(Extra)ordinary communication: *Communication events or moments that are unique, special, novel, or become so through routine enactment.* [revised]

Including meaningful routine encounters as part of the extraordinary category more fully represents the scope of human experience that individuals savor, which includes both novel or special events and ordinary or mundane events (Hurley & Kwon, 2013). This small refinement gives greater precision to the types of communication encounters people savor. We thus recommend future studies adopt *(extra)ordinary communication* in place of *extraordinary communication* in the types of communication savoring.

### **Generational Differences in Communication Savoring: Change and Continuity**

Our findings also revealed similarities and differences between emerging and mature/older adults, suggesting that the focus and practice of communication savoring may vary depending on one’s developmental stage. It is unsurprising, perhaps, that differences emerged, as both

communication (Pecchioni et al., 2005) and savoring (Bryant et al., 2011) are recognized as inherently developmental processes resulting in a broadened repertoire of strategies as individuals acquire life experiences. Indeed, the narratives provided by mature/older adults in this study demonstrated a broadened perspective (e.g., capacity to savor the bittersweet, other-focused savoring, complex blend of savoring) compared to emerging adults. These findings are in line with Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions and Carstensen's (1991) socioemotional selectivity theory (Charles & Carstensen, 2009), both of which suggest that, as individuals age, they gain greater ability to recognize and capitalize on positive emotions, while also developing greater emotional complexity and broadened perspectives.

Our findings also demonstrated similarities among both age groups with respect to the relationships and events they savored. Consistent with life span developmental perspectives (Charles & Carstensen, 2009; Harwood, 2018; Nussbaum et al., 2000), our findings suggest both continuity and change with respect to communication savoring. That is, some aspects of communication savoring demonstrated high consistency for both age groups (i.e., cherishing communication within close relationships and savoring parallel experiences), while others demonstrated change through a broadened perspective for mature/older adults (i.e., savoring the bittersweet and receiving versus giving). Notably, regardless of age, all seven of the communication savoring types persisted across the generational cohorts (see Table 3), but with evidence of generational differences in the reported complexity, valence, and target of savoring.

Improved abilities to self-regulate and manage (positive) emotions, combined with an increased focus on meaningful engagement later in life, helped to explain the difference in findings for mature/older adults (Charles & Carstensen, 2009). For example, the greater presence of giving versus receiving among mature/older participants suggests a developmental change regarding the target of positive communication (i.e., self-versus other) that may be attributable to accrued wisdom (Nussbaum, 2013) and communication competence (Pitts & Harwood, 2015) across the life cycle—turning from self to other. As individuals age, they experience socioemotional developmental gains, which favor a sharper focus on deriving emotional meaning by turning toward close relationships rather than continuing to expand horizons (Carstensen et al., 2003). Although both age groups in our study savored giving and receiving praise and recognition, mature/older adults showed greater proclivity to savor the *giving*, while emerging adults savored the *receiving*, therefore demonstrating differences in the pursuit and appreciation of emotionally meaningful goals between mature/older adults and emerging adults (Carstensen et al., 2003).

This shift from *self* to *other* may also reflect Bryant and Veroff's (2007) concepts of self-focused versus world-focused savoring. In self-focused savoring, positive feelings originate within oneself (e.g., basking in received praise and recognition), whereas in world-focused savoring, they surface in response to something external to oneself (e.g., savoring the joy in praising and recognizing others). World-focused savoring involves "a sense of communication or merging with something more compelling than our own individual person" (Bryant & Veroff, 2007, p. 125). As such, world-focused savoring requires greater attention to the social and physical environment, an awareness more likely achieved by mature/older adults than emerging adults (Bryant et al., 2011). Thus, our findings about giving versus receiving show potential for generational differences in world-focused versus self-focused savoring. Mature/older adults engaged in more world-focused savoring by attending to the other (giving) rather than the self (receiving). Similarly, and consistent with their developmental phase marked by individuation (Yingling, 2004), personal discovery, independence, and self-focus (Arnett, 2004), emerging adults reported more instances of self-focused savoring, finding pleasure in being the recipients of praise and recognition.

Our results also suggest an interesting shift not only in the origination and target of savoring for mature/older adults, but also in their complexity and valence. Bryant et al. (2011) suggest that the ability to savor basic emotions (such as joy) should develop earlier in the life span, whereas the ability and opportunity to savor more complicated emotions (such as gratitude or grief) should emerge later in the life span. Our findings regarding savoring the bittersweet support this argument. Communication savoring appears to develop in complexity with greater life experience. Like nostalgia (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016), savoring bittersweet moments may confer psychological and social health benefits, especially to mature/older adults, because of the juxtaposition of positive and negative emotions. Mature/older adults narrated more instances of savoring the bittersweet than did emerging adults; they showed greater complexity in savoring by blending emotions of joy, happiness, and excitement alongside emotions of sadness, hurt, and grief. While this may appear counterintuitive given the often hedonic nature of savoring (e.g., seeking and enhancing pleasure), our findings highlight its eudemonic component (e.g., pursuit of meaning, virtue, and human excellence), suggesting that it is possible (and enriching) to savor moments that might appear negative at face value but are deeply imbued with meaning (Kringelbach & Berridge, 2009).

Previous research has shown that people who have experienced and overcome adversity may also broaden their capacity to savor (Croft et al., 2014). Adults with greater life experiences may be better able to recognize and appreciate the wellspring of emotions that arise from joyful as well as difficult (but meaningful) encounters (Charles & Carstensen, 2009; Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2008). It may also be the case that, as compared to emerging adults, mature/older adults have greater experience with life's uncertainties, which may lead, as Gregory et al. (2021) suggest, to more opportunities to savor even the bittersweet. Thus, savoring the bittersweet strengthens the dimensionality of communication savoring as a developmental construct, as individuals gradually acquire a deeper appreciation for difficult experiences, enjoying opportunities for self-discovery, positive reappraisal (Cheung & Ng, 2020), and growth (Bryant & Smith, 2015; Nowlan et al., 2015).

We also uncovered generational similarities consistent with social dimensions of aging that demonstrate continuity across the life span (Charles & Carstensen, 2009). Specifically, our findings on communication savoring highlight the importance of close relationships and milestone moments for both emerging and mature/older adults. The consistency with which the two groups reported savoring communication moments within close relationships—appearing in about 60% of narratives (see Table 4)—demonstrates that relational ties are prominent across the life span. However, what constituted a close relationship differed between the groups. While mature/older adults described savoring moments with friends in 3% of the narratives, emerging adults savored moments with friends, roommates, or teammates in 24% of the narratives. These findings are consistent with the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1991), which suggests that close relationships become more significant and salient for individuals as they mature, especially within the family context. As time horizons shrink, older adults become more selective in how they invest resources in their relationships, adjusting their social networks to minimize emotional risks and best satisfy their relational needs. On the other hand, consistent with their developmental stage (Arnett, 2004), emerging adults' perspectives expand as they take risks and pursue new goals and relationships, leading them to savor communication across broader interpersonal relationships (e.g., friends, teammates, celebrities, and strangers). Nevertheless, both age groups reported in detail communication experiences they savored. From a life span perspective, this is good news because it demonstrates that savoring may be an adaptive skill that promotes happiness and well-being regardless of one's age (Smith & Bryant, 2017).

## Limitations and Future Research

The primary purpose of this study was to refine, validate, and extend the grounded model of communication savoring, which we believe we have achieved. Nonetheless, our findings should be considered in light of the following limitations. First, to replicate Pitts' (2019) findings, we restricted our analysis to one primary type of savoring, namely, communication savoring. While this restriction was helpful in demonstrating the robustness of Pitts' (2019) typology, we recognize that individuals' ability to savor is not restricted to this one mode or to one experience of savoring. In fact, we found that the seven types of communication savoring were not mutually exclusive. This level of complexity is largely missing from our study.

Second, although our sample necessarily varied in age, it was otherwise fairly homogeneous with regard to race, ethnicity, and education. Grounded theory development requires testing initial findings in additional samples and contexts and searching for confirming and disconfirming cases (Charmaz, 2014). Since savoring capacities and experiences can differ across cultures (Cheung et al., 2018) and age groups (Smith & Bryant, 2016; Smith & Hanni, 2019), individuals taking up this area of scholarship should seek greater diversity, including a finer distinction in generational cohorts and different ethnolinguistic and cultural groups, since differences in languages and worldviews might influence savoring. Finally, this comparative analysis categorized emerging and mature/older adults into two separate and discrete developmental cohorts. While this was helpful for the validation of the model, it fails to capture the developmental nuances of communication savoring. Therefore, future research should consider employing a longitudinal design to examine changes in communication savoring practices over time.

To conclude, this study contributes to the ongoing theoretical development of the grounded model of communication savoring. This study validated the core of the model by demonstrating the robustness of the communication savoring typology. Next steps include developing and validating a communication savoring index and conducting additional exploratory and confirmatory empirical studies to test relationships between communication savoring and well-being outcomes, such as resilience, life satisfaction, relational satisfaction, and sense of belonging. Our findings also have practical importance. Because of the adaptive and developmental nature of human communication (Pitts & Harwood, 2015), communication savoring enables people to recognize and capitalize on the positive emotions that are generated in social interactions and has the potential to provide rich benefits individually and relationally across the life span. Building a repertoire of communication savoring practices, as well as a bank of savored experiences during emerging adulthood, may help create pathways toward savoring in later adulthood.

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## Notes on Contributors

**Margaret J. Pitts** (PhD, The Pennsylvania State University) is Associate Professor of Communication in the Department of Communication and Senior Associate Dean of the Graduate College at the University of Arizona. She is an expert in qualitative research methods in communication. She uses a positive communication lens to study lifespan transitions with a focus on interpersonal and intercultural transitions.

**Alice Fanari** (PhD, University of Arizona) is a Postdoctoral Teaching associate in communication studies at Northeastern University. Her research focuses on intercultural, interpersonal, and positive communication that facilitates cross-cultural interactions.

**R. Amanda Cooper** (PhD, University of Arizona) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Connecticut. Her research focuses on family communication and relationships surrounding end-of-life transitions.

**Jian Jiao** (PhD, University of Arizona) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Boise State University. His research focuses on close relationships and mental health.

**Sara Kim** (PhD, University of Arizona) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. Her primary research area is intercultural communication, focusing on online communication and identity management during cultural adjustment and transitions.

## ORCID

**Margaret J. Pitts**, <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7355-400X>

**Alice Fanari**, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0940-5624>

**R. Amanda Cooper**, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8771-6842>

**Jian Jiao**, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1058-8026>

**Sara Kim**, <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9300-1445>

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