



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
BONUS Valentine's Day Episode – COVID and Interpersonal Relationships

Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles
Liesel Sharabi
Stephanie Tom Tong

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Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Hello, I'm Trevor Perry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association and I'm your host on *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. Thanks for joining us for today's episode.

Hello again and welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to limit in-person gatherings, connecting virtually has become important for maintaining and developing interpersonal relationships. Some new relationships have even accelerated during the pandemic with couples moving in together sooner to avoid pandemic isolation and that sort of thing. At the same time, there are reports that the pandemic may be increasing stress, accelerating divorce and breakups. So in honor of Valentine's Day on that happy note, this special episode of *Communication Matters* looks at how COVID-19 has influenced relationships and the important role that technology plays in fostering connections. Communication researchers Liesel Sharabi and Stephanie Tom Tong join the podcast today to discuss these important issues. And let me tell you a little bit about our guests today.

Liesel Sharabi is an assistant professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University, researches in the areas of interpersonal communication, communication technologies, and romantic relationships with particular emphasis on how relationships initiate and develop on online platforms. Sharabi's research has been featured in media outlets such as *The New York Magazine*, *Men's Health*, *The BBC*, *The Huffington Post* and now *Communication Matters*. Hi, Liesel. Welcome to the podcast.

Liesel Sharabi:

Hi, thank you. It's great to be here.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Stephanie Tom Tong is an associate professor in the department of communication at Wayne State University. Tong is also the director of the social media and relational technologies, or SMART—I love those acronyms—SMART labs at Wayne State which investigate how technology affects how people make decisions about their relationships. Tong researches interpersonal communication and new media, in particular how relationships are initiated, maintained, and terminated using social media. Hi, Stephanie. Welcome to *Communication Matters*.

Stephanie Tom Tong:

Thank you. It's great to be here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So let's start with a discussion of where many relationships are beginning today and that's online. Stephanie, do you have any thoughts about how COVID-19 has influenced the formation of relationships? And we're thinking here particularly of like dating apps. Are people swiping differently? Are they engaging differently online than they did before the pandemic?

Stephanie Tom Tong:

Yeah, that's a great question I think what we have seen with the start of COVID since last year is just an increase in the use of dating apps altogether. I think as people are finding it difficult to get out and socialize, they're turning to mobile apps and websites to make those connections. So I would say that today, even before the pandemic but even more now, that virtual dating is becoming more and more normalized.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

How are people presenting themselves differently during the pandemic? These online dating apps and they have profiles. And do people present themselves any differently? Do they emphasize different things? Has that aspect of the technology of interpersonal relationship information changed anything?

Stephanie Tom Tong:

Yeah. So even before the pandemic people, were very interested in making sure that their personalities were accurately described, that they were talking about their preferences, their likes and their dislikes. But another kind of interesting trend I think that we've been seeing is that people are putting information about their health on their profiles as a marker. So a common thing to list is that they have the antibodies, that they've had the COVID, and they feel like they're protected or even some users and some daters are listing that they have gotten the vaccine as a way to kind of ensure other people that they are healthy and that they're thinking about their health and



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the health of others even in this very difficult time. They're still trying to make connections. But they're trying to kind of signal to other people that they care.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Do people say instead of long walks on the beach in the moonlight, long Zoom calls or they enjoy those personal connections?

Stephanie Tom Tong:

Yeah, actually. Some dating sites have actually incorporated that into some of their little badges and icons that they can display. So I know that Bumble actually has, Bumble's one of the more popular platforms. They actually have a little badge where people can say I'm interested in virtual dates or I'm interested in meeting up but with a mask so that they can kind of broach those topics even in a profile before they have to talk to each other.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Interesting. Now Liesel, maybe you have some thoughts about why some relationships are accelerating during the pandemic. Are there particular factors or forces or aspects of this pandemic world that motivate people I guess to choose to deepen or to move in together or to deepen their relationships with romantic partners? I'm watching one of Shonda Rhimes' shows right now and there was a discussion on that show of a partnership or a relationship and whether or not to move in together during the pandemic and if that's safer or if there's a false rationale for accelerating the relationship. Do you see that across the board?

Liesel Sharabi:

Yeah, I mean I think in online dating in particular, one interesting trend that we're seeing is that people are extending the courtship process. So they're taking more time to get to know each other because there's risk involved in meeting people face-to-face right now. So Helen Fisher is calling that slow love. So people are taking more time to sort of deepen their connection and to get to know each other before they introduce some kind of physical component to the relationship. And so for that reason, I think that with strangers, you might see sort of accelerated intimacy and then in relationships, what you have is a situation where people don't have as many alternatives right now which we know tends to increase commitment. So they're not meeting as many new people. Also, there's not as much to distract you from a relationship. So for a lot of us, I think like our hobbies are on hold, we're not seeing friends and family as much. So perhaps that's giving them more time to focus on their relationships. There's also the financial component as well where you get to split the rent if you decide to move in with a partner. So there could be practical reasons that people would be doing that as well.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Now you say that there are fewer options. Right? There's fewer partners. Is there any evidence to suggest that people are settling, that there's a tendency for people to because of everything going on in the crazy world and they need some stability so they might opt for a partnership or a relationship that isn't quite their ideal but that they just kind of settle and get comfortable because everything else is so uncomfortable? I'm wondering is there any data to suggest that that's happening?

Liesel Sharabi:

Yeah. We thought that might be the case, and at the very beginning of the pandemic, we actually, we did a big multinational survey study with colleagues in the U.S. and also in Europe and in one of the projects off of that that's being led by Cassie Alexa Poulos who's at UMass Boston, we were looking at partner preferences and how that's changed during the pandemic. And something we found is that people are really afraid of being single right now which makes sense. Like how are you going to meet people unless you use online dating because everyone is staying at home? But that didn't necessarily mean that they were willing to settle and compromise on what they were looking for in a partner. And we actually found that people said they were becoming more selective, kind of digging their heels in on what they hoped to find in someone. Now this was at the beginning of the pandemic. So a year later after spending months on end alone, I don't know if that would still be the case now. But it might be you have more time to sit and reflect on what you're looking for.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. I'm really curious about the effect of this pandemic on relationship formation. And so the research you have says that people aren't settling but they're really scared of being single. So if they don't settle and they're scared of being single, are they less likely to move the relationship along or—I don't know. I'm just ruminating on that.

Liesel Sharabi:

Yeah. It's an interesting question. And this is also, these are people who are more concerned about COVID. So people who also are probably taking more precautions. I would assume that that could also increase your fear of ending up single if you're not as willing to go out and meet people right now. So that could play a role as well.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, mask wearers are a little bit more nervous. Stephanie, do if relationships that are formed online or that develop online are more or less likely to lead to long term relationships or marriage or long term commitment than are other relationships formed in other ways, I guess non-online ways? And then has that changed at all because of the pandemic?



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Stephanie Tom Tong:

I mean I think online dating and mobile dating have been around long enough that we know that relationships, long-lasting relationships can and do form through technology. And what was once a very kind of stigmatized way of meeting someone has become a very accepted way and almost expected way of trying to develop a romantic connection. But I mean I think the need to have human connection, the need to have a relationship has always been with us. I think that especially in this time we're realizing now how important technology is to maintain those connections when we can't be together or to develop new connections when we are so isolated or feeling so lonely. And so I don't necessarily know if—I would say that these technologies are definitely helping people who want to have that connection. But I would also say that relationships that are developing during this time, you're really trying to develop a relationship or form a connection under so much uncertainty. It's really going to be hard to predict how these unprecedented kind of circumstances that we're living through right now are going to affect long term relationship development. It's going to be a very kind of interesting almost generational question for folks at this time.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That makes me think that a lot of people in romantic relationships and in non-romantic relationships, family relationships, whatever, are really relying on technology to stay connected. And one of the more heartbreaking aspects of all this from my perspective is these stories coming out of hospitals or hospice care or situations like that where people are having to rely on technology on their deathbed, when they're dying. And I'm curious if you have any thoughts of the ways in which people use technology and online sort of communication platforms differently depending upon the nature of the relationship. Am I inclined to use technology differently when I'm talking to my mother-in-law as opposed to when I'm talking with a romantic partner or something?

Stephanie Tom Tong:

I hadn't really thought about it in terms of different kinds of relationships. I kind of think given the circumstances that we're in right now, most people I feel like are trying to use technology just to create that connection really, to kind of create those moments that they can share because these are the things that we're really missing are kind of our everyday interactions with loved ones. And so I've heard anecdotal stories of people reading stories with their grandkids online or reading a book together or listening to music together. And these are very mundane activities, but these are also the things I think that we go back to, to have these kinds of happy emotional experiences that we can kind of hold onto when we can't have them in person. But as you mentioned, that's the example of saying goodbye to a loved one in a hospital through an iPad. The power of technology right now, sometimes we should be really thankful that we even have these tools to be able to do that and create those memories and have those moments.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. I'm reminded that one of the streaming television services, Sling, I don't know if you've seen these ads recently, but they're showing a family where the grandfather gets an email inviting them to watch cartoons with his grandchild. And that strikes me as both wonderful that the technology exists but kind of odd in a way. I mean watching cartoons together, it strikes me as a strange sort of technological innovation. Do you see, Liesel, any ways or new innovative ways that people are using technology or social platforms, social media platforms to stay connected during the pandemic? Are we seeing an expansion of people's technological repertoire for social media and that kind of thing?

Liesel Sharabi:

Yeah. I mean I wouldn't say this is necessarily a new thing but something I know that has been happening during the pandemic is that there's more reconnection going on. So I know there's initial data showing that more people are reconnecting with their ex's during the pandemic on social media. I know just from personal experience, I've also reconnected with a lot of friends who I haven't heard from in a while during this time. And I mean I think that we have more time now because we're all kind of, most of us at least are stuck at home. Maybe people are also thinking of people who they haven't thought about in a long time. So that's an interesting trend that I've been kind of keeping my eye on.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Is necessity the mother of invention here though? I'm thinking of my senior parents or my in-laws, and the pandemic has really expanded their sort of social media use? They've accessed platforms and modes of communication in ways that they never would have normally absent the pandemic. Are we seeing a real increase in that? I'm thinking of senior citizens and children perhaps in schools and educational settings, that kind of thing.

Liesel Sharabi:

Yeah. That's an interesting question because for a lot of people, we've taken away the face-to-face component, but I think we've also added other channels into the mix. So I think that reminds me of my own grandparents because they're on social media. They're really active on Facebook, but they're not so good with the phone. So like texting and phone calls are a challenge for whatever reason.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Wow.



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Liesel Sharabi:

And they've gotten better about that during the pandemic, texting a lot more and calling a lot more. And so I think it's caused them to sort of explore other options because they want to connect and that's really all that they have right now.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I'm old enough to remember when long distance calling was a major expense, and you worried about whether or not you could afford to call people all that much. Can you imagine if that were still an economic force right now with what we're dealing with in this pandemic? It would be a real, it would be a real disaster for a lot of people. Is there a dark side to all of this? Is there, you know *The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication*? Right? Ala who is Brain, Brian Spitzberg. Is there a dark side to all of this technology? Are we seeing, for instance, in relationships an increase in say online or social media infidelity? As people are without connection and without that face-to-face connection, are they engaging—I mean politically. Right? We know that all of this has led to a or has accelerated I guess a lot of hate speech and really conspiracy, ugly conspiracy things in online platforms. Are we seeing that in relationships as well?

Liesel Sharabi:

I kind of hesitate to say that the pandemic is the causal force behind everything bad. But I guess I would say that for people and couples who are experiencing infidelity, it probably would have been likely to happen anyway. Infidelity is a sign that your relationship is not in a great place. But I mean I think I would also venture the hypothesis that COVID and the stressors that it's putting on people and technology are playing a role in that, maybe exacerbating problems that they would have been able to kind of find a solution or work out a solution before or maybe the increased stress. But I would say that infidelity is still in and of itself just a sign that the relationship is not in a great place. But maybe yeah, that the pandemic is contributing additional stressors that are kind of pushing it in that direction.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. Or cyber bullying I suppose would be a sort of another bad sort of outcome of the increase in technological communication.

Liesel Sharabi:

Right.

Stephanie Tom Tong:

Yeah. I was going to say agree with everything you're saying. And just like we said earlier, that online dating use is increasing. So is the use of online infidelity websites. So I know Ashley Madison is one of the big ones, and they've been saying that they're seeing a surge in use. But



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just like you were saying, I would imagine that what you have is a situation where maybe people were cheating before and now they're with their partners 24/7 and it's a little harder to do that. And so they're turning to these technologies to replace what they were doing before at least temporarily.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. After the pandemic lockdown ended in China and parts of China and Wuhan in particular, there was an increase in divorce filings. Now our lockdown hasn't been as specific or nationwide. But do you think that's going to happen in the United States? Are we going to be seeing a disintegration of relationships as a result of this lockdown idea?

Stephanie Tom Tong:

Well, I hope not. That would be another kind of really negative consequence of the pandemic. But to build on what Liesel was suggesting too, partners are now kind of thrown together 24/7. They're spending every moment of every day together in their houses, and I think early on in the pandemic, we saw that a lot of couples were really excited about that prospect where it's like oh, I get all this free time and I can spend it with my partner and my family and it's going to be wonderful which we've quickly realized that not all that time is like quality time. And it's not just couple dynamics but it's family dynamics and work dynamics and financial issues and health issues and they're all under this one roof. And so there's a lot happening all at once at home. That can put a strain on a relationship whereas before you had outlets. You could go to the office. You could go to work. And maybe in part, that's why we're seeing people kind of stretching to their breaking point in their relationships, stretching to their breaking point. But maybe the reverse is also true, just to have a happy note. Right? That couples that were really happy before are finding ways that they can spend more time together as well. So it's not all gloom and doom. I hope not.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, what do you think interpersonal communication research can tell us about navigating all of those both positive and negative dimensions of this new situation we find ourselves in where we're all at home? How does interpersonal communication matter and the research that you all do matter to helping people actually navigate these communication challenges?

Liesel Sharabi:

One thing that I think has become really important is just having effective conflict management skills because I know a lot of couples are having a lot more conflict about finances, about child care, even about safety where maybe one partner is willing to take more risks than the other one. And so they're having disagreements that they didn't necessarily have before COVID began. And so for couples that maybe aren't equipped to deal with those conversations, they could take much more of a toll. And so I think in those cases, if they've taken our interpersonal communication



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classes and they've learned about conflict management, that could be really helpful for trying to navigate this period.

Stephanie Tom Tong:

Yeah. I think that's a really great point. I think another thing I'd add to that is just that there's an interesting trend of almost being forced to talk about tough stuff. Right? The pandemic has brought up things like having to discuss your health and COVID precautions and financial stress. And these are topics maybe that people would have avoided especially early on in like developing relationships or even in long term developed relationships. We don't want to talk about our money, but in this case we have to because it's becoming an issue. And so also kind of thinking about how to disclose those things and how to navigate those tough conversations is kind of another place where some of our research can really speak to.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It feels like we're doing more listening. It feels like we're constantly having to pay attention. And that's a little more challenging if we haven't trained our students or trained our people, the population to listen very well. And we don't often do much of that. So maybe that's another area where interpersonal communication research can move things along.

Liesel Sharabi:

Yeah. And thinking about, going back to your original question about the divorce rate, I mean some of that is also, it's probably amplifying problems that already existed in the relationship. So if they struggled with these things before, if the relationship was already in trouble and now you have, like Stephanie was saying, all of these other additional sources of stress that are being introduced and then you're also putting people together all the time. So before maybe they could have independent routines, they could kind of sweep some of the stuff under the rug. But now they're just faced with it because they're together all the time. And so if they're lacking some of these skills, it might be even more obvious to them now and might cause them to reflect more on the relationship and where it's going.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I like that. It's not so much that these problems are brought about or these concerns or issues in relationships are brought about because of the pandemic. It's that they're amplified by all of the conditions and dynamics that the pandemic creates. Huh. Well, that's great. Thank you very much for being with us on *Communication Matters*. This has been a fascinating discussion at the look at how pandemic politics and pandemic lifestyles lead to a change in our relationships and our romantic affiliations. So thank you, Stephanie and Liesel, for joining us today on *Communication Matters*.



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Stephanie Tom Tong:

Thanks for having us.

Liesel Sharabi:

Thank you.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And listeners, thanks again for tuning in. Be sure to subscribe to *Communication Matters* wherever you listen to your podcasts. And have a great Valentine's Day.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles. The podcast, organized at the national office in downtown Washington DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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