

Personal Statement

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RESEARCH PROGRAM

My scholarly work examines how mediated systems change the ways people communicate when initiating, maintaining, and terminating relationships with their partners. I have always been interested in questions such as, “How do we present ourselves to other people?” “How do people form impressions of others?” and “How do we form romantic relationships?” But when I began my graduate work in 2006, it became clear to me that new technology could affect these interpersonal and relational processes in new and unanticipated ways. The intersecting interests in computer-mediated communication, social media, and interpersonal relationships that I developed over 10 years ago continue to resonate in my current research agenda.

I believe that my record reflects that I produce creative, rigorous, and impactful scholarship, that I invest in my students, and that I push the boundaries by publishing and working with others across multiple disciplines. Below, I discuss my past, current, and future research plans, and how my scholarly work is informed by both my teaching and service activities.

Early research work. My very first study solidified my interest in CMC and social media. With the help of my advisor and colleagues, I examined how impression formation and popularity function in the popular social media platform, Facebook. Previous social science work suggested a “linear” association between interpersonal judgment and sociometric popularity. Simply put, people who have a lot of friends and acquaintances also tend to be judged more favorably (e.g., physical attractiveness, leadership abilities, etc.). While this one-to-one association was well documented in the existing literature, I reasoned that the Facebook friend count makes a person’s popularity much more visible by functioning as a very small “system-generated information cue.” This, in turn, might make it more salient to others when forming impressions. Since Facebook allows its users to maintain ties with hundreds of “friends,” under such circumstances, would others still judge a profile-owner who has 900 friends positively? Or would such a profile-owner be judged as a disingenuous attention-monger?

Results of this experiment indicated a *curvilinear* relationship between online popularity and judgments of attractiveness: When the profile-owner was shown as having 100 friends, people didn’t find her very attractive; similarly, when she had 500, 700, or 900 friends, judgments of the profile-owner’s attractiveness were low. Interestingly, the profile-owner was seen as most attractive when she had 300 friends. This resulted in my first publication in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, which has been cited 561 times to date.

I added to this first study throughout graduate school by constructing a research record in which I examined a variety of phenomena in contexts as diverse as organizations, education, and environmental communication. But interpersonal interaction has always fascinated me. In 2011, I returned to the topic of impressions in my dissertation. This work resulted in two Top Paper awards from the flagship professional associations—the National Communication Association (NCA) and the International Communication Association (ICA). This early work forged a foundation that I continue to build upon today.

Recent research activity. Since my appointment to Wayne in Fall 2012, I have published 10 peer-reviewed articles and conference proceedings, 6 as lead or sole author. These pieces have been published in the areas of health sciences, psychology, human-computer interaction (HCI), computer science, and communication. [Notably the pieces in the fields of HCI and computer science appear in peer-reviewed conference proceedings rather than journals, as proceedings are the premiere outlets for these disciplines]. I have also produced 12 competitively selected conference papers, many co-authored with students. While writing with students often takes more work than writing alone, the extra effort helps me fulfill my commitment to teaching and mentoring. Co-authoring with students gives them the opportunity to present our research at national and international conferences; I am happy to support their professional development.

Current research interests. At present, my research examines how people form romantic relationships using online and mobile dating systems. Online dating is now the second most common way for single adults to initiate romantic relationships, so investigating how these systems affect processes like impression formation, mate selection, and interaction with potential romantic partners is extremely important. Because a significant and growing proportion of romantic relationships, including marriages, have an online component, examining these dynamics are critical to understanding the development and longevity of these relationships.

To pursue this research agenda, I decided to apply for external funding. I targeted the National Science Foundation (NSF), which is the most prestigious, but also most competitive, of federal agencies. Because I received no formal “grantsmanship” training during graduate school or post-doctoral training, I independently sought the mentorship of two colleagues, Dr. Richard B. Slatcher (Associate Professor of Psychology, Wayne State University) and Dr. Jeffrey T. Hancock (Professor of Communication, Stanford University). In December 2012, as the Principal Investigator on our team, I decided that we would submit our proposal to NSF’s Social Psychology division. Our plan was to design a pilot project in Summer 2013, collect data in Winter 2014, write the proposal in Spring 2014 and submit it by July 2014. In preparation for the NSF proposal, in September 2013, I applied for and received a small seed grant from Wayne State’s Vice President for Research, which provided the funding needed to establish the Online Interaction Lab. We prepared for our July 2014 deadline.

Unfortunately, a costly 12-week delay from Wayne State’s Internal Review Board meant we could not submit to our targeted NSF program. Although disheartened, in December 2014, my team regrouped and we submitted the proposal titled, *The SMART Model of Online Dating: Uncovering the Impact of Internet Technology on Romantic Relationship Formation and Individual Self-Perception*. This proposal received funding over a 3-year period in the amount of \$851,462. This was the largest single research grant ever awarded in the 30-year history of Wayne State’s College of Fine, Performing, and Communication Arts, and the third largest NSF award for Wayne State University for 2015.

Currently, my team and I am testing the *source multiplicity* and *attribution* components of the SMART model: Because dating systems combine information from multiple sources into a single mediated space, this raises questions about how people perceive and process information communicated by both system sources (e.g., match recommendations and algorithms) and human sources (e.g., other daters’ self-presented profiles). We know that people pay attention to

algorithmic recommendations when it comes to movies on Netflix and books on Amazon, but what about *people* on dating websites like eHarmony? How do dating systems function as a source of information that influences people's romantic decision-making? This initial line of research has already resulted in one published proceeding at the 2016 HCI International Conference, and one publication in the top interdisciplinary journal, *Personal Relationships*.

The support from the NSF grant has also allowed me to investigate other, related questions of interest. Currently, I am working with two graduate students to examine how daters present themselves linguistically in their dating profiles, and how observers form impressions from that self-authored content. Daters' profiles function as an online first impression, and without a full understanding of how profiles work to convey those impressions to others, a dater may be unknowingly projecting a self-image that is completely inconsistent with what they had hoped to communicate. Is it this potential mismatch between one's desired self-presentation and actual signaled impression that explains why so many daters report being disappointed with the partners they attract online? Is this why online daters are often frustrated with their overall lack of potential romantic prospects? Obviously, this project was sparked by my longstanding interest in online self-presentation and impressions, but I think our findings will have practical implications for the 30 million online daters who are working to craft profiles in an attempt to find romance.

Future research plans. Going forward, I will explore other components of the SMART model—specifically *recognition* and *transformation*. As the information acquired through source multiplicity is predicted to affect daters' attributions, a related question is whether people *recognize* technology's influence over their behavior, or whether such influence operates subconsciously. The phenomenon of algorithmic awareness represents a new area of scholarship for me, but I believe it will have strong implications for the area of online relationship formation.

Another understudied phenomenon is the effect of online dating technology on a dater's self-concept. The use of visual information in dating systems such as text messages and photos means daters can continually re-visit the messages they exchange with others. Daters also receive a steady stream of feedback from the system through updates and push notifications. In this line of research, I plan to examine how daters' iterative information processing creates "feedback loops" that have a *transformative* effect on their self-concept. For example, if a dater is rejected by several potential partners, and if that rejection is localized in a single place—the message inbox—does this affect the dater's feelings of self-esteem? What if the dater continues to re-read all the rejection messages they receive? How does this make them feel? It is the visual and archival nature of mediated communication that allows us to revisit such interactions over and over again. While human-generated and system-generated information is clearly affecting daters' relational decision-making, might it also affect the way daters see themselves as individuals?

I also will continue my work on mate selection. My team and I are examining "tried and true" theories of mate selection—grounded, distantly, in the evolutionary psychology of the 1800s—and applying them to modern day dating behavior. Do Darwinian predictions about mate selection apply to today's world of online dating? Questions like these are important to answer if we are to understand how technology affects relational dynamics. I'm excited to answer these questions in my future work.

Overall, I think my research record demonstrates that I am actively pursuing a focused agenda that is making an impact. Evidence of this impact can be seen in my citation count, which is 1,649 at the time of this writing. But more importantly, I think my future research has the potential to make significant theoretical contributions in multiple disciplines. Practically, my work is poised to make recommendations regarding the effectiveness, usability, and design of social computing technologies that blend human-generated and system-generated content. We will achieve a better understanding of online dating phenomena, and how such technologies affect the larger relational landscape in America. I am proud of the work that I'm currently doing with my colleagues and students, and hopeful about the projects we are planning to do.

TEACHING & ADVISING

I believe that being a strong teacher and mentor to my students is a critical part of my role at Wayne State. I currently advise 3 PhD students and I've directed 1 MA thesis. I have served on 5 PhD committees and 2 MA thesis committees. I've supervised 4 independent studies at the MA level. Mentoring undergraduates is also very important to me. To date, I have directed 4 senior theses and supervised 10 independent studies and senior honors projects.

I also actively mentor other students who are not my direct advisees, but are members of the Tong Research Team (fondly referred to as "TRT" by my students). Pioneered by Dr. Gerald R. Miller, in the team model, faculty leaders work directly with students to introduce them to all areas of the research process. My own research team experience as a graduate student at Michigan State University gave me the skills and experience required to build an independent agenda of my own. Upon arriving to Wayne State, I vowed to do the same for my students.

In our weekly, 2-hour meetings, we discuss everything from research topics (design, data collection, peer review process), to professional development (resumes, appropriate conference attire, networking at conferences, and what to expect on academic interviews). These more "informal" lessons are as essential to teach as the process of experimental design or statistical analysis. Moreover, I find that students are more likely to ask questions in a more casual setting: Because we see each other so often, TRT members are very familiar with one another and with me. This creates an environment where no question is too silly to ask, no issue too small to discuss. TRT members often come to me for advice about their future careers, work-life balance, or life in general.

I think that building these relationships is very important; I find myself investing a lot of time and energy into the mentorship of these students. As the faculty leader, TRT often feels like preparing for an extra class, but I think the effort is worth it. Now in its fourth year, the student members of TRT have worked together to produce 8 competitive conference papers, 3 successful grant applications to the Provost's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, and 6 peer-reviewed publications. I am pleased to lead such a dedicated team of students.

In the classroom. During my time at Wayne, I have consistently taught several classes, but none more important than Communication Theory and Communication Research Methods. Central to our degree programs, both are considered core classes at both graduate and undergraduate levels. I have found that in order to help students develop and obtain the level of critical and analytical thinking required for both theory and method, it is necessary to integrate relatable examples,

rigorous assignments, and relevant activities. I strive to bring a high degree of enthusiasm to the classroom every day, knowing that if I'm excited about communication, my students will be too. Although my student evaluations demonstrate that my approach has been effective, a more tangible marker of my success is the 10 undergraduate students who have joined TRT after taking my classes, and my 9 MA and PhD student co-authors. In April 2016, my colleagues formally recognized the effort I put into my teaching; I was honored to receive the Outstanding Teaching Award for the College of Fine Performing & Communication Arts for 2015-2016.

Working with students is incredibly demanding, but it also improves my own scholarship. My students energize me by bringing infectious enthusiasm and a sense of humor to our work. And as a scholar of social media, my students often introduce me to new platforms and systems that I was unaware of (because clearly, my students are much cooler than I am). I am grateful for their contributions because they make me a better researcher and scholar.

SERVICE & PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

I have served on many committees within the Department of Communication, across Wayne State, and within the discipline, and some of these commitments have also influenced my research. For example, in March 2016 I was invited to present at the annual conference of the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) regarding a recent mischaracterization of my research. In December 2015, my team's NSF-funded work was singled out in Senator Jeff Flake's (R-Arizona) *Wastebook Report* as an example of "government waste." When COSSA asked me to speak about this attack and meet with Congressional representatives during their Social Science Advocacy Day on Capitol Hill, I jumped at the chance.

Defending the value of communication research was disciplinary service that I found to be extremely impactful, as well as invigorating: As a result of this personal experience, my research team and I are now examining the evolution of anti-intellectual attitudes in the public sphere. Attacks on social science research from members in the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate have become more hostile in recent years. For example, the House Science Committee proposed legislation in 2015 that recommended a 45% cut in funding to the NSF's Social, Behavioral, and Economic Science Directorate. Several Senators have published reports on "wasteful government spending" which often involve attacking basic social science research. While drawing attention to these attacks is important for communication as a discipline, it is also important to teach graduate students about this issue as they become independent scholars. This area of disciplinary service is of great significance for both the current and future generations of communication researchers, and I plan on continuing my efforts in this area.

My professional activities span multiple disciplines, and doing so gives me a broader context to better understand how my own work fits in to different communities. I just finished a 2-year term as a member of the Article and Book Award Committee for the Human Communication and Technology Division of NCA. In 2015, I served as a Program Chair for The 3rd International Symposium of Chinese CHI, a conference sponsored by the Association for Computing Machinery. I am also a reviewer for NSF and many journals in communication and psychology.

In short, my work as a researcher, teacher, and professional academic is important to me. I hope to continue this work for many years to come.