

I DO, BUT COVID:

HOW INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION INFLUENCES THE DECISION TO HAVE A WEDDING OR NOT DURING A PANDEMIC

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"I BLOODY
LOVE THIS
BLOKE. HE'S
THE BEST
PERSON I
KNOW."

Desirre J., Australia



The coronavirus is unlike anything we have seen in our lifetimes; nothing has ever impacted our lives to this degree. Everyone's lives are being disrupted, as people continue to figure out how life during a pandemic is supposed to look. While some people have had their lives completely stunted, others have found ways to safely adapt and adjust. In many cases, people have dealt with a mix of both: losing one aspect of their lives

while gaining another, and in the case of weddings, this could not be more true. No two couples who had planned their wedding date after March 2020, have met the challenges of the pandemic the same way. As our research shows, some couples have decided to get married, some have continued to delay their weddings, and others have chosen to wait until the pandemic has passed entirely. Further, none of these couples have done so for the same set of reasons. Through a number of interviews with brides and brides-to-be, we gained insight into how brides are handling their pandemic-stricken wedding plans.

At some point, everyone thinks about their wedding day: beginning their lives with their soulmate, surrounded by family and friends. What happens when a worldwide pandemic prevents you from bringing all of those people together? As an article from CNBC states, “Weddings are largely considered recession-proof. From flowers to photography, celebrations of marriage are a \$74 billion industry, according to market research firm IBISWorld” (Dickler, 2020, p.1). Yet many brides are struggling with the decision to postpone or continue with their wedding plans, with a number of options weighing heavily on their minds. According to David Dykes of the Greenville Business Magazine, “63 percent of engaged Americans have postponed their weddings because of the coronavirus outbreak,” (Dykes, 2020, p.1).

Sadly, for many couples, it is not just the wedding they have to consider; they must also consider how their event may be putting family and friends at risk. As one interviewee stated in an Al Jazeera article from May, “This is supposed to be a joyous, fun time, and it’s impossible to be joyous when we’re spending our time arguing with people over the phone and worrying about if we are going to get our loved ones sick,” (Forde, 2020, p.1). As months have gone by, and more people have continued to suffer from the sickness and death of COVID-19, brides have been required to make incredibly difficult, often heartbreaking decisions, about what should be the most joyous days of their lives.

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Amy N., United States



Number of Brides by Country

Australia	1
Canada	1
Israel	2
Philippines	2
United Kingdom (UK)	3
United States (USA)	16

Table 1

Due to the unfamiliarity of this pandemic and the predicament that many brides are experiencing, we wanted to research whether brides are moving forward with their wedding plans, and how they came to those decisions. Specifically, we wanted to know, how does interpersonal communication through advice motivates a bride's personal goal to continue or postpone her wedding due to COVID-19? The goal of this project is to provide perspective on what brides are going through as they make this stressful choice to continue or cancel their weddings, and whom they turn to for advice during the decision-making process. Additionally, our findings will provide clearer insight as to how brides can be supported best during this stressful time.

While developing this study, we were interested in a unique aspect of interpersonal communication, advice-giving and receiving. In particular, we note the many different facets of advice as a form of interpersonal communication. For example, brides might receive solicited (e.g., asked for) or unsolicited (e.g., volunteered by others) advice from others about whether to postpone or continue their wedding event. Often, when a person is talking about a situation that they are in, they are not looking for advice. However, the listener can respond by giving unsolicited advice. Whether or not such advice was asked for or not can affect a bride's willingness to attend to it.



"WHAT MATTERS IS GETTING MARRIED TO THE ONE YOU LOVE, THAT'S WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT."

Erica B., United States

An additional facet of interpersonal advice is its perceived value—that is, how does a receiver judge whether the advice is valuable or invaluable to the decision at hand? One possible answer can be relationship closeness (Feng & Magen, 2016), which is defined as “...the degree of affective, cognitive, and behavioral mutual dependence between two people,” (p. 754). One can presume that the closer you are to someone, the more willing you are to receive their advice. According to the article Relationship closeness predicts unsolicited advice-giving in supportive interactions, this presumption holds value: “Third, and similarly, support providers may perceive close friends as more willing to receive advice than less-close friends.”

While relationship closeness is a strong factor, another plausible condition that may affect bride’s advice receipt is her culture. In the communication research literature, cultures can be seen as individualistic or collectivistic. Individualistic cultures often value the individual over the entire group, whereas collectivistic cultures focus on the status of the group and its members tend to be driven by collective goals. Other differences include communication of emotion: “Emotional expression is highly valued in individualistic cultures, whereas emotional restraint is prioritized in collectivistic cultures,” (Chen et al., 2015, p. 2). Notably, such differences in culture can impact the advice receiver. For example, in a study from the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, researchers found that Russians are more receptive to unsolicited advice because in their culture, advice-giving is seen as a supportive act. On the contrary, Americans do not respond well to unsolicited advice: “European American culture emphasizes the tension between the supportive and informational functions of advice and its potential threat to personal autonomy. If autonomy is threatened, the psychological costs of advice can outweigh its benefits” (Chentsova-Dutto & Vaughn, 2012, p.689). In the current context, it would be naive to ignore the fact that culture has an influence on advice receiving and giving; as such, we included it in our research study.

Lastly, the advice giver's focus on personal experience can be another variable that affects the bride's decisions and goals. Experience can be viewed in two ways: first, someone who is sharing a similar experience with the advice receiver can relate to them more making their advice seem more tailored to the advice seeker. Experience also can link back to culture. If someone is from the same or similar cultural background as the advice target, they can better understand the situation that target is in. For example, in Judaism, there is a concept of kosher meat. Similarly, in Islam, there is a concept of eating Halal meat. These two cultures can better understand each other and the struggle of dining out. Secondly, the experience can be viewed as a marker of stature or importance of the advice source: "People improve their judgments by taking advice from those whom they perceive to be more expert than they are than themselves and by taking more advice from those whom they perceive to have greater expertise" (Harvey & Fischer, 1997). The idea of being an expert is really in the eye of the beholder. Brides can be classifying health experts, industry experts, or other brides that have continued to have their wedding during the pandemic as an important expert, thus making their advice the most valuable. With all of this in mind, it is clear how brides can feel overwhelmed by advice that is constantly being given to them about their wedding plans. To answer our main research question, we reached out to brides from around the world to hear their stories and understand how elements of advice—perceived solicitation, closeness and expertise of advice source, and culture—affect their current experiences and decisions. Below, we offer an analysis of our data and results.



Sample

Our sample consisted of twenty-five brides from around the world. To obtain a truly international sample, we recruited participants from all over the United States, Israel, the Philippines, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. We did not specifically focus on any age criteria for this project, as we felt it would not influence our research. With that being said, our brides' ages varied from in their 20s into their 50s. Additionally, not all brides wanted to discuss their specific race, so we opted to focus more on their culture or religion. (See table 1).

Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method. “Snowball Sampling is a recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential subjects” (Oregon State University, 2010). We used Facebook groups to recruit participants for our study. We posted in over twenty Facebook groups. Many of our interviewees were recruited from bride and wedding-related Facebook groups such as Bride to be South East Michigan, Brides of 21, Corona Brides, The December Brides, and other social media groups relating specifically to COVID-19 Brides and Weddings. We looked for social media groups that had keywords such as COVID-19, wedding planning, and Brides in the title. For example, the group Supportive UK Brides 2020, was for brides in the UK that needed support because COVID-19 had affected their wedding plans. Another example would be Wedding Planning Support Group. This group is for brides that are continuing to have their wedding during the pandemic and are looking towards other brides to give them advice on how to do it. Some other groups that we posted in are Bridesmaid shares Israel, Brides of COVID-19 in this together, COVID-19 Wedding Support Group, Corona Brides, Georgia wedding, and Bride to be mid and east Michigan and many others.



In these groups, we posted a short recruitment message that described our research project, what kinds of respondents we were looking for, and how long the interview would be. Our participants were all at least eighteen years old, all identifying as female, in romantic relationships, and from all different ethnic backgrounds. Our final sample contained brides from all over the United States, Australia, the U.K., Canada, the Philippines, and Israel.

In addition to brides responding directly to our social media posts, they would also tag other people that they knew or other people in the group that they thought would be interested in participating in our study. We would respond to each comment saying that they should directly message us. We had around sixty responses in total; however, not all the brides responded back to our comments and reached out to us. We stayed in contact with them through Facebook messenger to schedule interviews with interested brides.

Interview procedures

Most of our interviews were conducted synchronously via zoom. Five were conducted over asynchronous email for those participants that were in different countries that had challenging time zones. The other twenty were done over zoom. The zoom interviews were recorded. Our team had an interview guide that we followed (see appendix) to ensure consistency across data collection. The guide focused on questions that pertained to our key research question, how does interpersonal communication through advice motivate a bride's personal goal to continue or postpone her wedding due to COVID-19? Our interview protocol asked the contained sections pertaining to advice, culture, COVID-19, and what she was feeling. Specifically, brides were asked a series of questions that started with their engagement, followed by the ways that COVID-19 affected their wedding planning, how advice impacted their decisions, and the cultural significance of their decisions. At the conclusion of each interview, we discussed the factors that caused the bride to alter her wedding plans. Most of the interviews were approximately thirty to forty-five minutes.

As the interview was conducted, each response, as well as participants' nonverbal cues and overall emotion, were noted by the researchers. After the interview was over, the recording was reviewed again to see if there was any important data that was missed. The average length of our interviews was twenty- five minutes. Transcription of each interview was done individually by members of our team. We coded each interview in order to recognize themes that would allow us to interpret the information. We manually transcribed each interview using Microsoft word and excel.



Data Analysis

Our analysis followed an inductive semantic thematic approach, which is appropriate for semi-structured interview data. The coding process was broken down into multiple stages. We first looked for common themes that pertained to aspects of our key research question: First, we looked for specific interpersonal communication themes that were offered thorough advice. Sixty-eight percent of our brides stated they did receive advice. It came from parents, siblings, friends, clergy, and their future spouse. The advice they received impacted each bride differently. One bride received advice from everyone in her inner circle to include her parents, siblings, bridesmaids, and friends, they all agreed that she should postpone her wedding. It was her husband that said he wanted to continue with their original date that pushed her decision to get married as originally planned and not postpone. One of our brides from Israel received advice from many very important people in her life, her parents and future in-laws, her husband's Rabbi, and her close friends. She said, "there was not just one person who affected and made an impact on our decision to keep going forward, because everyone we spoke to just wanted us to be happy with what we chose, and that in itself was a great impact on us." (Sarah G.) Ayelet S. stated "Well, the people who made the most decisions/gave me the most advice were my parents. We were always under the "let's wait a few more weeks and see" mindset. We knew that we didn't want to continue with the wedding as planned since it would have been a super spreader event had we continued." Another bride Erin J. received advice from "everyone", she and her fiancé did decide to postpone their wedding. They felt it was the best decision for the safety and health of everyone. This was especially true for this bride and her future stepson because both were immune-compromised and could not take the risk. These are just a few examples of the advice our brides received through interpersonal communication. Respectively it was not directly the advice that influenced their decision it was, steadfast support, safety/science and health for these brides.



Additionally, we examined other components of our research question—did the bride continue/postpone the wedding, and finally what was the reason for the outcome? In our first round, we color coded the initial categories we found in the interviews. Categories included initial wedding information, feelings, did they continue/postpone, influences on their decision, advice, cultural influences, vital bride comments, changes due to covid and original plans, and alternate plans. Secondly, a spreadsheet was used to organize the major themes: bride's name, wedding date, continue/postpone, the reason for the decision, advice from who, cultural influence, and miscellaneous comments. After going over key themes and how each related to our research question, we coded again. The third time coding, we looked for common themes as to factors that influenced the bride to continue or postpone her wedding. Common themes that were very specific were bolded, italicized, and underlined to differentiate from our previous color coding. These included the bride's pseudo name using a number, location, planned date for wedding, continue/postpone, and the number one reason that affected her wedding. From this iterative coding process, we started to notice a real pattern in the reasons for adjusting their initial wedding plans and who (if anyone) motivated that decision. We address these themes below, in our findings.



Feelings and Emotions

From the data we noticed a pattern regarding participants' emotions about their weddings. Feelings are essential to all decisions we make as humans. When something like a pandemic impacted them all at once, they tended to have similar feelings. What we noticed from all our brides were the common adjectives used to describe their feelings, “devastated,” “anxious,” “disappointed” and “sad.” Interestingly, while there was a clear commonality of feelings among our participants when looking at our data, these personal feelings did not seem to directly impact their decisions to continue or postpone their weddings. Brides feeling towards the advice they received was acknowledged and calculated. One bride said it felt nice when her feelings were validated by comments she received on Facebook/Reddit. Another bride said, “it felt good because no one was being judgmental or argumentative, it was comforting to know I had that support system”. This quote from a bride puts their feelings into perspective regarding how they handled their feelings. “Drink lots of wine. Cry when you need to. Feel the feels, then start re-planning. It sucks. There's nothing anyone can say or do that will make it better. You just have to wade through it and come out the other side”. Our brides did have feelings throughout this process. However, each bride made a conscious decision to not let their feelings influence what was the most practical decision for them and their future husband.



Interpersonal Communication with Others: Advice and Support

Moreover, advice played an important role in many conversations the brides had with their parents, brothers, sisters, close friends, bridesmaids, and clergy. Advice was flowing freely from just about everyone. Our interview data indicated that many brides listened to advice they received and may have considered some of the advice; however, when asked if advice was a reason that motivated their final decision about whether to continue or postpone their wedding, most of the brides we interviewed said it was not. What we found was that no matter what advice was given by others, the bride and groom ultimately made the final choice that was best for them. Desirre J. said it best: “I bloody love this bloke, he’s the best person I know – I just want to marry him!”—for her the marriage itself was most important. On the other hand, safety and health were the most important factors to Ashley P.:

“Everyone basically gave us the same advice “do whatever you want, it’s your day”. We took that approach that it is our day, and our decision. Our decision from day one of COVID taking place is that we would rather keep everyone else safe and healthy than throw a big wedding”. The concern over others’ safety and health was mentioned as the key deciding factor among twenty-seven percent of our brides that did get married. Even considering this factor, ultimately, they just wanted to get married.

Rather than others’ direct advice, many participants noted that their decision was also influenced by the support they received from their parents or others in their support systems. For example, Sandra K’s said: she was “very comfortable because our parents mean a lot to us, and they always want us to be happy with whatever we decide together. They would’ve been supportive no matter what.”

Michelle R. said: “No one really influenced me one way or the other. Everyone said I’ll support you either way.” Our brides felt that “people always had something to say, something comforting and were very supportive of our decision”. This suggested that while direct advice was being offered to brides, this kind of interpersonal communication was less likely to affect their decisions. Our participants felt the social support they received after making their decision was the most important to them overall. They all shared some form of a support system; each was unique as each bride and offered various types of support. This eased the bride’s feelings of anxiety about disclosing their final decision. Ultimately the bond they all shared through their many support systems is what counted when making their final decision.

Religion

Religion did stand out as a theme that influenced change to their wedding plans. Religion (as opposed to culture) turned out to be a stronger indicator of. Although some brides identified with a particular culture and wanted to imbue that into the day of their wedding, their culture alone did not prompt them to go through with their wedding. An example, was Diane L.H., a bride from Minnesota, who was culturally Jewish (i.e., interested in keeping some traditions or Jewish holidays, but not observant of the religion on a day to day basis). When asked if culture or religion affected her decision about her wedding, she said no: “Not for me it did not. Other than my Jewish family is a Jewish family and they like to get together and be a big group, but with corona we couldn’t let that happen” (Diane. L. H.). Seven out of our sample of 25 felt strongly enough about their religion to continue with their wedding plans. Among these seven, their religions were Judaism and Christianity. However, the sects within those two religions varied. For the Jewish brides quite a few identified as Modern Orthodox or Modern Machmir (a more conservative subset of modern orthodox). The other Jewish Brides said they were Hasidic. For the Christian brides three identified as Chaldean Catholic, and other Christian faiths. Only one out of the seven who continued her wedding plans chose to postpone her wedding; the rest of them got married as planned. For the six brides that did get married, they noted how the significance of marriage and weddings in their religion was so great, that not getting married would effectively postpone their ability to begin a new chapter in their life. For example, in some Judaism sects, men and women do not touch, let alone live together before marriage. A Jewish bride from New York told us “I am an Orthodox Jew and we have many traditions but the main one is that we cannot touch each other before we are married. So, it would be hard to wait indefinitely; this isn’t the only reason but it’s a good one!” (Rebecca. G.) This importance of marriage was expressed by our Chaldean brides as well. Taylor, a bride from Michigan said: “Being Chaldean, we are not allowed to move in with each other or have kids before marriage. It is a very traditional culture with morals and values. My husband and I are both Catholic and follow the faith, so we would not want to move in together until after marriage. We did not want to wait to do so.” (Taylor K.) It is important to note that while these seven brides were contemplating what their final decision should be. They leaned heavily on the support from those in their religious communities. A Jewish bride from Michigan said, “In the Jewish orthodox World having a wedding is a steppingstone into a whole new aspect of your life and in Judaism and its frowned Upon to ‘live together before marriage so when I talked to frum (observant) people in my community and they got it, they saw where I was coming from about getting married during a pandemic. However, my mom and my sister were less compassionate, they didn’t understand. They are not a part of that community.” (Daphnie.L)

The Health and Safety of Family and Friends

Our next theme indicated that an overwhelming fifty-six percent of participants (twenty-seven percent who continued with their wedding) reported altering their plans for the safety of family and friends. Brides were concerned about losing their grandparents and those with pre-existing health conditions who were more at-risk of contracting coronavirus. As a bride from Virginia told us, a main factor considered in her decision was to “not being responsible for killing people that we love or worse.” (Sarah F.) Another participant noted: “I would have been putting many at risk, just to what...have a party? It’s better to not risk the health and safety of those I love most” (Ariel A.). Other motivators influencing decisions included: government restrictions, Facebook Groups/ Reddit, Coronavirus itself, health insurance, and financial reasons. In sum, our research findings suggest that interpersonal communication through advice and emotion was less of a motivator in the decision process; instead, brides approached their decision making with practicality. That is, brides and grooms looked over and considered the advice given to them by others, but chose to do what was best for them in that moment. Feelings aside, their priority was what they deemed the most important to them—and this made the decision-making process unique for each couple. Although there were commonalities in the factors that they mentioned, each ultimately had to weigh these factors individually—for some it was health insurance that was most important, for others it was their religious practices and views, and some were eager to start a life together with the one they loved. As a bride from Michigan put simply: “what matters is having a husband at the end” (Haley H.). With COVID-19 continuing, many brides are still left unsure of what to do. While some have retreated to smaller ceremonies, others have found safe and meaningful ways to bring together the people that they love. This study gives perspective into the greatest forces of humanity - determination and resilience - and shows that there is no right or wrong answer. “We accepted the fact that what was happening with the pandemic was obviously not in our control, that we will stay positive throughout the decisions to rearrange our plans, and that we weren’t the only ones dealing with this. Thankfully everything went perfectly while re-planning our wedding!” Sandra K. Before closing our interview, we asked each bride if she had advice for someone going through the same experience as her. Most brides said: “remember that you are not alone.” In a time of literal isolation, that message speaks volumes to the strength in each of our interviewees, and society at large. They may have felt alone because of the lockdowns and restrictions placed on humanity during this crisis. However, there was always a crutch by their side in the form of the support from their loved ones that had their best interest in mind. The function that social support played was immeasurable to these brides and will continue to be for many brides during this pandemic. Although not what we anticipated for the outcome of our project this study does show how the role of interpersonal communication motivated the bride’s decision. Advice was not the leading factor, but it was a form of support. The combination of feelings, advice, religion, safety for all and support, stood out as the leading function to our question. Communication is the basis for human relationships and is offered in many forms. While our brides were isolated from most of their friends and family, it was function of communication that continued and supported their many relationships through this pandemic. Concluding, many brides expressed how rewarding their decision was, simply put by Sandra K.: “Our biggest reward was seeing our families happy with our decision, and of course us being happy and stress free as well”.

Intentional Limitations

Regarding limitations to our project, it was noted on our zoom call how qualitative research can be perpetual.. The more you interpret the information and discuss your findings the more interpretation is needed. Covid19 is new to our world but is not disappearing anytime soon. It may be a long time before brides see their wedding dreams come true. Research in this area could be interpreted for many years to come or until we get this virus contained. However, given the approaching deadline for this project, we made the decision to stop coding. There are still oodles of rich data to be coted but unfortunately, we have run out of time.

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