

CSCW 2024

# Friendship Formation in an Enforced Online Regime: Findings from a U.S. University Under COVID

Soyoung Lee, Kentaro Toyama

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor



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# COVID-19 and Enforced Online Regime (EOR)



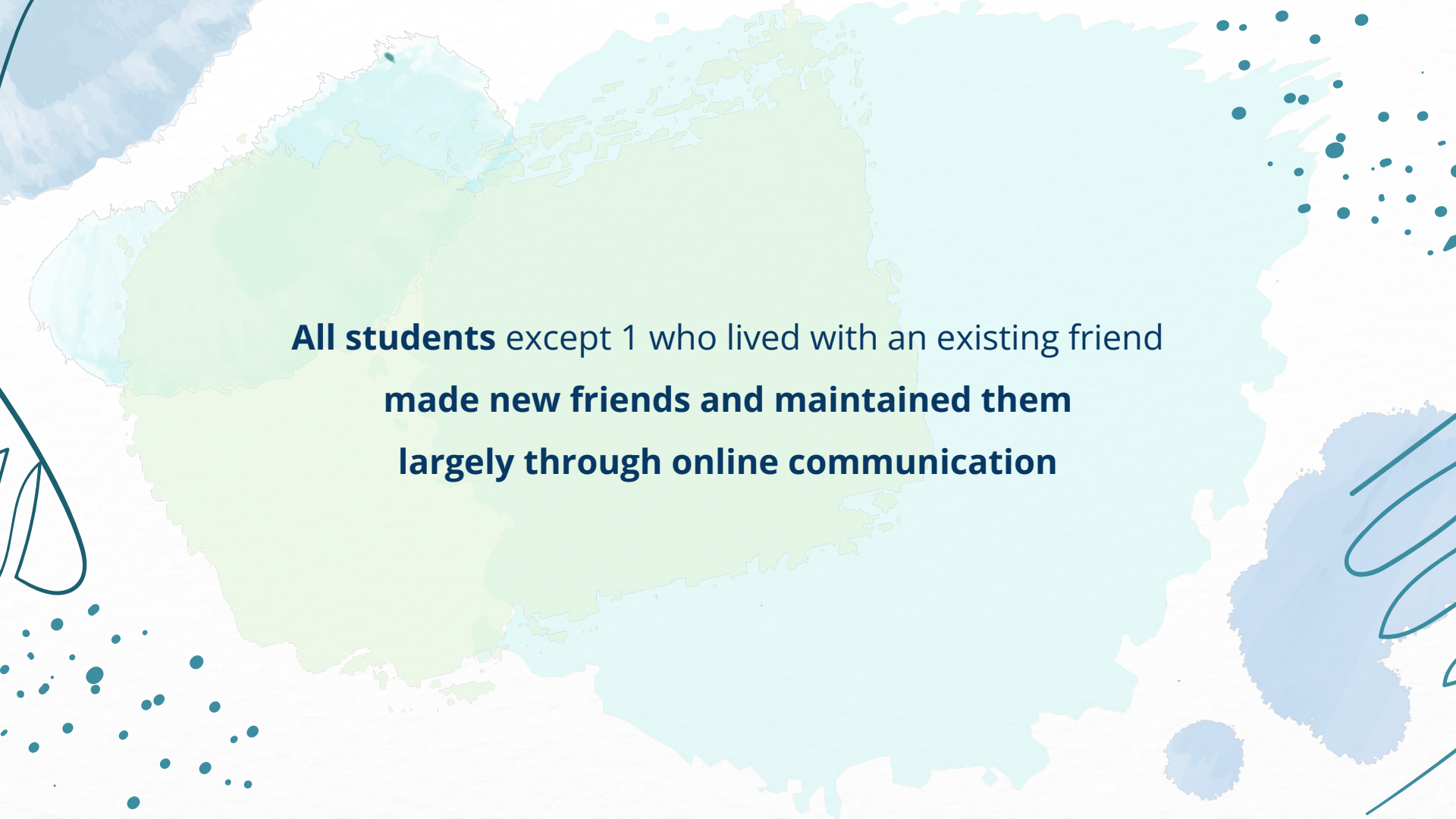


# Motivation and Research Questions

- COVID remote learning mode posed a unique challenge in students' social life and friendship formation
- **What challenges did students face in forming friendship** under the enforced online regime?
- **How did students overcome the challenges** to build or maintain friendship?

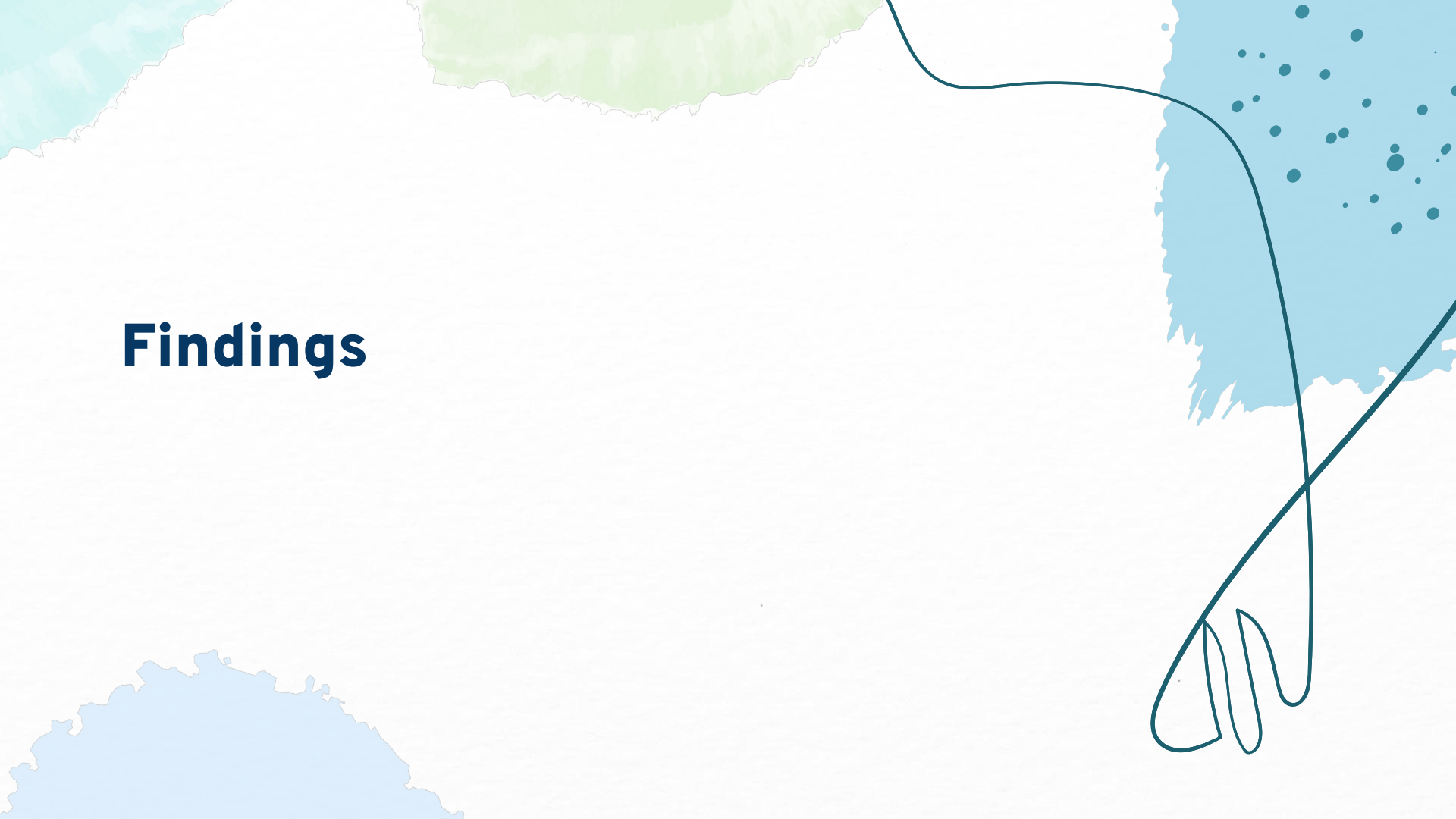
# A Study on University Students' Social Life During COVID

- **Method: semi-structured interviews** with **17 graduate students who attended school mostly remotely during the peak of COVID protocols** (2020-2021 academic year)
- School start: after COVID (13), before COVID (4)
- Programs: 10 different master-level/professional degrees at the University of Michigan
- Age: from 24 to 34
- Gender: female (9), male (7), non-binary (1)
- Ethnicity: Asian (9), Black (2), Hispanic/Latinx (1), White (2), multi-racial (3)
- Nationality: United States (10), international (7)



**All students** except 1 who lived with an existing friend  
**made new friends and maintained them**  
**largely through online communication**

# Findings



# EOR\* Friendship Formation Process

Pair relatedness theory (Levinger & Snoek, 1975)		Description
<b>Level 0</b>	<b>Zero Contact</b>	Unaware of each other
<b>Level 1</b>	<b>Unilateral Awareness</b>	Learn external attributes without reciprocal interactions
<b>Level 2</b>	<b>Bilateral Surface Contact</b>	Exchange superficial information
<b>Level 3</b>	<b>Mutuality</b>	Deepen mutuality in the lives of partners



\*EOR: Enforced Online Regime



# EOR\* Friendship Formation Process

Pair relatedness theory (Levinger & Snoek, 1975)		Description	EOR Friendship Formation Process (Proposed)		Description
<b>Level 0</b>	<b>Zero Contact</b>	Unaware of each other	<b>Phase 0</b>	<b>Zero Contact</b>	Lack of awareness of the other
<b>Level 1</b>	<b>Unilateral Awareness</b>	Learn external attributes without reciprocal interactions	<b>Phase 1a</b>	<b>Name Awareness</b>	Awareness of basic information about the other
			<b>Phase 1b</b>	<b>Physical Awareness</b>	Awareness of the other's physical attributes
<b>Level 2</b>	<b>Bilateral Surface Contact</b>	Exchange superficial information	<b>Phase 2a</b>	<b>Frequent Contact</b>	Frequent meetings, with possible accomplishing of formal agenda
			<b>Phase 2b</b>	<b>Personal Contact</b>	Personal conversations beyond formal agenda
<b>Level 3</b>	<b>Mutuality</b>	Deepen mutuality in the lives of partners	<b>Phase 3a</b>	<b>Interest Mutuality</b>	Identification of similarities or common interests
			<b>Phase 3b</b>	<b>Ongoing Mutuality</b>	Repeat interactions to build and maintain friendship

were particularly obstructed!



# Challenges and Workarounds

## Challenges

- **Lack of non-verbal presence**  
(turning on/off cameras)
- **Little opportunity for chit chat**
- **Lack of physical social lubricants**

## Lack of non-verbal presence

*“Virtually, the group **might not have their camera on... Those little courtesies** [of turning on the camera] **helped build rapport quickly...** [Those who didn't] just got excluded. Sometimes, we'll ask them [to turn on the camera] (and) they'll do it. But **having the camera on was a big one.**” (P2)*

*“In many of our classes you didn't need to open your camera, so **you don't open your camera**, so people cannot see your expressions or your gestures or face. I think that **decreases the connection between each other.**” (P17)*

## Little opportunity for chit chat

*“For me, **something that's really important is in-between moments** -- walking to class, leaving class, talking during breaks, **which you don't get on Zoom**. It's **the little interactions that build up friendship**” (P9)*

*“It's just **awkward** being on a call, just like one other person and you don't even know them. In-person would be nice because you can at least chat with them. But **every week you're just seeing these people and you don't even know who they are**. This is **really weird** for me.” (P16)*

## Lack of physical social lubricants

***“Food is really important to distract. That means no need to focus on only conversation. That makes it easier to connect with people... Especially at the very beginning of the MBA, [everyone] tries to present themselves as smart... [It’s] some kind of a hurdle, wall. With food... it’s easy to [go] beyond these emotional hurdles.” (P12)***

# Challenges and Workarounds

## Challenges

- **Lack of non-verbal presence**  
(turning on/off cameras)
- **Little opportunity for chit chat**
- **Lack of physical social lubricants**

## Workarounds

- **Regular group meetings**
- **Personal contact on chat**
- **Scheduling conversations**
- **Reaching out to potential friends**  
(email profile sharing, online groups/matching)

## Regular group meetings

*"[The members of] my wellness coaching class, they were the first other people that I started to do things with. We would do a dinner at someone's house or hang out at someone's house... We did spend a lot of time together online. **It was a lot of training, we had a full day before classes started and then for maybe a month or two, we had all day training on Fridays,** so it was **quite a lot of time together.**" (P4)*

## Personal contact on chat

***“DM-ing people over Zoom** or being able to like multitask, so to speak, when someone's lecturing and then I could like **shoot someone a text**. I think **people were craving connection in that way...** It might **just start with like ‘Oh, that's a great comment.’** They're like ‘Oh, thanks. I liked your comment.’ and then you start talking with each other. So, I know **I formed some relationships that way.**” (P5)*



## Scheduling conversations

***“After the group meeting, if I wanted to hang out with one of the others, then I would just ask them to stay back and we'd just talk about life. Yeah, for example, if the group meeting was from, say 10 to 10:30, then we'd go for another 5 or 10 minutes just to talk.”*** (P15)

***“Someone was like ‘We should meet up, we should do a big video chat,’ and a lot of people were also interested. Someone made the happy hour channel. I remember someone said a time and a date and they were like, ‘Hey, let's meet up Tuesday at 6pm’ and just chat, talk about life, things like that .... I only went to one or two of the happy hours, but even that was really helpful with just putting names to faces and like connecting with people.”*** (P8)

## Reaching out to potential friends

*"We all got to see a slideshow of everybody... And so one of the girls that I'm friends with now, I saw that she was interested in the same thing as me. **We're interested in women's health research.** So **I reached out to her** and I asked her like 'Are you doing anything related to this on campus?'" (P1)*

*"I just remember having like an hour-long discussion with random people, the first years in a program that I'd never met... [One of my eventual friends] came to **the anime event.** And that's **when I was kind of like, 'Oh, okay he really loves the show that I really love, I think I'll get along with them.'**" (P14)*

# Ongoing Mutuality in the Time of COVID

## Online

*"I think there wasn't much social interaction for all of us **outside of classes**. So **Zoom was a social outlet**, and I would say we are extroverted, so we're **definitely looking for more social interaction** than what we were getting from remote school." (P6)*

# Ongoing Mutuality in the Time of COVID

## Online

*“When we met in person, we tried to do an event where either like bowling or ice skating or just having fun and then also talking. **On Zoom, it's like you're only talking. You're not doing an activity.** So it's **a little boring** even when I connected with my friends from school. And **I'm an introvert.** It did not bother me that much not having those many friends. **But online there wasn't a lot to talk about.** So yeah, we would just space out... At **one point I had to tell my friend that let's not talk as much.** I don't have anything to talk about.” (P16)*

# Ongoing Mutuality in the Time of COVID

## In Person

*“Public health students were supposed to be following all the rules when it came to protecting people from getting sick... There was a sense of **‘public health guilt’** that we weren't supposed to be seeing each other indoors without masks on. Whenever you would go and do something it's **‘Okay, we definitely shouldn't be doing this, but... it's our only social interaction.’**” (P4)*

# Ongoing Mutuality in the Time of COVID

## In Person

*"I don't have any pen pals. I gotta see your face at some point... Yeah, we both texted. It was a **digital relationship**, and it **was fine**. Then **meeting in person was great**. Crazy, **is it real? Is this your face?**" (P2)*

*"We met online September 2020, and ever since then, we just started talking and connecting. And yeah, they just picked me up from the airport a couple of days ago, so we're still friends!" (P8)*

# Discussion





# 1. Theories of friendship formation

- A new 7-phase friendship formation model that extend Levinger & Snoek's (1975) **pair-relatedness theory by adding face-less** (Phase 1a: Name Awareness) or **personality-less** (Phase 1b: Frequent Contact) **phases**

<b><u>L&amp;S Level 1</u></b> <b>Unilateral Awareness</b>	Learn external attributes without reciprocal interactions	<b>Phase 1a</b>	<b>Name Awareness</b>	Awareness of basic information about the other
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- Explain that three specific phases were blocked in online-initiated friendship formation process, not hindered across board
- Diagnose challenges with friendship formation for intervention

## 2. Similar challenges in friendship but different situations

- **Residential university students**

- <-> **online degree students** (Sun et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022)

- <-> **work teams** (Schinoff et al., 2020)

- predictable annual cycle and highly social environment
    - student's **strong desire** for making friends and **Ongoing Mutuality** (Phase 3b) to occur **in person**

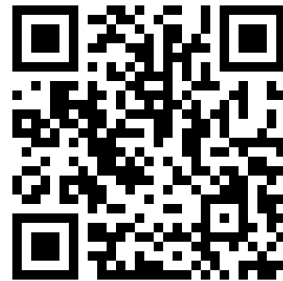
## 3. Impact of COVID on higher education and mental health

- Provide an explanation on why students under the pandemic felt a lack of belonging and fewer social interactions found in previous work

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