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"Should I Believe This Person?" Strategies in Health Communication with Dr. Namyeon Lee

Dr. Richard Gay

Welcome to *30 Brave Minutes*, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In *30 Brave Minutes*, we'll give you something interesting to think about. I'm Richard Gay, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and with me today are Dr. Joanna Hersey and Dr. Ashley Allen. Joining us is Dr. Nom Lee, from the Department of Mass Communication. Now get ready for *30 Brave Minutes*.

Dr. Lee, thank you so much for joining us today. I remember that you joined the UNCP faculty in the fall of 2021. Could you please tell our listeners a little bit about yourself and your work?

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Hi, everyone, I'm Namyeon, or you can just call me Nom, Lee. I joined UNCP as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication in the fall of 2021. I have been teaching classes on public relations and theory and research classes since then. My research mainly revolves around figuring out the best ways to share health and science information. My goal as a researcher is to make sure people can understand, and also trust science, especially when they need to make challenging decisions.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

That's wonderful. Thank you so much. I see your research as being very interdisciplinary. When we went to your talk, we were talking about the flyers and how to communicate, or how to engender trust with these flyers. It was something that really resonated with me as a social psychologist, because I'm listening to this research, and I'm thinking, this is something we would do in social psychology as well. So, I'm interested in the extent to which you find collaboration in your research spaces, and how easy it is for you to take what you're interested in and collaborate with others.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes. So, I have always been interested in understanding health issues focusing on minority groups. So, this whole clinical trial recruitment study project started during my PhD. The trouble was the lack of the diverse or representative population in these clinical trials was preventing the medical research. A lot of clinical trials are stopped because they don't have participants, and you can't have the medicines to go out in the market. So, we thought why not investigate how we recruit for these participants. And maybe if possible come up with a strategy focusing on Black participants. So, we thought of, we brainstormed a lot of channels, and social media was one of them, but we later decided to focus on the printed flyers, because flyers are still one of the most commonly used tools. We planned the study with a few variables like whether a doctor or a previous clinical trial participant made for a better spokesperson. So they could be both effective, because doctors have expertise, and they are the ones who run the clinical trials. So we thought that maybe doctors could be effective

because they are seen as more credible. On the other hand, previous participants are the ones who went through the process, and they are telling or sharing their narratives. So we thought that they can be also effective too. And also like I said, we also examined having a racially diverse spokesperson, so white spokesperson or Black spokesperson. So, in this study, we had four spokespersons. The white doctor, white previous clinical trial participant, Black doctor, Black participant, and a control condition, without any spokesperson's photo in the ad.

And what we found was pretty interesting, so the ads with previous clinical trial participants were more persuasive than those with the doctor spokesperson, and also not only the spokesperson, but both white and Black participants rated racially mismatched peer messages as more effective. So meaning, our participants found the ad, and also the clinical trials in general, more relevant, or more important to them, when they were promoted by previous participants, especially spoken by a different race. For the white participant, when they see the Black previous clinical trial participants, they find it more effective and vice versa. So the findings from the study, the best, maybe highlighting the experience might be the best way to connect with some potential participants, and encourage future people, or future participants, to take part in clinical trials. So since then our research team from Missouri have done other studies on clinical trials, like focusing on rural white men as participants, and also examine other tool or other channel, like Facebook and TikTok, so we still have some grant money left, so we ran another study last year.

Dr. Richard Gay

I think this is extremely interesting, I was curious about how the results of your study have similarities to, or differences to, studies where one is interacting with someone from their own peer group.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes, yes. So the peer, we define, we conceptualize peer as a previous participant, because they are seen as more similar to our study participants. You know, most of people are not medical doctors. So, we found, we needed the similarity to be the reason that people found the similar people more effective. Clinical trials is a very complicated issue, it definitely affects your health, still people think that it is good for society, like altruistic behavior. A lot of things are gains. So, maybe in this case, we thought that maybe having this similar spokesperson could be effective health communication source in this printed ad.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

I'm just curious about the age of the participants in this study. Was it a wide range do you remember?

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes it was a purposive sampling from Qualtrics, and we asked for the U. S. population. So okay, I think mean age was probably like 40-something, so Average Americans were a target.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

And your findings, I'm trying to reconcile that, right, with what we understand about representation in these different spaces, and the fact that I would assume that seeing someone from your own race would be more persuasive than seeing somebody from another race.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

How do we reconcile that here? Because what it's basically saying is that if you want minority participants, then you need to have a white person, who's been in the study before, in the ad, is that right?

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes, so the race mismatch was effective for the peers, not doctors. So the only thing that we discussed was maybe because having the racially mismatch race on the ad could possibly have people to feel that they are working with the diverse population, and probably left this impression to them. But the least effective communication source was the Black doctor. So there could be many reasons, but we think that in reality, the Black medical doctors are not that many, right? So, in reality, representative, so maybe we think that some sort of realistic, but still having the diverse source could be resulted in an effective source.

Dr. Richard Gay

I find that your results are fascinating, and I want to learn more about how one might tease this apart to understand the variables a little bit more.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

And this research was done pre-Covid, right?

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes, it was like, 2021 publication, so the research probably done in 2020 or 2019.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

Yeah, I'm just trying to think about confidence in medical professionals and how that might have changed. It could have impacted you know, if it had been after, the lower ratings for the doctors, even, for those flyers. Very interesting. Well, tell us a little bit about the follow ups that you're doing. I'm curious, I know. Dr Hersey alluded to the TikTok research.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes, yes. So I'm still in touch with my research team from Missouri, so we are all over the place now, Nebraska, Arkansas, I'm here in North Carolina, but we meet virtually almost every

Friday to work on our studies. So we still have some research grant, and last summer we decided to dive into the world of short-form videos on TikTok. I've seen health professionals using TikTok, like, medical doctors, registered nurses, nutritionists, and many others, sharing their health tips on Instagram reels. So my colleagues and I were curious to see if these short-form videos could be an effective health communication tool.

So one of our studies from that study that I am currently leading, are now under review in the *Journal of Health Communication*, and in that study, we found that frequent TikTok users, compared to a non-frequent TikTok users, were more persuaded by the different messages on TikTok, and also they reported higher willingness to participate in future clinical trials.

So it's probably because high TikTok users are more familiar and also comfortable with the platform itself, and also they probably have a greater motivation, and also not only the motivation, but also ability, to process technical videos compared to non/low TikTok users, and also in this study, we still have a doctor source versus peer source. Interestingly in this study doctor TikTok videos are seen as more credible, and participants reported more favorable attitude toward the message. But messages from everyday TikTok users were resulted in higher intention, which is behavior change, So, doctor TikTok videos were good and effective for looking credible, and favorable attitude. But still, people reported more willingness to participate when they see the everyday TikTok users.

We think that it might be because our study participants can't relate to their personal experience like, with the first study. So, they have been there, done that, and there's something about that experience of knowledge. And the kind of, they have gone through and that's really valuable. So, maybe doctors are effective until until some, like line, and but for behavior intentions, peers' direct experiences are more effective. So, they see doctors as experts in explaining the health information, and peers, or the previous participants, are more like their friends, they were sharing their direct experiences. So, it's not just about who's more credible, but credibility is very multi-faced construct to begin with, and also have different effects in different health situations too, but also about how their messages fit with what people are looking for. So that was the source part, and in the study, we also introduced a new variable or new construct for consideration. So, the mentioning of the barriers impacting participating in clinical trials. What sort of barriers can you think of, in preventing people from participating?

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

Maybe access and transportation?

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Sometimes even languages that the materials will be in.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes. So, like Dr. Allen said, many times there're logistic variables like the time, transportation, or the family obligations, like logistics, and also the languages are just difficult. So maybe cognitive barriers, so they don't understand the stuff. Or another very significant barrier is the

psychological barriers like, I fear. So, we thought that the two barriers, logistical barriers and psychological barriers, could be the major barriers in clinical trial participants, and in our study, we noticed a trend that participants felt more capable of participating in clinical trials, so self-efficacy, when doctor videos are mentioning logistical barriers, so when doctors are mentioning, 'hey, I know that you guys don't have much time' or thinking of money, or what not. And when peers mentioning about psychological barriers, so when peers are sharing, 'hey, I know that you fear that too.' The participants are likely to focus on practical, logistic barriers when the information comes from the doctor, because after all doctors are usually the ones overseeing the clinical trials, addressing concern related to compensation, schedule, and transport, and realistic hurdles. And so because of their position and trust, people then have the medical professionals, participants might believe doctors can offer the best guidance to tackle these logistical challenges. They matched well.

On the other hand, we know about viewers might be more inclined to emotional and psychological barriers when the information comes from a peer, because they are like us, and they are mentioning the fear that we are directly experiencing. That way, people, participants, feel more capable, or self-efficacy, in clinical trials.

Overall, the series of our studies found that health communicators can use this new platform to engage potential participants, especially the high TikTok users are more willing to participate in clinical trials. We also focused on TikTok, because it's very bite-sized, I think nowadays you can upload up to ten minutes, but usually TikTok videos are very short, and it is very easy to be shared as well, and many times a lot of health information or clinical trial recruitment is considered as boring or not relevant, so that, we thought that if we could come up with the TikTok videos, mentioning that thing, is good. And also a lot of Gen Z population, who are also the major users of TikTok, we need them to participate too.

Chancellor Cummings

This is Chancellor Robin Cummings and I want to thank you for listening to 30 Brave Minutes. Our faculty and students provide expertise, energy, and passion driving our region forward. Our commitment to southeastern North Carolina has never been stronger through our teaching, our research, and our community outreach. I want to encourage you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. With your help, we will continue our impact for generations to come. You can donate online at www.uncp.edu/give. Thanks again for listening. Now back for more 30 Brave Minutes.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

So Dr. Lee tell us a little bit about which classes you're teaching here at UNCP and how you can involve students in some of this research.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

So I've been teaching mostly public relations courses, so Intro to Public Relations and social media classes, Public Relations Case Studies, Mass Communication Theory and Research and I really like all of the classes. So I love sharing my research and my students, especially for the theory and research classes, because I think it's easier for them to understand any theories, mass comm theories, which also I use for my research. When I use real life

examples, for example, when we were theorizing or brainstorming for this TikTok study, I asked my students about, like, 'hey, how is this?' And they actually, found it funny at first, or not cool, but later they agreed that it could be pretty effective. I showed them my actual experimental stimuli, which are not that bad. It's actually good. I think. My students are media majors, and they have in-depth knowledge, and also they are the direct users. So if possible, I'd love to involve my students more in my research process, like creating the experimental stimuli. So, for this TikTok study, we used researchers, like our research team members, or other actors, for the creation of the TikTok videos, but because we want to have a consistent average age of the doctors, like, they were too young to be looked at doctors. But eventually, I would love to have my students to film those videos or other sort of stimuli creation because they're really good at it, and they are probably better than us.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

So when you first were talking to them about this, and they weren't into it, do you think that's because they assumed that none of us old people know how to do it?

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yeah, that's too, and they think that we are trying too hard to fit in or something.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

Oh, no, yes. We probably are.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

But we are really not that bad. I think, so then later, they were not sure about the quality, but later when I showed them our stimuli, the draft of them, they thought that was pretty good, so. We filmed multiple times, like, many, many times.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

I have sort of a general question, over your years, doing research, getting your PhD, et cetera. What has most surprised you, or have you had any results that really took you back, you know, and you weren't sure what to make of them, in a good or bad way.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes, so when I first started studying and researching health and science communication, first of all I thought trust was all about expertise and competence from the experts. I was focusing on also how we can educate people about health and science matters. But as I study more into my research, I started to think more about what trust really means. So, you see, trust is not just about believing someone knows their stuff, right? So, it's about being willing to be vulnerable, based on what they're saying, agreeing to participate in a clinical trial for a new drug, you are being venerable, getting a Covid-19 vaccine, buying a self-driving car, or even deciding to eat GMO chicken or GMO salmon. So, these decisions aren't in terms of cold, hard facts or, me educating information to the public, because they already know, and they already have all the information. So, when we trust someone's information, we are not also just weighing the pros and cons of the effects. We also think about how they come across to

us. So, for example, do they seem warm and understanding, for example, do they come across as sincere? Should I believe this person? Is this message engaging, or sometimes funny like, humorous messages are very effective too. So these factors can be as important as the information itself. So, the sources platform, channels, and everything, complex. So, and that, I believe is both the fun part, and also challenging part of the strategic health communication.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

When I'm thinking about your research, I'm thinking that a lot of this ties into, you know, persuasion research, I mean, there's a lot of this done when we're really looking at print ads and, like, central routes of processing for persuasion right? Versus the peripheral ones. And and how, you know, if you were really invested, then you could try to do the central ones, which would have lots of text, be really information heavy. And those would work and be persuasive for people, if it was important information. I'm trying to figure out how that plays in here because participating in a clinical trial to me is a very important decision. But when I think of TikTok, I literally think of the opposite for that. I think of like the peripheral, you know, the catchy, the quick, little dance, the something that's just going to appeal to you in this, not like, not a deep processing level. And so how does that work here? Like, how do you take the TikTok angle, and apply it to something that's very serious. Right? But gives just enough information to be persuasive.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

We think of in these short-form videos, like you said, because of this unique modality, there are not much variation between central and peripheral cues. You know, I said, that the source is the peripheral source usually configured. But in these TikTok videos, they're like the primary characteristics of the TikTok, right? So, because the source is both visual and audio present in the video format. And also making it challenging for the viewers to ignore or separate from the message content. Right? So it is hard to distinguish an essential element from the peripheral. So, consequently, the source's prominence may affect the processing of the central message, central persuasive messages. And leading it to become more impactful than the mere peripheral cues in shaping overall message perception.

Dr. Richard Gay

I would think it would be challenging to get people to engage because, you know, so often in TikTok, you're just flipping through, looking for something that really catches your eye and peaks your interest. So, I think it might be challenging to get people to stay on your TikTok presentation long enough to get to the point. So, when you work with the company to help disseminate these, your surveys and stuff, do you get data on how long somebody stays on your source?

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Yes, yes, of course. So, for the way we make people to, we make a timer on the TikTok page so that they cannot proceed. We try to screen out any people who spend too much time too, because that means that they just probably have the browser open and are doing something and come back and that. So we do see how others have spent the time in that video, and also

see how the responses are, is it consistent or are they just putting the 7777 or what. They could be just really 7s, but we also have some reverse codes so that we can screen out whether they are being consistent with their responses or not. But there are a lot of limitation in online experiments. It is the best when there's like a lab, and I can watch the participant in how they're doing. But this is another limitation for online studies.

Dr. Joanna Hersey

We talked about how this came out of your research for your own education, but could we back up, to you as a student in your late high school years? How did you know this was where you wanted to have your career, and what made you, this science communication, or communication in general? Did you always know this field was what you wanted to do?

Dr. Namyeon Lee

I briefly mentioned about the minority health, and, like health, but mental health too, but because I also have struggled with food consumption as a teenager, and also while I was studying abroad, stress, binge eating stuff, and I didn't know a lot of people are struggling. Like, for example, in my dorm next to me, she was also having some eating issue, I didn't know. So, during my college years, I was interested in food system and nutrition and whatnot and health issue. But, it was my senior year in college, that I wanted to do more of some new creative studies, like, not just reporting the science studies, but wanted to do something directly. For example, for my thesis study, I use infographics because I have some background in graphic design. So, I wanted to incorporate some sort of creative and visual ways to communicate health information to the public. And wanted to test, evaluate, how effective that could be. And at that time, I had my PhD advisor, I was taking one of her classes, and she said, 'hey, you can do that in research.' And at that time, I didn't know what research was, but we had like, 4+1, expedited master's program, and she said, 'hey, this is your in, if you don't think research is right, you can always quit because there's only one year.' So I liked that. So I was continuing the research.

But in high school, I don't think I had this idea. I was majoring in East Asian Studies and economics for my first year in college. So it was not, but I've always liked to use media, and maybe I also was interested in the form of communication, because as an International student in America, I always, at times, struggled communicating my ideas to someone else. So, I have become interested in what is the good communication. What is the communication anyway? And what sort of background, psychological background, should play in communication process and whatnot. So I'm not a cognitive psychologist, but many theories that I borrow are from cognitive psychology, and because I study humans and how they process information.

Dr. Ashley B. Allen

What would you say you are most proud of when you look at your various accomplishments?

Dr. Namyeon Lee

That would be my thesis paper, master thesis paper. You know, thesis papers are not good usually, because you're, it is most likely your first ever study that you have completed, but this journey of my master thesis taught me to be resilient. And don't give up easily. So, like I said,

the study was about how infographics can make a difference when reporting about scientific matters, compared to just text news. This was early in my career, and the study was rejected many times, and also I received a lot of not so nice reviewers' comments, but I just, I just didn't give up and I kept tried, and guess what, it paid off and the paper was published in the *Public Understanding of Science Journal*, which I really wanted to publish in. So, that felt pretty good. So, and this journey was tiring, but that's what academics are always going through, right? Like, you will not be welcomed at first, but you still have to keep trying. I would say that this experience has taught me to be more patient and resilient and just do what I like to do, even though the outcomes are not immediate.

Dr. Richard Gay

That's something that I think many of our students could benefit from learning that lesson as well. So you're a good role model for our students here at UNCP.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Thank you.

Dr. Richard Gay

So, thank you so much for talking to us today about your research. I feel like I learned a lot, and you have sparked my curiosity in a number of things. So, I think this is an example of where I'm going to keep thinking about the things that we've discussed for a while and hopefully, we'll get to have more conversations about this very interesting research that you're doing.

Dr. Namyeon Lee

Thank you so much for this opportunity again. Take care.

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