



**THE HONG KONG UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY  
DEPARTMENT OF MARKETING**

# **Exposure Neglect and the Riskiness of Strong Ties**

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**Date: 12<sup>th</sup> May 2023 (Friday)**

**Time: 10:30 am – 12:00 pm**

**Venue: Room G003, Lee Shau Kee Business Building, HKUST**

**Abstract:**

Fear of strangers and trust in family are deeply ingrained in human psychology and culture. However, in epidemiological contexts such as COVID-19, relative risk is determined by exposure; in other words, those closest to us often pose the greatest risk (of disease spread). Across 4 online studies and 3 nationally representative field surveys (two conducted during the pandemic (US N = 2497, China N = 2638)), we find evidence of a systematic bias in perception that the strangers (and weak ties) pose greater COVID-19 transmission risk than close relations (and strong ties). We observe this effect both during and after the pandemic. The bias is less pronounced but still statistically significant for those with previous COVID-19 infection (and thus learning). Furthermore, we find that the perceived social network dynamics of spreading vary across relationship categories; the relationship between structural embeddedness and perceived infectiousness is flat, linear, and discrete for family ties, friends, and strangers, respectively. We test varying psychological explanations for the bias in risk perceptions, including exposure neglect, stranger anxiety, uncertainty, perceived information asymmetry, among others. Overall, our findings show how systematic biases in the psychological perception of social relationships can lead to dangerous misunderstandings of epidemiological risk, and highlight how many psychological perceptions are maladaptive to commonplace network contexts.