

Love, learning and the algorithms of the heart

Married ASU marketing professors who met at ASU share a life, research into relationships between people and robots

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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On a quiet day in 2003, a visiting doctoral student from Germany sat down for lunch with a nervous first-year PhD student at an Ethiopian restaurant in Tempe. Neither could have known that the meal would become the first chapter of a partnership spanning continents, careers, classrooms and a growing body of research on how humans connect with machines and with each other.

Today, Arizona State University professors [Martin Mende](#) and [Maura Scott](#) are internationally recognized marketing scholars in the [W. P. Carey School of Business](#) who study relationships, trust, empathy and technology. They are also spouses and collaborators who still talk about ideas the way they did more than two decades ago.

As Valentine's Day approaches, their story sits at the intersection of love and logic, romance and research.

"I was visiting ASU as a doctoral student for six months, and on day two of my visit, I met Maura," said Mende, the J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation Professor in Services Leadership. "It turned out to be a very life-changing experience. We studied together and spent more and more time together, and she introduced me to the beauty of Tempe and Phoenix. Our first lunch that day was Ethiopian, and I had never had Ethiopian food. I have never had such an amazing lunch with anyone."

Scott remembers that day differently, though no less vividly. She had left a career in product development, branding and marketing to return to school, but found herself overwhelmed by the intensity of doctoral seminars.

"I was terrified," said Scott, the Edward M. Carson Chair in Services Marketing. "PhD seminars are super intimidating. Martin seemed so confident and so well-read, and I thought, 'I needed to get to know this guy. He really seems to know what he's doing.'"

There was, Mende later confessed, a small secret behind that confidence.

"I was already in the third year of my German program," Mende said with a laugh. "So, I was a little ahead. I'm glad she didn't realize that right away!"

What did happen right away was the connection that followed. Conversations about coursework turned into daily exchanges about ideas, research questions and life plans. When Mende returned to Germany, the discussions did not stop. Instead, they deepened. They continued to talk every day.

“Our first [project together](#) (a peer-reviewed conference presentation) when we were doctoral students was on how consumers build emotional attachments to brands,” Mende said. “I think that was the writing on the wall. We realized we were meant to be together and needed to figure out a way to make that happen.”

That realization led Mende to leave Germany and build a career in the United States. It also set the foundation for a shared research agenda centered on human relationships and, eventually, robots.

“I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that we just talk all the time,” Scott said. “We talked about our dissertations, our ideas and where we wanted to take our research. After a while, it was like, we should work on this together. We’re already contributing to each other’s work every day, and it’s elevating it. And it’s more fun.”

Fun is a word not always associated with robotics research, but for Mende and Scott, it fits. Their work examines how people relate to service robots in contexts such as health care, finance and customer service. The questions are deeply psychological and rooted in attachment theory, trust and vulnerability.

“Some people connect to robots just as they would with other humans,” Mende said. “Robots are designed to be connectable. They often look childlike and approachable. For some people, especially those who have difficulty connecting with others, robots can feel safer. That can actually support human well-being.”

Scott’s research examines how design choices shape those connections.

“There are very specific dimensions that make something [seem cute](#),” Scott said. “Rounded edges, larger eyes, softer features. Those things can increase curiosity and reduce fear. When people are curious, they’re more willing to engage.”

(Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Wzc3ZelpXo>)

In one [health care study](#), the couple examined teams made up of human clinicians and robotic assistants. They discovered that patients were comfortable with robots helping but resistant to robots leading.

“Patients did not like the robot being in charge,” Mende said. “They wanted the robot to be supportive, not authoritative. I can relate to that myself.”

Scott found that even small choices could shift perceptions.

“When we gave people a choice, like selecting the color of the robot, that sense of agency helped them overcome concerns,” she said. “It reminded them they still had autonomy in a very vulnerable situation.”

Those insights reflect a broader philosophy they share about technology’s role in society.

“We are behavioral researchers,” Mende said. “We study psychology not to trick people into buying things, but to make experiences better. Universities have a responsibility to [pay back to society](#), and we take that seriously.”

Scott echoes that mission.

“What excites me about technology is its potential to level the playing field,” she said. “If we do this right, we can use technology to help make health care, financial services and public services more accessible, more humane and more inclusive.”

Their partnership thrives on complementary strengths. Scott describes herself as an optimist. Mende calls himself a realist. Together, they meet in the middle.

“Maura’s motto is, ‘What’s the best that can happen?’” Mende said. “I sometimes raise questions about potential barriers. That combination works.”

Their debates do not stop at the office door.

“Ideas hit you at nine o’clock when you’re walking the dogs,” Mende said. “It’s wonderful to have a partner who understands that. We usually compromise by dessert.”

Scott says the lack of boundaries is a challenge, but also a gift.

“It’s the greatest privilege of my life to work every day with my partner,” she said. “We’re pushing knowledge forward together.”

That shared journey includes memorable milestones, like the day their [first joint paper](#) was accepted.

“We were Christmas shopping and got the call in the mall,” Scott said. “We grabbed a stranger and asked her to take our picture because it was a historic moment for us. We were jumping up and down, and the lady had asked if we had just won the lottery. And in our own world, we did.”

As robots become more present in daily life, both scholars emphasize what must not be lost.

“Compassion and human dignity have to stay at the center,” Scott said. “That should be a mantra as we move into the future.”

Mende agrees and adds a note of caution.

“It can be a slippery slope,” he said. “If we stop saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ to machines, we might stop saying it to people. Empathy comes from lived experience. Machines can simulate it, but they cannot truly feel it.”

Still, neither sees technology as the enemy of love.

“I love when robots help promote human well-being,” Mende said. “Our responsibility is to understand the strengths, the risks and how to mitigate those risks.”

Scott believes working with robots has revealed something essential about humanity.

“It forces us to take apart how humans interact,” she said. “In doing that, we learn more about ourselves.”

This Valentine’s Day, the couple will not be celebrating with chocolates or a candlelit dinner. They will be presenting research at an academic conference.

“There will be no robots involved,” Mende said, laughing. “But maybe I’ll put a heart on my slides.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Professors Maura Scott and Martin Mende discuss their exploration of how humans connect with robots in the robotics lab at ISTB12 on Arizona State University’s Polytechnic campus in Mesa. They have built a significant body of research on human–robot interactions while navigating a shared academic journey in marketing that began early in their careers as they worked on their PhDs at ASU and developed alongside their personal relationship. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Forks up for W. P. Carey School of Business marketing professors — and real-life partners — Maura Scott and Martin Mende, whose shared academic journey explores the fascinating world of human-robot interactions. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News