

Chapter 13

Visual Stories of COVID–19 Social–Physical Distancing From Tagged Social Imagery

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ABSTRACT

“Social distancing,” combined with self-quarantining and self-isolating, are some of the few initial defensive stances for naïve humanity against a highly transmissible and contagious lethal pathogen, until more high-powered medical science-based interventions (therapeutics, vaccines) are available. “Social distancing” refers to various approaches: the physical distancing of people from each other, the wearing of face masks in public, the washing of hands to avoid contaminants from others’ microbes, and others. On social media, social imagery labeled “social distancing” (by both folk tagging and automated machine tagging) may be studied to better understand the surprise of transitioning from modern hyper-sociality (oversharing, high connectance, lessened senses of personal privacy) to sudden social-physical distancing with only the mitigations of electronic connectivity. This work takes a systematized manual analysis of social imagery to better understand social-physical distancing in a present-day pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

A modern mass-scale pandemic unfolds in the experienced real as a distant digital whisper in others’ stories, in media photos of shuttered storefronts, emptied streets, police and military personnel in the streets, people on stretchers and floors in hospital hallways, and data tables and plots. Then the geography shifts, and suddenly, the pathogenic virus is suddenly on one’s doorstep, and the expressions of concern ramp up from government officials. The learning about the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has been in real-time, with initial wishful thinking (it seems) that this was not transmissible person-to-person. Then there were explorations about whether the transmission was by bodily fluids alone or through the air through water droplets from sneezing and coughing. Then it was found that even talking in close

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proximity to another could spread the infection. The virus was found to last on surfaces for up to three weeks and still be infective and active, and it could last suspended in air for a number of days (three at last count). The invisibility of the virus to the naked human eye and its lethality magnified the sense of a lack of human control, both at the population level and down to the individual one. Psychologically, the threat was magnified with the idea that a beloved other, in one's trust network (family, friends, and colleagues), could carry the virus that can lead to death; later news that animals could be infected and carriers magnified this fear. (In prior viral outbreaks, children were vectors of the disease, too.) The rules for life and living had changed fundamentally.

Over time, it has become clear that there are not equal risks, with higher risks for those in certain geographies (like bigger cities with denser populations), certain work (first responders, health professionals, grocery workers, meat plant workers, cruise ship workers, and others), certain lifestyles (those with higher in-person contacts with others), and so on. Different demographic slices of the population are at higher risks for worse health outcomes with the COVID-19 disease, based on poorer underlying health conditions. The population-level health concern feels like a sudden onset even though it has been months since the first warnings started to emerge from the apparent "afar." As the colloquialism goes, This gets real fast.

To prevent the spread of infectious respiratory disease, people have engaged in "social distancing" as an important mitigation against a novel disease spreading through a naïve population by discouraging physically close interactions between people. ["Social distancing," as defined by urban sociologist Robert E. Park, has other applied meanings, too, in a continuum from distance to intimacy in human relationships. Social distancing may be a strategy used by researchers to keep a professional distance from those they study in fields like sociology and education; in undercover narcotics officers in high schools to keep from having personal relationships with their targets; in intelligence officers engaging with their agents, and others. The idea is to keep relationships manageable in these different contexts.] In social relationships, mental self-distancing may bring in some objectivity (and a different perspective) to a context, and therefore reduce "aggressive thoughts and angry feelings" from social provocations (Mischkowski, Kross, & Bushman, 2012, p. 1187). In the literature, social distancing may be used as a form of social control—using stigma and social ostracism to show disapproval of others' choices or lifestyles.

Living is a pre-requisite and a precondition for everything else, and human life is inherently deeply precious, regardless of the value of what individuals may contribute to the world that can be monetized or expressed in dollar value. Based on learning from prior viral outbreaks and zoonotic spillovers into humanity, public health officials advocated stay-at-home policies to limit human interactions with each other

The essential premise is that people have had to shift from "hypersociality" (typified by over-sharing and high self-disclosure, thin lines between the public and private information, common data leaking, promiscuous befriending of others via and through social media and other means) to a time of "social distancing" (typified by physical home- and self-isolation, online connectivity for many, caution in the presence of others—both those familiar and unfamiliar / unknown, and untrusting approaches to others, in many cases). This lifestyle of social distancing also includes door-to-door deliveries of groceries, fast food, and household goods. (Table 1)

This work explores the precipitous hypersociality -> social distancing shift in the age of a pandemic, based on the apparent lived experiences of people (at the micro and macro levels, the individual ego-based and the population-based levels) from their user-generated social imagery labeled as "social distancing" imagery. The images used here are from Google Image Search, with a set of 784 items captured in a

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