

## Calling for a Change to ‘Physical distancing’ in-lieu of ‘Social distancing’: Does it Happened?

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Social distancing is a term applied to certain actions that are taken by Public Health officials to stop or slow down the spread of a highly contagious disease. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the phrase ‘social distancing’ received massive attention in the mainstream and social media. It was adopted as a universal precaution to stop the coronavirus pandemic. However, after quite a few weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak, scholars discussed whether the term was, in fact, misleading and could be counterproductive. And there was a call for a Change the term to ‘Physical Distancing’. This write up is around the discussion of ‘social distancing versus physical distancing’

World Health Organisation (WHO) campaign promotes the five steps to kick out coronavirus says that “in terms of social interaction, take a step back, stay at least one meter (some advocates two-meter) distance from others. By maintaining such social distancing, you are helping to avoid breathing in any droplets from someone who sneezes or coughs in close proximity.” As COVID-19 spread in India, social distancing guidelines were issued by the union and state governments. The Ministry for Health and Family Welfare, Government of India has issued a comprehensive advisory on coronavirus (COVID-19) on 16th March 2020, directing states across the country to take social distancing measures as a preventive strategy. As per the advisory, social distancing is a non-pharmaceutical infection prevention and control intervention implemented to avoid/decrease contact between those who are infected with a disease-causing pathogen and those who are not, so as to stop or slow down the rate and extent of disease transmission in a community. This eventually leads to decreasing in spread, morbidity and mortality due to the disease. The term ‘social distancing’ has gained popularity when Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi has put emphasis on Social Distancing in his address to the nation and explaining the need for more preventive strategies.

Analysis of social media through Google Trends and various other measures demonstrated increasing use of the term ‘social distancing’ across various social media sites e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp during the early course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though, The effects of social distancing as a public health measure in controlling epidemics are becoming ever more known. Its effects on human relations and societies at large are not well unspoken. Nor has it been seen how societal changes triggered by social distancing can affect public health.

Social distance is a sociological term that means "the extent to which individuals or groups are removed from or excluded from participating in one another's lives" (Dictionary.com). However, there is a variety of ways in which social distance is conceptualized as a sociological notion. It is associated with effective distance, which refers to how much sympathy the members of a group feel for another group. It was mentioned that Emory Bogardus (1933), the creator of the Bogardus Social Distance Scale, based the instrument on the subjective-affective concept of social distance: the feeling reactions of persons toward other persons and groups of people in terms of attitude and prejudice. Social researchers generally emphasize the affective dimension of social distance, i.e., how members of a group “feel” about others. They also reflect on the way ‘us’ is distinguished from ‘them’ in terms of normative patterns which also refers to the widely accepted and often consciously expressed

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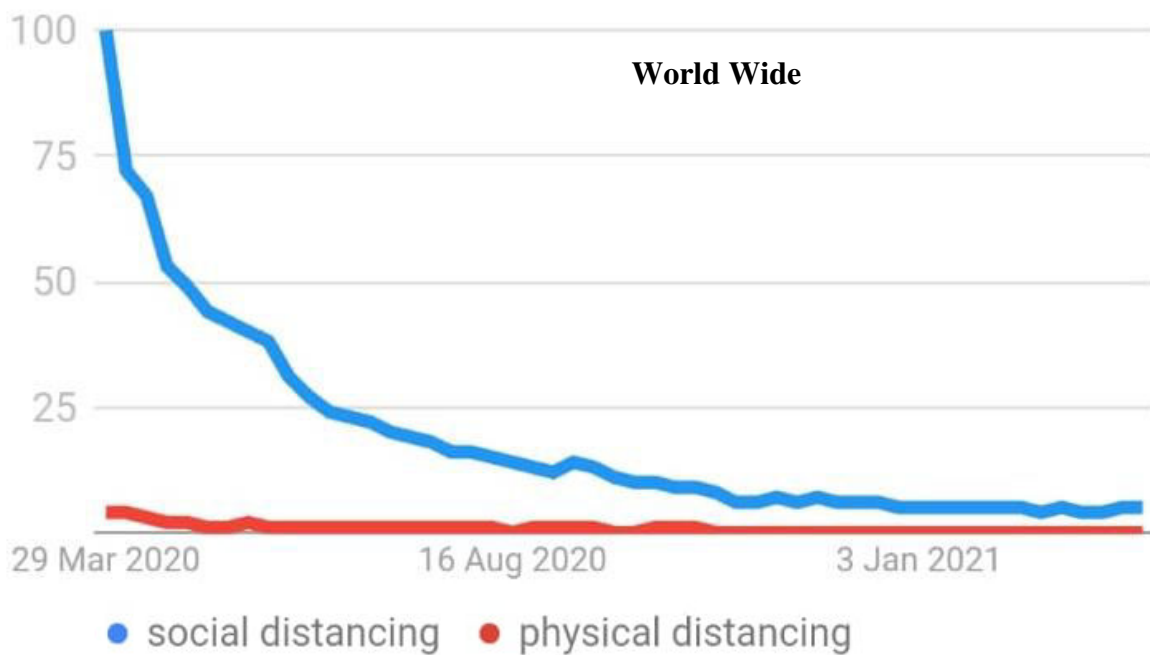
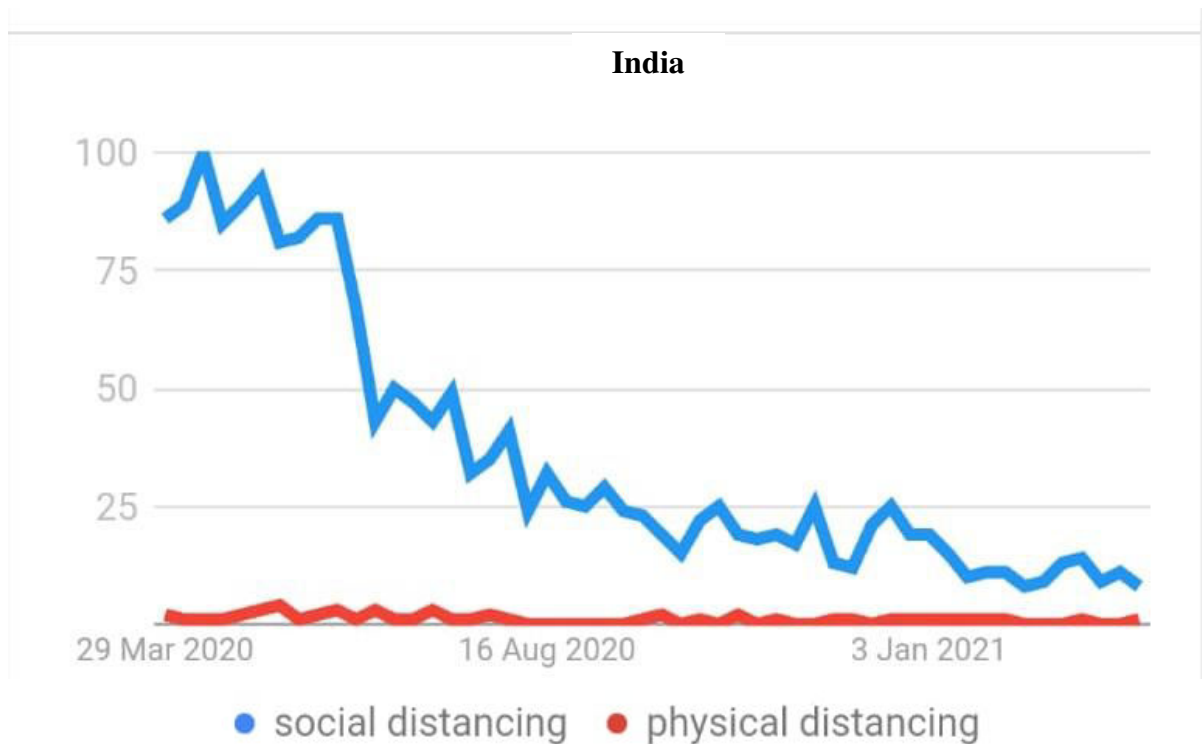
norms about who should be considered as an ‘insider’ and who an ‘outsider/foreigner’. Furthermore, interactive social distance refers to the frequency and intensity of interactions between two groups, claiming that the more the members of the two groups interact, the closer they are socially. This aspect is similar to sociological network theory, where the frequency of interaction between two parties is used as a measure of the strength of the social ties between the parties. Lastly, cultural, and habitual distance proposed by Bourdieu is influenced by the ‘capital’ that people possess.

The motivation for practising the social distancing measure in public is that COVID-19 spreads through means such as touching, coughing and sneezing. Hence, if people are spaced far enough apart, they will be out of reach of being exposed to the coronavirus. Any break in a chain of contacts breaks the disease transmission along that chain, which is why distancing measures are highly recommended during an epidemic such as COVID-19. The practice of social distancing means staying home and away from others as much as possible to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. The practice of social distancing encourages the use of things such as online video and phone communication instead of in-person contact. So it was not about social contact (distancing) but actually intended physical distancing (contact) between people.

After few weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, scholars discussed whether the term ‘social distancing’ was misleading and could be counterproductive and the prefers the term ‘Physical Distancing’. It was argued that it is all about ‘distant socialization’ rather than ‘social distancing’ and that the ‘efforts taken to slow the spread of the coronavirus should encourage strengthening social connection/relation while maintaining physical distancing. The Secretary-General of the World Health Organization, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, quickly adapted the new term ‘physical distancing’ in his announcements. The World Health Organization wanted everyone to know that while it's important to stay physically separated from each other, being together mentally is more vital than ever. That is why the U.N. agency is trying to switch out the popular phrase, "social distancing," for the more nuanced, "physical distancing." WHO daily press briefing by Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, an infectious disease epidemiologist and COVID-19 technical lead, said that she and her colleagues are exchanging “social distancing” for “physical distancing” because while keeping physical distance from people is essential for mitigating the spread of COVID-19, that “doesn’t mean that socially, we have to disconnect from our loved ones, from our family.”

Sørensen (2021) and his colleague have done excellent work to gain clarity on the arguments associated with the use of the terms ‘social distancing’ and ‘physical distancing’ and apply a health literacy lens to the discussion of the outcomes to guide their use in the public health and health promotion during the current COVID-19 pandemic and in the future. They conducted a Google Trends analysis to explore the performance of the terms worldwide in the period of 15 February–15 June 2020 along with analysis of media discussions and scientific literature review. In the thematic analysis, they found that "arguments based on nine themes with two to five sub-themes reflecting on the misleading concept, the historical perspective, the sociological perspective, the public health perspective, alternative proposals regarding the social and the physical dimensions, the distinction of terms, the political choice, and the need for rebranding. Two papers were included in the scientific literature review, which both stressed the need for a change of terminology". They concluded that "the study emphasizes that the choice of terminology matters when life-saving public health messages are designed. It is therefore recommended to rebrand ‘social distancing’ to ‘physical distancing’ to enhance clear communication during the current COVID-19 pandemic in order to prepare for future pandemics".

It is quite an obvious question here is that the use of the term “social distancing” changed to the term “physical distancing”? I did a little research using Google Trends analysis and saw that the use of “social distancing” in comparison with “physical distancing” results is depicted below in two fingers one in India and the other across the globe.



So, It is clear that the practice of the term “social distancing” could not change to the term "physical distancing” it has been addressed and written about, but until the media and our leaders make this transition, it is unlikely to catch on.

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