

## Global Experiences of Physical Distancing, Social Connectedness and Social Detachment in COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

The present study aimed to explore the effects of COVID-19 pandemic from global perspective. The study explored physical distancing, social connectedness and social detachment as an outcome of COVID-19 and its impact on individuals. Online survey was conducted from 522 respondents from across the world included, Asia, Europe, Africa and Western region. The participants of the study included wide-ranging age group (18-above 65), both less educated and highly educated, male and female with having single and marries status. The survey was conducted in three weeks' time periods in the month of April, 2020. The collected data was transformed to SPSS to performed descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The findings of the study demonstrated significant correlation among physical distancing, social connectedness and social detachment. Simple regression analysis illustrated the significant impact of demographic characteristics on dependent variables. It is concluded that on the one hand, physical distancing was adopted as the only preventive measures against COVID-19, but on the other hand, due to advancement of technology providing multiplicity of online access strengthen social connectedness. However, social detachment is also imitated due to prolonged physical distancing and fragile social relations and interactions. It is recommended that by strengthening social connections, social detachment can reduced and the interval of physical distancing can be utilized more prolifically with the aid of technology.

**Key words;** Physical Distancing, Social Connectedness, Social Detachment, COVID-19, Pandemic

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### Introduction

Physical and social distance is one of community extenuation measure that is suggested to control pandemics situation. This distancing can reduce the transmission of virus by getting multiply in socially dense community settings, like workplace, schools, and shopping malls. To deal with accelerating pandemic, states across the world have proscribed

all social activities and restricted inhabitants to stay home. Across the realm, offices and colleges have shifted entirely online, hotels are closed. This kind of physical distancing can stop, or at least slow down the massive spread of COVID-19, the ailment caused by coronavirus (Lambert & Saey, 2020).

Social distancing term was used in past focuses on declining physical contact as it can transmit virus and add up fuel to catastrophic situation, while change in social contact is an outcome of that, which was not the targeted aim. Certainly, the social distance can be successful over stretched period only depending on people attitude of upholding social contact from a distance with family, friends and colleagues. In this regard internet-based contact is key tool for confirming a successful social distancing stratagem. (ECDC,2020)

The coronavirus suppress profoundly human and evolutionarily difficult-stressed out impulses for connection: seeing our buddies, getting together in groups, or touching every other, says Nicholas Christakis, a social scientist and physician at Yale University stated that social distancing is also tests the human ability for collaboration and assistance , he adds. “Pandemics are an especially demanding test ... because we are not just trying to protect people we know, but also people we do not know or even, possibly, care about”(Miller, 2020).

Interactive social distance is one of the ways which explain phenomena of different group of individuals interacting and communicating with each other, in terms of intensity and frequency. It demonstrates that more the variety of groups interact, closer they are socially and on other-hand the lesser they interact, the greater interactive social distance is there between groups. Sociologists who work on social network theory pay consideration to interactive social distance and view it as strength of social ties (Crossman, 2019).

When there's a major occasion occurring in our condition, for example, the spread of COVID-19—our impulse is regularly to associate with others to look for help, or examine the circumstance and increase point of view as strategies for adapting. Since COVID-19 is spread through individual to-individual contact, our ordinary roads for social cooperation in the physical world have changed and should be led for all intents and purposes. This may feel less compelling and less mitigating than interfacing in person since we're not accustomed to it as our essential type of association (Miller, 2020).

Loneliness caused by isolation can increase risk of depression and anxiety (Kanter& Kuczynski, 2020). Social distance in terms of isolation has equivalent adverse effects on physical health same as smoking 15cigarattes a day and obesity and wide variety of other health problems (Miller, 2020). Human beings are social creatures same like all social animals, they have evolved over a period of time by rely on complicated social interactions with those who belong to our own species. Interaction is vital part of human evolution and forms the foundation of most societies and as per mental health experts' stringent social restrictions has put into place at a high psychological cost (Khan, 2020).

The growing realization that social distancing carries both physical and psychological health risks has directed toward a growing call to change term to “physical distance”, a realization that what we are in need is greater physical distance between people, not social distance. Physical distance surely means deteriorating physical contact that can help us thrive and stay healthy but keeping social connections can protect us psychologically as well as physically, while undertaking everything possible to reduce the spread of virus (Miller, 2020).

In addition, there are huge monetary ramifications for others who have lower earnings and who may as of now be inhabiting the edges, for instance, individuals who may have insecure lodging conditions, restricted medical coverage as well as transitory business. Those who are stressed over what the ramifications of a decrease in hours or employment misfortune may accomplish for their salary, just as their entrance to nourishment, human services and sanctuary. These are significant gatherings we should consider both when we make proposals for sure fire social and physical removing, just as in considering longer-term suggestions going ahead (Miller, 2020).

Physical distancing was firstly adopted in December 2019 when the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, encourage the general public to avoid public places, schools and workplaces. The situation drastically shifted social interaction patterns which needs to be quantified across a range of countries (Mossong, Hens & Jit, 2019;

Prem, Cook & Jit, 2017; Zhang, Klepac & Read, 2019).

The established literature explained social distancing as physical isolation and detachment from other human beings, whereas no study was found to explain the consequences of physical distancing on social connectedness and social detachment under the sociological paradigm. The present study has explored following three objectives to identify the profound outcomes of physical distancing on social life. The study explored experience of human beings with physical distancing & social connectedness. It also measured the impact of physical distancing on individual personal and social life professed as social detachment.

**Theoretical perspective**

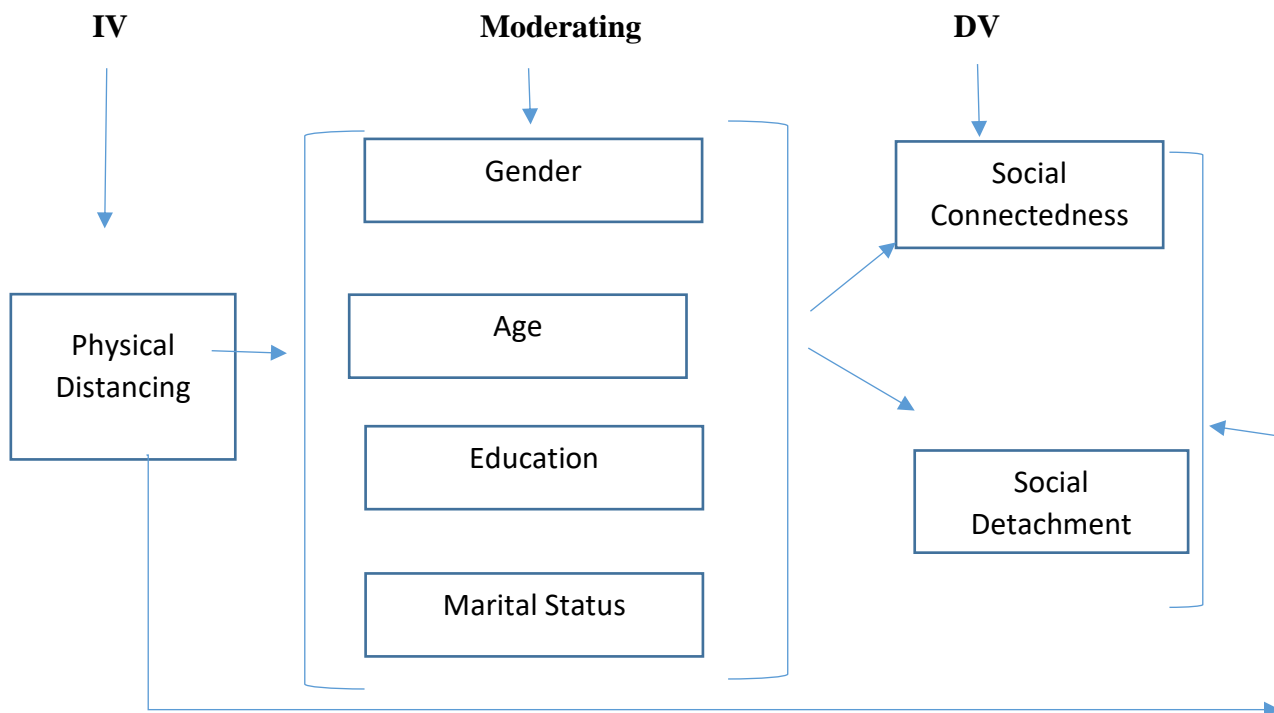
The sociological theoretical perspective of Bogardus (1925) on social distancing was adopted as framework of analysis. By extending the ideas of Park (1924;339) who coined the term ‘distance’ with reference to human beings as defined as ‘*distinguished from spacial relations*’. Social distance is measured simply as a means of securing good interpretations of the difference in degrees and grades of feeling and understanding that exist

in social situations. The results of this dimension direct towards the main point for intensive investigation into human experiences (Bogardus, 1925). His study demonstrated the influence of social environment on life circumstances supported his justification of the development of social distance scale.

As one of the prolific American Sociologist of the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was best known for his development of the idea of ‘social distance’ which can also be used to explain the physical detachment of individuals from each other. In this way, it is perceived as affective social distance where center of attention reflected through sympatric feelings of an individual and groups towards another individual and groups. on feeling reaction

**Conceptual Framework**

On the basis of pervious literature and theoretical perspective cited above, the current study has develop a model ‘‘physically distant but socially connected’’ defined physical distancing (PD) as an independent variable, whereas social connectedness (SC) and social detachment (SD) are explained as Dependent variables as illustrated in the Figure 2 below;



On the basis of above model, the study propose following hypothesis:

- H1: Physical Distancing cannot reduce social connectedness.
- H2: Physical Distancing is positively related with social detachment
- H3: Social connectedness can reduce the feelings of social detachment'
- H4: Higher age, low education and singlehood increase social detachment

**Socio-Demographic Characteristics**

**Results**

The self-administrated questionnaire was used comprised of 16 items in three domains i.e; physical distancing (3 items), social connectedness (5 items) and Social detachment (8 items). All the items were accessed on five point Likert scale; (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree. The Cronbach’s Alpha reliability of the items were as Physical Distant (a=.782), social connectedness (a=.812) and social detachment (a=.88).

**Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of demographic characteristic of the respondents (N=522)**

	<i>f</i>	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	396	75.9
Male	126	24.1
<b>Age</b>		
Less than 18	3	0.6
18-25	290	55.6
26-35	151	28.9
36-45	58	11.1
46-55	13	2.5
56-65	5	1.0
Above 65	2	0.7
<b>Education</b>		
Secondary (9-10)	4	.8
Higher Secondary/Collage (11-12)	12	2.3
University (13-16)	369	70.7
Higher (Above 16)	137	26.2
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	409	78.4
Married	113	21.6
<b>Professional Status</b>		
Students	256	49.0
Working	191	36.6
Job less	75	14.4

Table 1 illustrated that majority (75.9) of the respondents were female as compare to 24.1% male who participated in the survey. Majority (55.6%) were in the age group of 18-25 representing youth population, followed by 28.9% belonged to age group (26-35), 11.1% (36-45), 2.5% (46-55), 1% (56-65), while approximately

1% of the respondents were above 65 years of age. Furthermore the table also shows level of education representing 70.7% of the respondents having university level education, 26.2% higher education, 2.3% had higher secondary level education while only 1% had secondary level of education. In regards to their marital status, the

data shows 78.4% of the respondents were single and 21.6% were married. The professional status of the respondents depicted that majority (49.0%) of

the respondents were students, 36.6% were working and 14.4% were jobless.

**Table 2: Frequency and percentage distribution of the respondent country (N=522)**

Country	f	%
Australia	2	.4
Bangladesh	12	2.3
Canada	18	3.4
China	10	1.9
Ghana	17	3.3
India	6	1.1
Italy	6	1.1
Malaysia	199	38.1
Myanmar	3	.6
New Zealand	2	.4
Nigeria	22	4.2
Pakistan	149	28.5
Singapore	14	2.7
Turkey	16	3.1
United Kingdom	21	4.0
USA	22	4.2
Yemen	3	.6
Total (17)	522	100.0

Moreover, the findings of the study depicted respondents from 17 countries (Table 2. ) across the world participated in the survey including Asia, Europe, Africa and Western regions. The respondents included from Australia (0.4%), Bangladesh (2.3%), Canada (3.4%), China (1.9%), Ghana (3.3%), India (1.1%), Italy (1.1%), Malaysia (38.1%), Myanmar (0.6%), New Zealand

(0.4%), Nigeria (4.2%), Pakistan (28.5%), Singapore (2.7%), Turkey, (3.1%), United Kingdom (4.0%), USA (4.2%) and Yemen (0.6%). The graph below (Figure 1) clearly illustrated the contribution of 17 countries across the world leading by Malaysia, followed by Pakistan, USA, and United Kingdom.

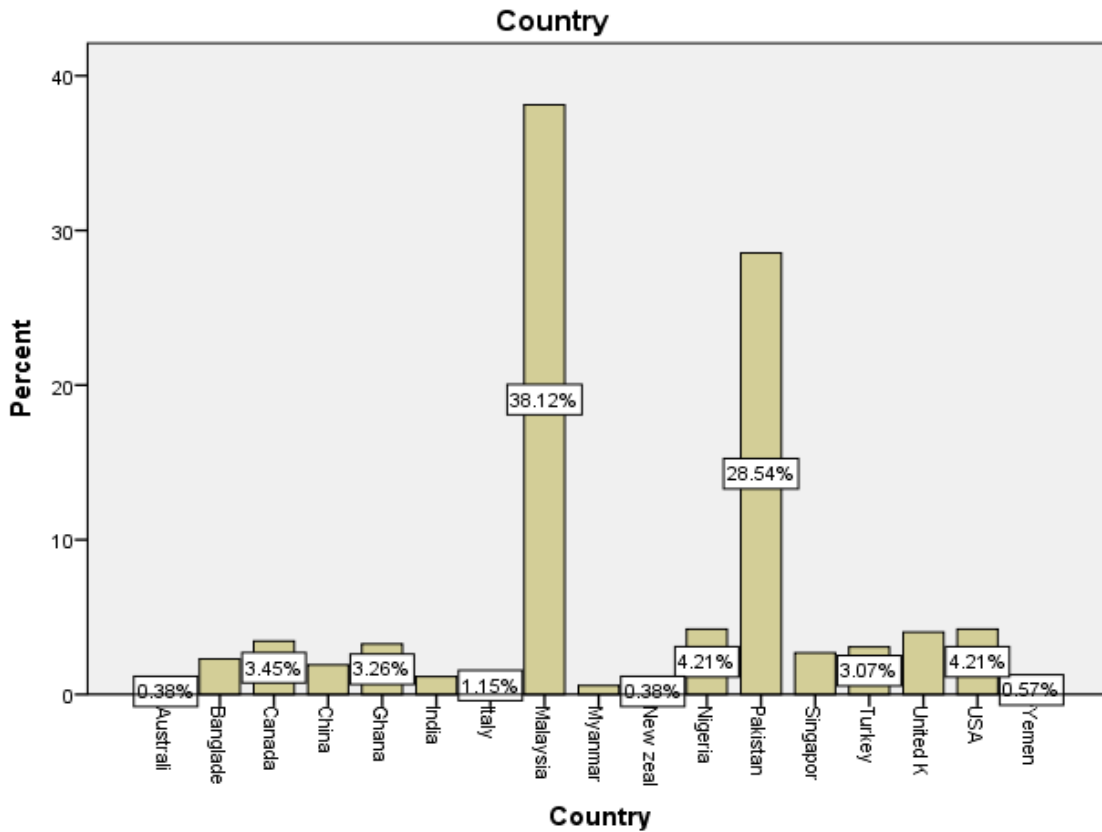


Figure 1: Percentage of countries' participation in the survey.

**Table 3. Descriptive analysis of Physical Distancing, Social connectedness and social detachment**

Scale items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Physical Distancing	3.00	15.00	11.3621	1.87956
Social connectedness	7.00	24.00	17.5498	2.93539
social detachment	8.00	40.00	23.2414	5.24443

Table 3 highlighted that the study participants were aware about physical distancing and considered it as necessary to avoid the spread of COVID-19, the mean value of physical distancing (11.36) indicated temporarily physical distant can reduce the chances of getting infection of the pandemic. While adopting physical distancing, social connectedness (Mean=17.5) is also possible by

utilizing the technology which is playing a major role in establishing social connections. Whereas on the other hand, social detachment (Mean=23) reflected that respondents were feeling isolated from the society & social networks, losing interest in social activities, wastage of productive time, and perceiving increase of class differences.

Table 4: Correlation analysis of social connectedness and social detachment (N=522)

	social detachment	
	r	p
social connectedness	-.187**	.000
Physical Distance	-.080*	.051

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The association between social connectedness (r=-.187\*\*, P< 0.05) and physical distancing (r=-.080\*, P< 0.05) with the social detachment illustrate a significant but negative relationship. It

is reflected that as social connectedness and physical distance reduced the social detachment increased.

Table 5: T-test shows gender differences in perception and experiences of Physical distant, social connectedness and social detachment

Scale	Male (126)		Female (396)		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Physical Distancing	11.0635	1.67211	11.4571	1.93323	2.045	.041
Social connectedness	16.8730	2.97720	17.7652	2.89266	2.994	.003
social detachment	23.8175	5.20523	23.0581	5.25011	1.417	.157

The above table indicated that there is significant difference between male and female experiences of physical distancing (t=2.045, p< .05) and social connectedness (t=2.994, p<.05). The differences in mean values of both male and female illustrated

not a big difference but there is significant difference the test value calculated. However, there is no gender difference in social detachment (t=1.41, p>.05).

Table 6: T-test on difference between single and married respondents towards social detachment

Scale	Single (402)		Married (113)		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
social detachment	17.8259	4.07957	16.7522	4.27520	2.446	0.15

The t-test analysis in table 6 demonstrated slightly but significant difference between the single and married respondents towards social detachment.

Mean (17.82) illustrated single population were feeling more socially detached as compare to those who were marries.

Table 7. Association of age and education with social connectedness and social detachment

	Age		Education	
	r	p	r	p
Social Connectedness	.107*	.015	.098**	.025
Social Detachment	-.063	.025	-.181	.000

The demographics characteristics such as age and education has very strong and positive association with the social connectedness ( $r=0.98^{**}$ ) and social detachment (-.181). The social detachment

is negatively correlated with the age and education, the older adults and less educated individuals were redundant feelings of socially detached.

**Table 8. Simple Regression of demographic variables with Dependent Variables**

	Predictors: Gender, Education, Work status, Marital status, Age				
Constant	SE	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	p
Social Connectedness	3.22464	.206	.043	5.937	.000
Social detachment	4.06869	.193 <sup>a</sup>	.037	3.994	.000

P<0.05

The demographic variables of Gender, Education, Work status, marital status, and age was regressed with dependent variables; social connectedness and social detachment to determine the coefficient of determination (R<sup>2</sup>). The F values in the above table at .000 level of significance illustrated significant impact of demographics on social connectedness and social detachment.

**Discussion**

To prevent the spread of COVID-19 and maintaining social connectivity, the World Health Organization (WHO) has rephrased the term “social distancing” into “physical distancing” (WHO, 2020). The findings of the current study elucidated how human interactions are changing globally in the current pandemic situation of COVID-19. Social connectedness and social detachment were used as two dependent variables whereas physical distant is treated as independent variable with having moderating variables of gender, age, education and marital status. The statistical analysis was performed by using SPSS version 20.0 software. Both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed included descriptive statistics for demographic variables, t-test to determine gender differences, correlation to determine the association between dependents variables (DV) and independent variables (IV) and simple regression to predict the effects of moderating variables on DVs & IV.

The data was collected as online survey from 17 countries across the world highlighted the importance of physical distancing in order to control the spread of COVID-19. While following social distancing, maintaining social interaction is also important. The findings were supported by Lieberman & Schroeder (2020) mentioned that to control the spread out of the disease, more and more people are forced to stay at home but social connected with their families, friends, colleagues and others.

Physical distancing or social separation between different groups and individuals are caused on real and assumed differences as defined by well-known social categories. These social categories are established on the bases of ethnicity, nationality, class, race, religion, age, sexuality etc. According to sociologists we can divide social distance into three types: Normative, affective and interactive but sociologists are in view that these types are not mutually exclusive nor necessarily overlapping. So individual and groups can be close in one sense, like in term of interactive social distance but far from alternative like affective social distance (Crossman, 2019). Social connected through online sources cannot replace the significance and warm feelings of physical interaction with individuals which make some people feel disconnected and isolated (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2020). Similar findings were reported in the current study i.e; loneliness, feelings of detachment from the study, lacking interest in any productive activities and sense of timewasting etc.



Physical distancing, social connectedness and social detachment are significantly correlated with each other as table 4 illustrated association between social connectedness ( $r=-.187^{**}$ ,  $P< 0.05$ ) and physical distancing ( $r=-.080^*$ ,  $P< 0.05$ ) with the social detachment as a significant but negative relationship. It is reflected that as social connectedness and physical distance reduced the social detachment increased. While on the other hand, due to advancement of technology, despite physically distant, social connections are buildup in an innovative ways. The results supported the hypotheses of the study. These findings were also supported by WHO (2020) reported the effectiveness globalized technology oriented world strengthen social connections but physical distance is necessary to be taken to avoid the spread of the pandemic. Prem et al., (2020) supported the physical distancing have potential to impact on flattening the curve of the spread of COVID-19 which in return reduce the burden of disease on healthcare system.

The population with different demographic characteristics have different experiences with the social connectedness' and social detachment. The findings of the study elucidated the elders adult, with having less education, and no working status were more desperate with the feelings of socially detached and supported hypothesis 4 of the study. Such circumstances might be due to lack of social support, lack of interaction with the social networks, interruptions and misfortunes of occupations and schedules will tip a few people toward misery. The argument was supported by Kanter& Kuczynski (2020) mentioned expanded family strife as individuals are compelled to explore unordinary measures of time together, numerous in kept spaces. Adaptability is versatile. Building an establishment of sound adapting, keeping up attention to the symptoms of our fundamental cultural changes, and remaining associated with our qualities and to one another, are basic. Individuals have extraordinary limit with regards to sympathy and minding in the midst of anguish.

## Conclusion

Physical distancing is the only preventive measures against COVID-19 pandemic in the world. Many positive steps have been taken by the individuals and at the state level to ensure the implementation o physical distancing to minimize the hazards of the pandemic. While maintaining physical distance from others, social connectedness with the family, friends, colleagues and other social groups is important. However, social detachment is natural and communal due to losing face to face social interactions. The study recommended that by strengthening social connectedness, feelings of social detachment can be reduced and the quarantine time can be used productively.

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