



# Social Versus Physical Distancing: Analysis of Public Health Messages at the Start of COVID-19 Outbreak in Malaysia Using Natural Language Processing

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## Abstract

The study presents an attempt to analyse how social media netizens in Malaysia responded to the calls for "Social Distancing" and "Physical Distancing" as the newly recommended social norm was introduced to the world as a response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The

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## Abstract

The study presents an attempt to analyse how social media netizens in Malaysia responded to the calls for “Social Distancing” and “Physical Distancing” as the newly recommended social norm was introduced to the world as a response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The pandemic drove a sharp increase in social media platforms’ use as a public health communication platform since the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia in April 2020. We analysed thousands of tweets posted by Malaysians daily between January 2020 and August 2021 to determine public perceptions and interactions patterns. The analysis focused on positive and negative reactions and the interchanges of uses of the recommended terminologies “social distancing” and “physical distancing”. Using linguistic analysis and natural language processing, findings dominantly indicate influences from the multilingual and multicultural values held by Malaysian netizens, as they embrace the concept of distancing as a measure of global public health safety.

## Keywords

Social media analytics Natural language processing Linguistic analysis Public health communication COVID-19 pandemic Social media Sentiment analysis

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