Evaluating the Social Distancing Twitter Community

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Introduction

Social distancing, the ~~idea to~~ maintain a distance between an individual and other people, which in terms of ~~America,~~ is six feet (Mandavilli, 2020). A concept the world hasn't often had to face. Although, here we are, social distancing our friends, family, and strangers. Life as we know it has changed. Social media immediately became a lifeline for humans all over the world to maintain some type of human interaction without going nuts inside their house. As we are going through one of the most historic events mankind has taken on, COVID-19, social media has been everyone's outlet to have some connection to others. Now bring in the hashtag and twitter trend that has changed the world and how we see it, this new form of communication allows humans to interact without being physically together. The distance that twitter covers has no restrictions and enables people from all over to start trends and be part of a community of conversations. Thus in the midst of this pandemic, the hashtag #socialdistancing has allowed people to interact on twitter. It emerged during this global crisis and has created a community for people from all over the world, sharing what they are doing to social distance and advocate for this cause. This hashtag has become popular due to the serious effects of COVID-19. With the social distancing twitter community, they are furiously advocating for social distancing and to follow guidelines. The guidelines I am referring to are what the Center for Disease and Control (CDC) recommends, such as limiting interaction with others, washing hands, wearing cloth face coverings, and limiting participation in events or gatherings (CDC, 2020). Many tweets I came across in my research came from adults, which makes sense due to adults being more at risk from COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). Many discussions from this twitter community have been produced and continue to bring various opinions and ideas of how to social distance. Most of the

tweets support social distancing with masks and hand sanitizer because they do believe the benefits of keeping distance outweigh the cost. Social distancing actually delays the outbreak peak, reduces the peak number of cases and overall number of cases during a pandemic (Ferguson, 2009). This social distancing twitter community has been so active and prominent in spreading the word to stay home and keep distance because it's the only way they believe they can connect safely but impactfully right now.

Methods

My process of coding began with creating a Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet (TAGS) on my google sheets. I began to look through twitter to find my hashtag in a twitter community. I stumbled upon the hashtag "#socialdistancing," which had tons of communication and activity occurring on twitter. To begin my coding process of my #socialdistancing tweets, I first had to narrow down the number of tweets in my google sheet since I had thousands of tweets using my hashtag. I used the Filter by Condition tab to get rid of all the retweets due to the unwanted material it would produce for my research. I then had to copy and paste all these refined tweets into a new workbook on my google sheets which put them in number order. The filtering of the retweets brought me from 22,453 tweets to 904 tweets. From there I cut my tweets down to 100 tweets. My tweets were finally ready to be coded. I decided to use various categories to fit the tweets in this community, based on the topic and stance that many of the tweets were taken toward social distancing. My categories include the type of poster, type of appeal, type of communication, attitude toward social distancing, justification, mask advocacy, handwashing advocacy, user age and political alignment. The user age, type of appeal, political alignment and type of poster were general types of categories I decided to apply to this topic to

get a better understanding of the user and ~~appearance of~~ the tweet. While the type of communication, attitude toward social distancing, justification, mask advocacy and handwashing advocacy were more ~~zeroed in and~~ specific to my topic of social distancing tweets. For each category, I looked at the tweets, how the user chose to write them, the reasoning behind their words, and the user's profile and previous tweets. ~~Based on the tweets in this community for most of the tweets I was able to code into the categories. Although what I coded does depend on the specific category and tweet, most tweets had similar views toward social distancing and the reasons behind their support of the movement.~~

Discussion

After the tweets were all filtered correctly and had the specific categories to code them with, I could begin to code. I began to code each tweet of my twitter community by analyzing each user and their tweet with the following categories : type of poster, type of appeal, type of communication, attitude toward social distancing, justification, mask advocacy, handwashing advocacy, user age and political alignment.

The type of poster was a general category that showed me who really was taking a stance on social distancing. To identify the type of poster I had to go through each twitter profile. Usually, the user's profile showed me the type of poster they were which was mainly an individual, organization, business and in some instances a teacher or group. As seen in Figure 1 below, a majority of the tweets were by individuals and organizations in this twitter community.
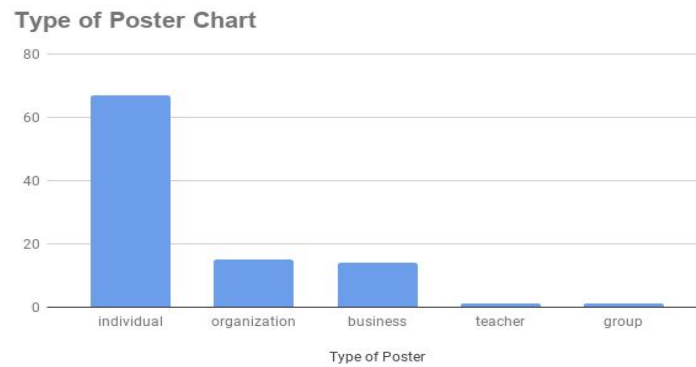
Type of Poster Chart

Figure 1

For the type of appeal I ~~had to analyze the actual tweet that the user tweeted. The two types of appeal I was~~ labeling each tweet ~~was~~ logic or emotions. For logic I was looking for a tweet that was more factual based and informative ~~to others~~. The emotions type of appeal for a tweet appeared more from the user's point of view and opinion. For example, one user tweeted, "Once again football and politics do not mix. Can't see there being any #SocialDistancing issues at #Burnley when the fans no longer turn up (Craig, 2020)." ~~Based on the user who wrote this tweet, he seems annoyed with football and politics and is expressing more of~~ an opinion based tweet ~~rather than using facts and information. Therefore, this tweet would be~~ categorized as emotions. In my research, I found the tweets to be split in half with half the users choosing to tweet with a logical appeal (50%) while the other half tweeted more with an emotional appeal (50%).

I had to examine each tweet to see the type of communication ~~they were using in their tweet~~. The type of communication was one of my more varied categories due to there being many ~~types of~~ ways to communicate things on social media. The labels created for the tweets in this category were informative, social, provoking, urging, and advertisement. Overall, the types
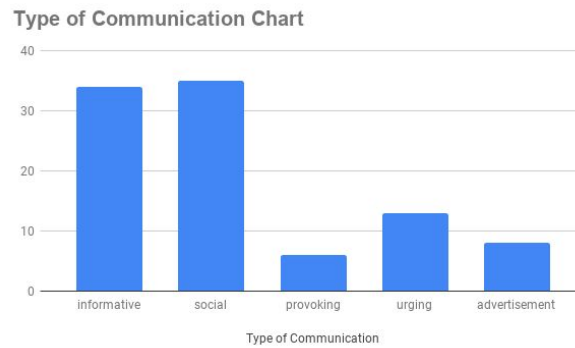
Type of Communication Chart

Figure 2

of communication in this twitter community varied but often showed either to be informative or more social in their tweet as shown in Figure 2.

My fourth category ~~I chose to conduct my research~~ was the user's attitude toward social distancing shown in their tweet. For each user, I read their tweet and interpret whether they supported the movement for social distancing or were against it. According to the academic journal article in *BMC Public Health* written by Savi Maharaj and Adam Kleczkowski, the worst thing you can do when in a pandemic or epidemic is to attempt social distance "but not cautiously enough to cause the epidemic to be suppressed (Maharaj, 2012)." ~~The authors were expressing that if~~ you decide to social distance, you must go all out to really make a difference. This view of social distancing is similar to the results I found in my research since many people in their tweet advocated to stay home and social distance. Overall, my research found that 94.8% of the users were supportive of social distancing and 5.2% were against it.

Another category I chose was justification. This category was meant to understand the reason why they used "#socialdistancing" in their tweet. I wanted to see the logic behind each tweet and what really pushed them to ~~write~~ it on twitter. The labels for this category varied such as social, business, pandemic scam, health and safety. In ~~the~~ newspaper article in the

Philadelphia Inquirer by Jonathan Lai he wrote, "Better to err on the side of caution," when referring to COVID-19 and staying 6 feet from family, friends and strangers (Lai, 2020). This correlates with how the twitter community expressed their feelings of prioritizing health and safety over socializing. As you can see in Figure 3, health was the major reason behind most tweets but safety and business objectives did come into play a lot in this twitter community.
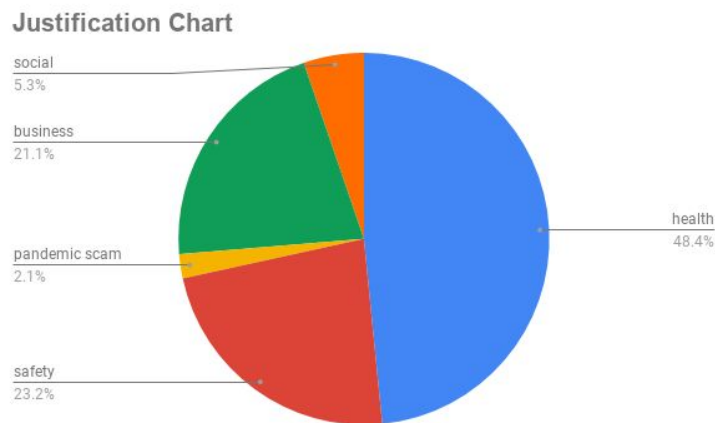

Figure 3

My sixth and seventh category for this report was mask advocacy and hand washing/sanitizing advocacy. While these are two separate categories and actions, they are both two recommended actions to take against COVID-19 by the CDC (CDC, 2020). For both these categories I had to scan through each tweet and see if it was pro or con in either mask wearing or hand washing/sanitizing in some way. One example of a tweet I analyzed stated, "This makes sense to me. #COVID19 is still a threat to people everywhere. Do not let up. #SocialDistancing #WearAMask #WearADamnMask I don't like wearing one, but I do ❗🔻❗ (Anne, 2020).[2] Based on this tweet, the user is passionately advocating for the use of masks through not only her words but also her choice in hashtags. In Figure 4, it shows that most people were in favor of wearing masks and only a small amount were actually advocating against it. While, in Figure 5, 66.7% of

users were for hand washing/sanitizing and an unexpected amount of 33.3% were actually
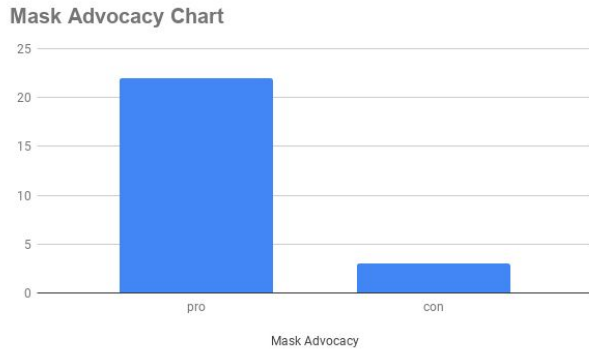
against this action.

Mask Advocacy Chart

Hand Washing/Sanitizing Chart

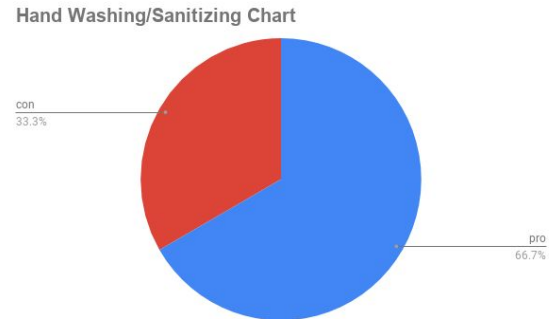Figure 4   Figure 5

User age was another category I used. For this category, I did have to ~~get more personal~~

~~with the user and~~ view every user's profile to see how old they seemed based on my

interpretation of their picture or the way they had tweeted. The ages tweeting ranged from 20 to

70 years old. The 20 to 30 years old category leads with tweeting in the twitter community with

40% of the users being in that age range. This makes sense due to the younger ages being more

involved in social media.

The final category used in my research was political alignment. This category I

specifically chose to see whether the left or right ~~party~~ was tweeting about ~~the~~ social distancing

in the world. To find this category I went through every user's profile and researched what their

values were and what they supported. Most of the tweets in the community were tweeted and in

favor of a more left sided judgement than right. Figure 6, below, shows the numbers between the

left and right supporters of the twitter community. Based upon my research, more left supporters

were tweeting about social distancing and more likely to advocate for people to keep distancing rather than go right back to normal behavior.
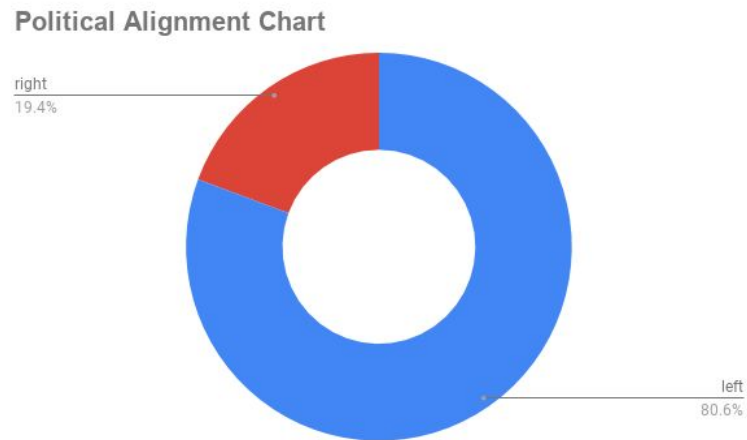
Political Alignment Chart

right
19.4%

left
80.6%

Figure 6

Conclusion

In short, it seems that social distancing has gone beyond the measures of avoiding contact but in some ways has brought people together in a new way as we have seen here in this twitter community. While people may not be able to touch one another and really engage as humankind is used to, it's positive to see twitter conversations and movements occur even in a pandemic. For the most part, the tweets I analyzed were in favor of social distancing and to keep society safe. The evaluation of this social distancing twitter community showed hope for the world of how positive people can be and that there is a way to help out and advocate even when we are not physically together.

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