

Evaluating the Social Distancing Twitter Community

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Introduction

Social distancing, the action of maintaining a distance of 6 feet between an individual and other people was something we never conceived of until the COVID-19 pandemic (Mandavilli, 2020). Since we all have been forced to be distanced from each other, social media has been everyone's outlet to have some connection to others. Thus in the midst of this pandemic, the hashtag #socialdistancing has allowed people to interact, particularly on Twitter. This hashtag has become popular due to the serious effects of COVID-19. Hashtags on Twitter allow for a way to group content and start viral movements (Lips, 2018). For example, the #MeToo, used to raise awareness for sexual assault and harrastment, became very popular and produced many Twitter conversations (Lips, 2018). The distance that Twitter has with “#socialdistancing” has no restrictions and enables people to talk and be part of a social distancing community. This Twitter community has been furiously advocating for social distancing and to follow guidelines from the Center for Disease Control (CDC), such as limiting interaction with others, washing hands, wearing cloth face coverings, and limiting participation in events or gatherings (CDC, 2020). Many discussions from this Twitter community have been produced and continue to bring various opinions and ideas of how to social distance. Social distancing actually delays the outbreak peak, reduces the peak number of cases and overall number of cases during a pandemic (Ferguson, 2009). The 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. To get a better comprehension of the social distancing Twitter community, we can examine the activity surrounding the hashtag.

Methods

My process of coding began with creating a Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet (TAGS) on google sheets. I searched on Twitter to find my hashtag and began to research the popular hashtag “#socialdistancing.” To begin my coding process of my #socialdistancing tweets, I narrowed down the number of tweets in my google sheet. 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 copied and pasted all the refined tweets into a new workbook on google sheets, which put them in number order. The filtering of the retweets brought me from 22,453 tweets to 904 tweets. I cut my tweets down to 100 tweets and was ready to begin the coding process. I used various categories to fit the tweets in this community, based on the topic and stance of the tweets. 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 the tweet. While the type of communication, attitude toward social distancing, justification, mask advocacy and handwashing advocacy were more 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.

Discussion

The first category I coded was the type of poster that showed who 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.

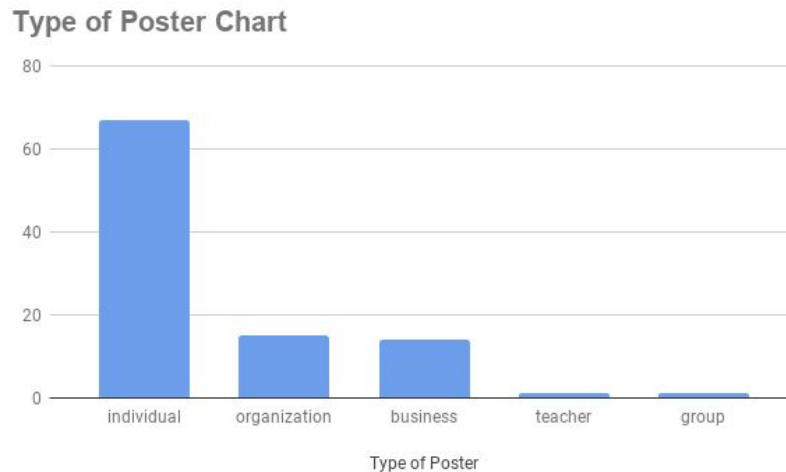


Figure 1 - Type of Poster that tweeted: "#socialdistancing"

For the type of appeal, each tweet logic or emotions is labeled. For logic I was looking for a tweet that was more factual based and informative. The emotions type of appeal 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). This tweet is opinion based which would be categorized as emotions. I found the tweets to be split, with half the users choosing to tweet with a logical appeal (50%) and the other half tweeted more with an emotional appeal (50%).

I had to examine each tweet to see the type of communication. The type of communication was varied due to a multitude 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 of communication in this Twitter community often showed either to be informative or more social in their tweet as shown in Figure 2.

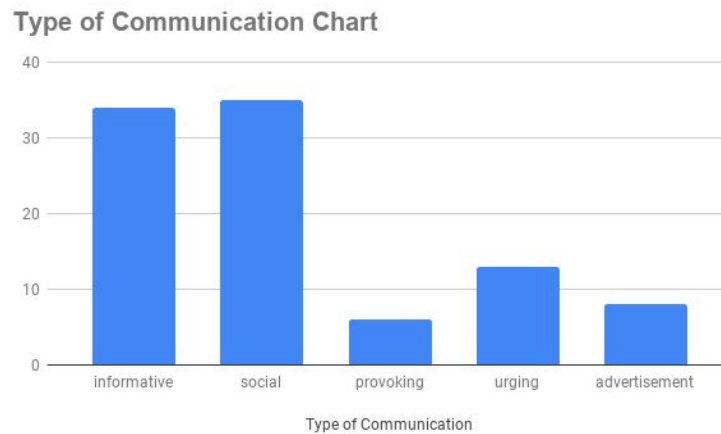


Figure 2 - Type of Communication of the tweets using: “#socialdistancing”

My fourth category was the user’s attitude toward social distancing. For each user, I interpreted 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). Therefore, when social distancing, you must be committed to it to make a difference. This view of social distancing is similar to the results I found, since many people in their tweet advocated 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 why they used “#socialdistancing” in their tweet. I wanted to see the logic behind each tweet and what really pushed them to post it. The labels for this category varied such as social, business, pandemic scam, health and safety. In the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jonathan Lai 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 in this Twitter community.

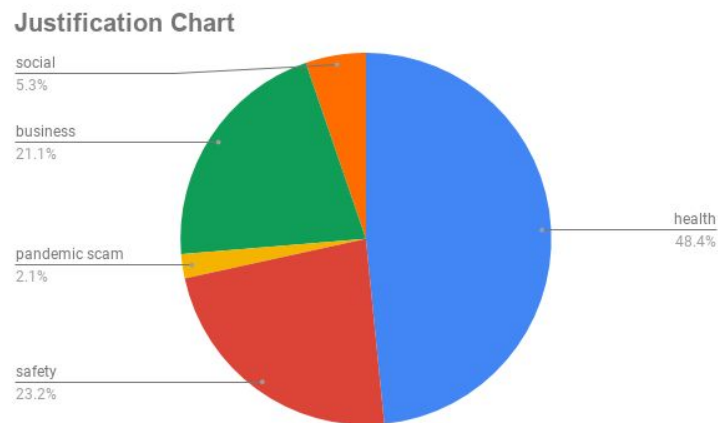


Figure 3 - Type of Justification of the tweets using: “#socialdistancing”

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 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). Based on this tweet, the user is advocating for the use of masks through her words and choice in hashtags. Figure 4, 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.

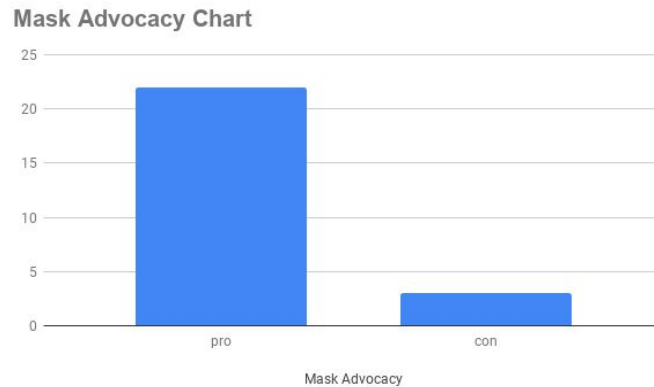


Figure 4 - Whether or not the tweet supported or opposed wearing a mask

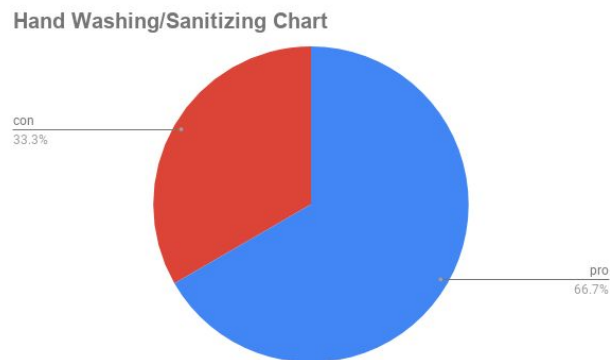


Figure 5 - Whether or not the tweet supported or opposed hand washing/sanitizing

User age was another category I used. For this category, I viewed 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.

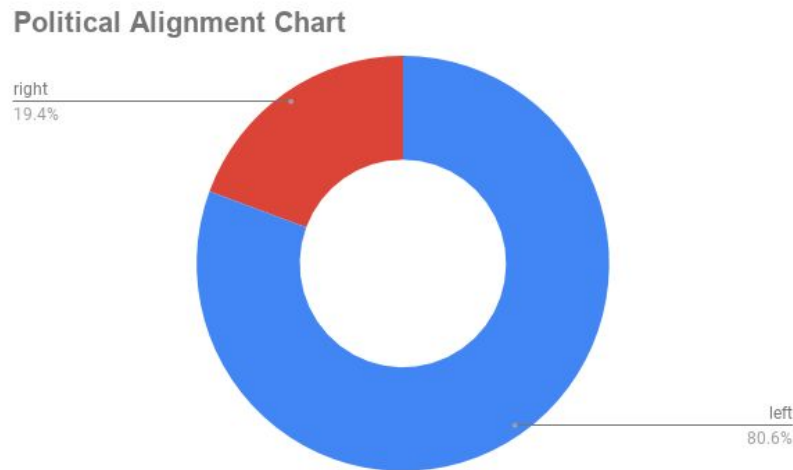


Figure 6 - Whether the tweet was in support of the left or right

The final category used in my research was political alignment. This category was chosen to see whether the left or right was tweeting about social distancing in the world. 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 in favor of left sided judgement than right. Figure 6, above, 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 back to normal behavior.

Conclusion

In short, social distancing has gone beyond the measures of avoiding contact and has brought people together in a new way 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. Predominantly, the tweets I analyzed were in favor of social distancing. The evaluation of this social distancing Twitter community

showed how positive people can be and a way to help out and advocate even when we are not physically together.

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