

## Psychological Factors Predicting Social Distance during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Empirical Investigation

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**Abstract :** Numerous nations around the world are facing exceptional challenges in employing measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. Following the recommendations of the World Health Organization, a series of preventive measures have been adopted. However, individuals must comply with these rules and recommendations in order to make these measures effective. While COVID-19 was climaxing, it seemed of crucial importance to analyze which psychosocial factors contribute to the acceptance of such preventive behavior, thus favoring the management of COVID-19 worldwide health crisis. In particular, the identification of aspects related to obstacles and facilitation of adherence to social distancing has been considered crucial in the containment of the virus spread. Since the virus was firstly detected in China, Asian people could be considered a relevant outgroup targeted for exclusion. We also hypothesized social distance could be influenced by characteristics of the target, such as smiling or coughing. 260 participants participated in this research on a voluntary basis. They filled a survey designed to explore a series of COVID-19 measures (such as exposure to virus and fear of infection). We also assessed participants state and trait anxiety. The dependent variable was social distance, based on a measure of seating distance designed ad hoc for the present work. Our hypothesis that participants could report greater distance in response to Asian people was not confirmed. On the other hand, significantly lower distance in response to smiling compared to coughing targets was reported. Adopting a regression analysis model, we found that participants' social distance, in response to both coughing and smiling targets, was predicted by fear of infection and by the perception COVID-19 could become a pandemic. Social distance in response to the coughing target was also significantly and positively predicted by age and state anxiety. In summary, the present work has sought to identify a set of psychological variables, which may still be predictive of social distancing.

**Keywords :** COVID-19, social distancing, health, preventive behaviors, risk of infection

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