



RESEARCH LETTER



## What do people share from quarantine?

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its consequent self-isolation, has imposed changes on various aspects of people's lifestyle. The present study aims at exploring the effect of these lifestyle changes on the content people share on their social media pages. To do so, we analysed Instagram posts containing the hashtag #viewfromquarantine which is promoted by the 'National Geographic' on a global scale. Adaptation to the new lifestyle, self-expression, and social issues were identified as the main issues shared by people during this time of pandemic.

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## 1. Introduction

At the end of 2019, a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was detected in China and, by early 2020, it became an unprecedented global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020) which led to community quarantines, business closure, mobility bans, and other restrictions in many countries. These, in turn, influenced many aspects of society such as education, the economy, politics, transportation, sport, religion, art, and tourism. As consequences of these changes and self-isolation, the social life of people and specifically their methods of communication have undergone unprecedented changes.

The restriction of traditional communication during self-isolation has directed people to alternative means of communications such as online platforms. Among them, social media become extremely important by allowing people to represent an online version of themselves (Belk, 2013) through the provision of reciprocal communication that enables them to view others' contents, share what they want, and receive feedbacks by comments and 'likes' (Chung et al., 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects on lifestyles, raises the question of what types of contents people share on their social media pages during this global crisis, and their period of self-isolation. The findings of this research are important since this is the first global lockdown since the emergence of social media. Furthermore, this study expands the Belk's (2013) 'digital extended self' theory and shows how a global crisis, affecting various aspects of society, communication, and business, is reflected on social media pages.

## 2. Method

To explore the content that people share on social media during a self-isolation period, we examine a COVID-19-related hashtag on the Instagram platform. The global popularity of Instagram, as well as its focus on both photos and texts, were the main reason for choosing it for the current study. Since the majority of Instagram users have a private profile (Litt & Hargittai, 2016), choosing an appropriate hashtag that accurately represents society was a critical step. After considering several possibilities, #viewfromquarantine was chosen. This was appropriate for several reasons; it was promoted by a

famous institution (the 'National Geographic') on a global scale; the promoted hashtag was not limited to photographers and targeted everyone; and, in order to take part in the National Geographic contest, people were prone to change their privacy settings.

When we collected data for content analysis in April 2020, around 13,000 posts contained the #viewfromquarantine tag. The Instagram platform has two sections for each hashtag, 'top posts', and 'recent posts'. The sample contains 1,800 posts (both photos and captions) including the first 1,500 top posts in terms of popularity, as calculated by the Instagram algorithms, and the 300 most recent posts to avoid missing less popular concepts. Given that a relevant hashtag was chosen for the study, most of the posts were relevant and only advertisement postings that used the viral hashtag to promote their pages were excluded. Instagram's translation tool was employed to convert captions from different languages into English. At the time of data collection, English, Spanish, Italian, French, German, Chinese, Korean, and Farsi were the most frequent languages. An inductive coding process (see Saldaña, 2015) in which the codes are developed from the data itself was used in this study. To avoid bias and allow us to cover more concepts, two of the authors worked on the open coding process. Images and the captions of each post were coded at the same time, and 84 initial codes were identified (the overlapped codes were eliminated). All the authors worked together to create meaningful codes and the construction of main themes through the iterative and reflexive processes of constant comparison of the meaningful codes.

### 3. Findings and discussion

By analysing the posts containing #viewfromquarantine, we categorized the concepts of photos and captions into three main themes; a) representation of adapting to a new lifestyle in which people depict changes in their communication, hygiene practices, work, activities, and the use of time; b) self-expression in which people share their selfies, moods, thoughts, and art during the self-isolation; and c) expression of social issues related to the COVID-19 crisis.

#### 3.1. Adaptation to a new lifestyle

*Human communication* is one of the most prominent abilities affected while people are trying to adapt to the new coronavirus situation. Online communication has become a major tool in compensating for reduced traditional communication – people, for example, share screenshots of their video chats with a group of friends and families to reflect this change (Image a). People also share photos of their limited communications (mostly from windows or on roofs) while keeping social distancing (Image b). Nevertheless, staying at home has provided families with the opportunity for spending more time together, so we observed some narrations of pleasure. However, people tend to share the more positive aspects of their lives on social media (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011), therefore, it was not possible to simply conclude that spending more time together will positively affect family relationships.

*Practicing hygiene* such as keeping social distance, wearing masks, and disinfection are also common among shared posts showing people's adaptation to the new situation (Image d). People also depict how they adjust to the situation by *doing outdoor activities indoor*. Distance working, exercise, sunbathing, and activities like haircutting are common cases in this respect (Image c). *Adaptation to freer time* is another concept in shared posts; some posters represent how they benefit from lockdown by reading books, doing art, working on their personality, watching movies, planting, and even participating in fun challenges.

#### 3.2. Self-expression

According to Hogan (2010), social media provide space for the online presentation of self. Given the abundance of concepts associated with the presentation of self, moods, thoughts, and art among the posts shared in the period of self-isolation, we argue that people are more dependent on social media

for self-presentation when there is a lack in traditional communication. *Selfie photos*, mostly edited ones, are common in posts shared during self-isolation. Standing by the window or beside home decoration, wearing masks and/or gloves, and while doing an activity like cooking are the most frequent selfie positions. The frequency of beautified selfie photos is in line with the findings of Chae (2017) that selfie-taking is positively associated with social comparison of appearance; the specific feature of selfies during this crisis period is, however, increased facial expressions showing boredom and anxiety.

*The expression of mood* was latent in the photos (mostly selfies) or explained in the captions. Some posts represent somehow negative moods such as boredom, loneliness, fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and sense of being imprisoned caused by the crisis (Image f). Some users share their sense of missing their pre-quarantine social life and leisure activities mostly by sharing photos of their past gatherings or trips. This is in line with the concept of the extended leisure experience (see Scott & Harmon, 2016) in that social media give the possibility of extending a leisure activity beyond its temporal and spatial boundaries. Some people share their cancelled plans and travel, and some express their hope and dreams for resuming these activities after the crisis. The negative emotion of plan cancellation has already been noted in a recent study conducted by Meng et al. (2020) on online communication during the COVID-19 crisis. Some users share a sense of surprise regarding the new condition, mostly by sharing photos of empty streets (Image e). Furthermore, since the peak of the crisis coincided with spring, expressions of regret for missing the beauty of nature, mostly by posting photos of blossoms and green landscapes, were also noticeable.

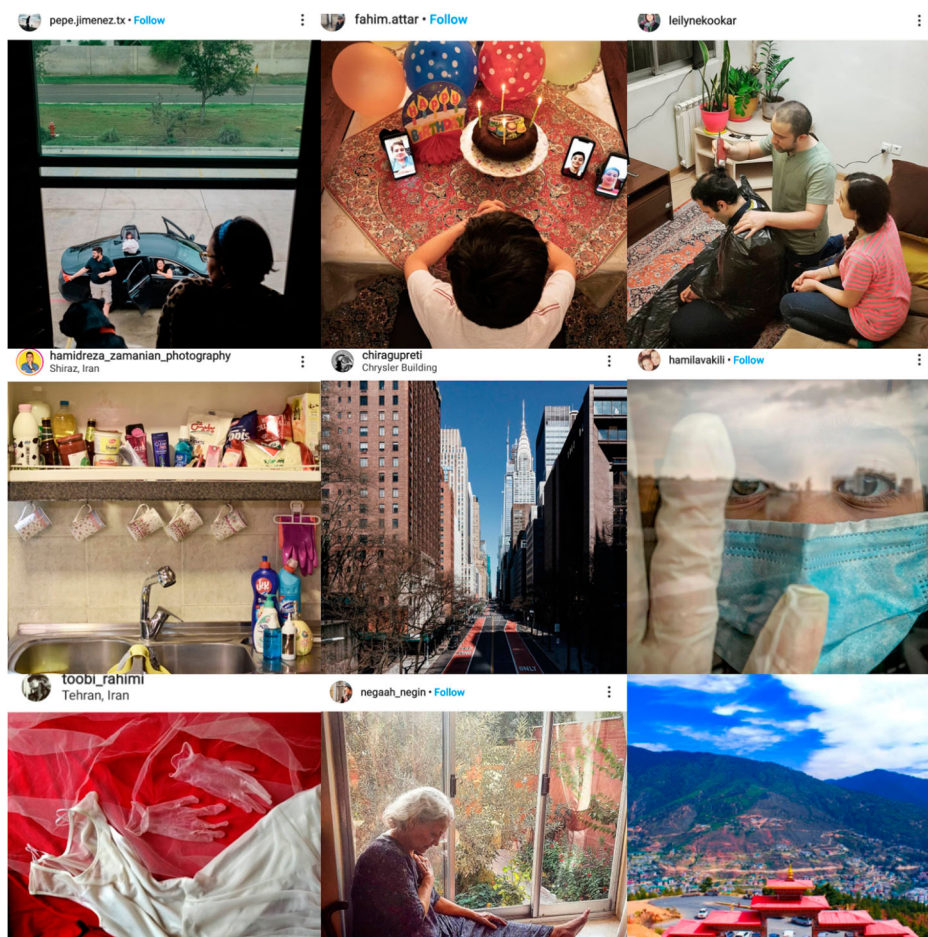
In contrast, some people portray a more positive version of self by sharing representations of hope; a beam of light, for example, is a frequent image to embody this concept. Some people *express their thoughts* as a reflection of the situation and discuss the meaning of life. Praising simplicity, and the role of coronavirus as a break from a busy life, are frequent in this respect. Some even go a step further and express how the temporary break in work routine sparked creativity and brought new ideas to mind.

In addition, the 'National Geographic' promotion triggered *the expression of art skills* among those who were aware of the photography challenge. Photos of the sky, sunshine and sunrise, other people, nearby animals (mostly birds and insects) are common among images focusing on the artistic aspects. It seems that staying at home provoked micro-shots and conceptual photos among professional photographers (Image g). Besides participation in the photography challenge, using hashtags helped photographers to build social identity within their community and improved their personal brand (see Lamont & Ross, 2019) especially during a period of shared social concerns like COVID-19 crisis. Figure 1.

### 3.3. Social issues

Some of the shared contents containing #viewfromquarantine address social issues. According to Litt and Hargittai (2016), when people share content in social media, they think about their imagined audiences, both abstract and target, and their imagery fluctuates between these. It seems that when people use a specific hashtag having a large number of users in a short period, their imagined audiences are wider and more abstract. This is the case for the hashtag chosen for this research.

The COVID-19 crisis affects various aspects of human life, which leads some people to share content discussing the benefits of a break for the Earth and for Nature. While air quality and new opportunities for wildlife were common concepts in this context (Image i), some users expressed their concerns and surprise about the change in animal behaviour due to the lack of human presence. People also express their concerns for vulnerable groups like the elderly, disadvantaged, and unemployed, as well as businesses and religious gatherings (Image h). Praising nurses, jobs related to coronavirus, service workers, and humanitarian tasks are also noticeable among shared content. And finally, the majority of content encourages staying at home, practicing social distancing, and hygiene.



**Figure 1.** a) a meeting with social distancing; b) a birthday celebration using video-call; c) haircutting at home; d) disinfected groceries; e) an empty street in New York; f) a portrait with mask and gloves behind the window with a facial expression reflecting the pandemic era; g) a conceptual photo representing the cancellation of a party; h) an image of an old woman depicting the loneliness of elderly people in the quarantine period; i) a landscape of Thimphu in Bhutan showing an infrequent moment of clean air. (Permission has been given by all photo owners).

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings of this study expand Belk's (2013) 'digital extended self' theory and show how people use social media to communicate and present themselves during a global lockdown and with a lack of face-to-face communication. After the content analysis of Instagram posts containing #view-fromquarantine, we found that the narratives of adaptation to the new situation were the specific feature of contents shared in this particular period. In this regard, adaptation to alternative means of communication and doing outside activities inside were the most common contents. People continued using Instagram as a tool for self-presentation during the self-isolation period. While the majority of users tended to share their selfies with a facial expression related to the pandemic situation (such as boredom and anxiety), some others tried to express a more positive version of self by presenting narrations of hope. In addition, expression of social concerns in regard to disadvantaged groups and businesses became popular.

As people reflect in their social media pages, the relevance of practicing hygiene and social distancing, as well as the attention to social issues related to the COVID-19, should lead tourism and

recreation practitioners to carefully consider hygiene in their activities and avoid actions such as unfair layoffs which are considered as sensitive social issues during the pandemic. Given that people are more dependent on online platforms for their communications during the pandemic, tourism and recreation practitioners can take advantage of this online space and encourage their consumers to reflect their hygiene practices and social supports on their social media pages. Furthermore, in line with Gretzel et al. (2020), we believe that IT and social media are paramount in understanding the COVID-19-related condition; policymakers and managers should, therefore, consider the capacity of online platforms to help them learn about behaviours and needs during the pandemic.

Privacy settings and regional popularity are common limitations in using Instagram hashtags for scientific research. These also negatively influenced the present study. To mitigate this, we chose a hashtag that was promoted on a global scale and targeted all people. We suggest that future work study other global or specific hashtags on Instagram, or other social media platforms, to find out various impacts of the pandemic on different aspects of human life and how this is reflected on social media.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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