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*SOCIAL DISTANCING* IN AN INTERACTIVE APPROACH:  
A TYPOLOGY AND FUNCTIONS OF VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS  
OF THE CONCEPT

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) is – as we know perfectly well today – an acute infectious disease of the respiratory system caused by a SARS-CoV-2 virus infection. It started in November 2019 in central China, in Wuhan, Hubei Province. After just three months, on March 4, 2020, the first case of infection with the new virus was recorded in Poland.

While the current SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic raises many concerns, it is not the worst that has happened to humankind. This is because we have constantly been struggling with dangerous diseases, such as: sweating sickness, polio (known as Heine-Medin disease), syphilis, measles, tuberculosis, yellow fever, the plague (the black death – *mors nigra*, pestilence), leprosy (*lepra*), smallpox (black pox), cholera, typhus (epidemic typhus), Spanish flu, AIDS, and Ebola virus disease. These new times of globalization, when travelling is easier than ever before, promote the migration of viruses to new continents and contribute to the development of the pandemic.

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What is more, Sonia Shah is probably right when she writes that it is possible that “the disease-causing microbe, or pathogen, that will cause the world’s next pandemic lurks among us today” (Shah, 2016, pp. 8, 11). We certainly would not like this quote to sound like some kind of Cassandra prophecy, yet human history proves that pathogenic microorganisms are still the most common cause of deaths in the world (Stasiak, 2020, p. 6).<sup>1</sup> Their prevalence brings destruction into our generally ordered lives, ruins interpersonal relationships, forces us to maintain social distance, i.e. physical distance toward another person/other people in order to prevent contracting the virus. Although the term “social distancing” is not new, it has acquired a slightly different meaning today.

#### BEHAVIOR IN PUBLIC PLACES IN AN INTERACTIONIST CONTEXT

The thesis that people are social beings is a truism (Collins, 2020; Patra, 2021). As Erving Goffman notes, “The notion that a person is alone when he is in a crowd, an anonymous atom, has a literary truth, but this is not the truth that actual street scenes are made of” (Goffman, 1971, p. 137). Greater physical closeness means the desire to contact other people and establish closer relationships (Eaves & Leathers, 2018, p. 106). This contact, to a large extent, takes place on a non-verbal level. We can safely say that “the discovery of the importance of non-verbal communication (NVC) has transformed the study of human social behavior” (Argyle, 1997, p. 243).

Everyday life is filled with such “small behaviors” (Goffman, 1982, p. 1); we constantly interact with one another (in focused or unfocused interactions,<sup>2</sup> to use Goffman’s terminology), and the lack of closeness to and relationships with others is a source of suffering for an individual. People who are in each other’s company do not merely function as bodily objects, but also as subjects who communicate certain contents. Moreover, the possibility to communicate, much the same as physical presence, has consequences for all participants and is socially and culturally conditioned, “giving rise to a kind of communication traffic order” (Goffman, 1966, p. 24).

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<sup>1</sup> In the introduction to the book (p. 6), read the statement of Dr Paweł Grzesiowski, who is an expert in the field of prevention and therapy of infections.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of such even seemingly insignificant interaction rituals, there is an implicit order of interaction. As Ireneusz Krzemiński (2000) writes: “Goffman strives to reveal regularities, constant dependencies and hidden order, which appear under the elusive surface as a strict structure of interactions, interrelations and permanent connections” (p. 128). All translations of quotations cited in this article are ours.

Goffman (1961) contends that communication behavior between people can be analyzed as unfocused interactions, which occur when the partners are aware of each other's presence, e.g. they glance at each other, even briefly. He writes that "unfocused interaction consists of those interpersonal communications that result solely by virtue of persons being in one another's presence" (p. 7). If they show greater commitment, they engage in focused interactions, "the kind of interaction that occurs when persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention, typically by taking turns at talking" (Goffman, 1966, p. 24). Given that the behaviors in public places, which we discuss when analyzing the rules of social distancing, pertain to the first situation, they should be considered as unfocused interactions, for example, when we stand in a shared line at a pharmacy, observing the designated spots on the floor. At the beginning of the pandemic, however, especially when the social distancing signs were not yet quite formal, the contact taking place in public spaces often had the characteristics of focused interactions. Sometimes it even led to deeper friendships with people standing in line.

Even in a situation where people engage in an unfocused interaction, "There is tacit monitoring, to make sure nothing abnormal or threatening is in the offing" (Collins, 2004, p. 23). Such monitoring takes place when people should stick to designated places marked on the floor. The reality of social interactions is ubiquitous and can apply to human behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interaction rituals, in which we constantly participate in everyday life, even provoke specific spatial behaviors. Examples include the rituals of opening interactions and closing them. "Hello's and farewells typically lead (and even oblige) participants to come close together" (Goffman, 1971, p. 172). Therefore, unconscious social behaviors can transform into conscious anti-social behavior (Cristani et al., 2020). Saying hello or goodbye, which reduces social distancing, can turn into non-civic, selfish behavior that leads to potential infections. Therefore, this instilled, deeply ingrained social behavior to gather and be in relative intimacy is tightly controlled.

People in the public space, while maintaining a social distance, experience "civil inattention", which, according to Goffman, is a behavior in which strangers, when in close range, are aware of each other's spatial proximity but do not engage in closer interaction. This happens, for example, when two people pass each other in the street, they glance at each other when still at a distance, but when they are very close, act as if they do not see each other (Goffman, 1966, pp. 84–85).

Randall Collins characterizes these rituals in the conditions of situational co-presence in the following way: "Being oblivious to other persons takes tacit

interactional work: there are minute adjustments of gaze, eye contact, and trajectory of pedestrian traffic that are finely attuned, ranging from ‘civil disattention,’ to friendly acknowledgment, to accosting attention, to aggressive control of public space” (Collins, 2004, p. 23). Contemporary behaviors associated with observing social distancing can be named “civil inattention”.

All these usually unconscious non-verbal behaviors make it clear that the idiom of the body can be considered conventionalized discourse. “We must see that it is, in addition, a normative one.... Indeed, the understanding of a common body idiom is one reason for calling an aggregate of individuals a society” (Goffman, 1966, pp. 34–35).

Even when meeting in a public place, there is a specific street etiquette, i.e. informal rules governing such a meeting, and passers-by can even develop, as Elijah Anderson calls it, a kind of “street wisdom” (Anderson, 1990, p. 210). A person demonstrating “street wisdom” is one who knows how to behave in unfamiliar or unsafe public places (p. 6). Although the theory referred rather to risky places, which somehow threatened the participants of interactions, it can be said that maintaining an appropriate social distance in public places is a mini example of “street wisdom”, where neither party is the oppressor and adapts to unwritten rules of behavior in a specific space, i.e. proxemic rules.

#### PROXEMIC RESEARCH ON SOCIAL DISTANCE

The concept of social distance gained popularity mainly due to the proxemic research conducted by Edward T. Hall. The etymology of the term proxemics refers to the concept of proximity – from the Latin word *proximitas* ‘nearness’ and the suffix *-emics*, in analogy to linguistic terms such as *phonemics* (Danesi, 2020, pp. 241–243; Głażewska & Kusio, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

Proxemics itself is defined by the aforementioned anthropologist as “the study of how man unconsciously structures microspace—the distance between

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<sup>3</sup> Hall (1963) himself was aware of the problem with the name for the field as early as 1963, when he wrote: “This presentation is concerned more with the proxetics than proxemics, and is therefore only the first of a series of steps in a long complex process” (p. 1021). Some researchers objected to the name proxemics. G.M. Milner asked, if someone accepts “proxemics”, what about “proxetics”? In turn, G.L. Trager, commenting on the same article on proxemics by E.T. Hall from 1968, argued: “I do not necessarily think that the term proxemics is the best there is for the area of investigation. My objection is perhaps based on the feeling that where there is an *-emics*, there should also be an *-etics* – but proxetics would hardly be a mellifluous or desirable addition to the vocabulary” (see more in Hall et al., 1968, 105). O.M. Watson argues that what is really being discussed are issues related to proxetics, not proxemics (see Watson & Hall, 1969, p. 222).

men in the conduct of daily transactions, the organization of space in his houses and buildings, and ultimately the layout of his towns” (Hall, 1963, p. 1003). As Hall notes, proxemics, or communication “via interpersonal space and distance”, is perhaps the most fundamental code of non-verbal behavior (Andersen, 2015, p. 230).

Hall (1969) concludes:

Virtually everything that man is and does is associated with the experience of space. Man’s sense of space is a synthesis of many sensory inputs: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and thermal. Not only does each of these constitute a complex system – as, for example, the dozen different ways of experiencing depth visually – but each is molded and patterned by culture. (p. 181)

Spatial needs may be different among people of the same nationality, residents of one city, and even members of one family. “To satisfy those needs, some people define and protect a set of spatial boundaries with a persistence and vigor that would put the family dog or cat to shame” (Eaves & Leathers, 2018, p. 106).<sup>4</sup> Hall adds that we observe differences in the perception of space by representatives of different cultures.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the perception of space is a complex process, conditioned by many variables; moreover, our spatial behavior is influenced by two competing needs: affiliation and privacy (p. 106). Fred Jandt remarks, “How much space we each want between ourselves and others depends on our cultural learning, our upbringing in our families, the specific situation, and our relationship with the people to whom we’re talking” (Jandt, 1995, p. 76).

Hall, within his own structural model of space, proposes its basic types: permanent space (e.g., buildings), semi-permanent space (e.g., railway stations) and informal space (conversational distances). He stresses that “informal spatial patterns have distinct bounds, and such deep, if unvoiced, significance that they form an essential part of the culture. To misunderstand this significance may invite disaster” (Hall, 1969, p. 112).

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<sup>4</sup> Researchers emphasise the importance of such variables as: gender, age, origin, status, race, personality, degree of acquaintance or place of residence, which make up the “idiosyncratic” component of proxemic norms (see more in Eaves & Leathers, 2018, pp. 113–114).

<sup>5</sup> More about cultural differences in perceiving distance in relation to the high/low-contact culture category can be found in Murphy (2020). See also the results of research on the spread of the pandemic in relation to cultural differences observed in 107 countries based on the dimensions of culture formulated by G. Hofstede in the articles by R.J.S. Dheer et al. (2021) and Deopa & Fortunato (2020).

Hall proposes four types of conversational distances: intimate, personal, social and public.<sup>6</sup> He divides each of them into a close and a far phase. This anthropologist and ethnologist simultaneously announces to the reader that “space speaks” (this is the title of chapter 10 of the 1959 book *The Silent Language*) and adds, “Spatial changes give a tone to a communication, accent it, and at times even override the spoken word. The flow and shift of distance between people as they interact with each other is part and parcel of the communication process” (Hall, 1973, p. 180).<sup>7</sup>

Social distance will depend on the space occupied, whether we consider private space (home, garden, car), semi-public space (office, school classroom), or public space (street, shopping malls, etc.) (Cristani et al., 2020).

Thus, let us focus on the characteristics of social distance described by Hall. The closer phase of social distance is the distance from 1.2 to 2.1 m; the far phase is between 2.1 m and 3.6 m. The current recommendations for respecting social distance would therefore be in the closer phase; all non-personal matters are dealt with at this distance (Hall, 1969, p. 155). The far phase “is the distance to which people move when someone says, ‘Stand away so I can look at you’” (p. 122). Hall writes, “A proxemic feature of social distance (far phase) is that it can be used to insulate or screen people from each other” (p. 123). This is exactly what happens when social distancing is maintained, for example in public places marked with distinctive horizontal signs (lines or circles) to indicate the place where to stand to minimize the risk of infection. This is also the purpose of social distancing as a recommendation to prevent the spread of the virus.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers maintain that we can talk about a new proxemics, the essence of which is that social distance generates a new social space:

In “social distancing,” the word *distancing* seems to imply staying away, as in distancing oneself from something or someone. There is good reason why many have suggested

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<sup>6</sup> Hall based his classification of space on the findings of the animal psychologist Heini Hediger, who found that animals have developed several uniformed distances that they keep between themselves: flight distance, critical distance, personal distance and social distance. The flight distance and the critical distance are observed when animals of different species come into contact. However, when it comes to members of the same species, personal or social distance is used. Hall notes that in humans, only the latter two remain of this typology (see also Hall, 1969, p. 10). He adds that Hediger “distinguishes between contact and non-contact species” (Hall, 1963, p. 1004; Hediger, 1955; 1961).

<sup>7</sup> In his autobiography, Hall (1992) calls *The Silent Language* “my first real book” (p. 256). In *The Hidden Dimension*, he writes about the Japanese, American or Arabic types of perception. See also chapters on proxemics in the context of cultural intersection (the Germans, English, French, Japanese, and the Arab world) (Hall, 1969, pp. 167–207).

“physical distancing” since “social distancing” connotes detachment and the opposite of social engagement and interaction. In contrast, Hall’s *social distance* implies a dimension within which active social behavior with eye contact can take place. What is on display, at least in many neighborhoods, is social distancing generating a new *sociable space*. This is the new proxemics. (Mehta, 2020, p. 670)

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the concept of social space needs to be redefined, because physical distance does not generate social distance; on the contrary, it is a manifestation of social “closeness”, emphasizing the pro-social and empathetic attitude of people who respect the principles of social distance.

#### SOCIAL DISTANCING IN GRAPHIC VISUALIZATIONS: A TYPOLOGY

We have probably all seen different types of visualizations of the message about the need to maintain social distancing. In the case of information placed on posters, notices on the doors of shops, pharmacies, etc., as well as clothes or masks, it most often takes a simple, unambiguous and transparent form, e.g., images of two people with an arrow marking a distance of 2 meters or 6 feet between them, depending on the system of measurement that is used in a given country. We can also find floor markings in public places (shops, shopping malls, offices), where, for example, a line indicates where to stand to keep a safe distance.

In visual representations, the safe distance to be kept in interior public spaces is shown graphically using various objects placed between people. One of these illustrations shows six filled wine glasses and an empty wine bottle which marks the distance. We also have instructions for dog owners saying that the correct distance is like that between two people separated by two Great Danes, four smaller beagles or 16 Chihuahuas. Other measures of distance are: one horse, one panda, one adult kangaroo, one llama, one tuna, two pigs, two sparrows (!), two turkeys, three goats, four koalas, or five sea turtles.<sup>8</sup> The above examples, even though they refer to specific cultural contexts (e.g., koalas, kangaroos, or turkeys would be typical of Australia, tuna fish of Japan), result in the fact that their often humorous overtones have also been spread and properly decoded in other parts of the world, regardless of their initial origin. A common feature of all these signs is that they were originally placed in public places, sometimes humorously communicating social distancing recommendations. Here are some examples relating

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/24/social-distancing-signs-and-posters-how-many-kangaroos-is-15m>

to Australia. The Sydney University Veterinary Teaching Hospital makes clear physical distancing with koalas. Turkeys, on the other hand, marked an appropriate social distance at James Cook University in Queensland. Also the Australian AMSANT Campaign (Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory), among others, featured sea turtles or kangaroos to mark social distancing.

Some visualizations include messages reading: “Please keep the social distancing recommendations by keeping a distance of 6 feet between you and anyone else who is not a member of your immediate family.” Below the arrow, there is a 6-foot or three-goat distance, and a caption below it: “If you cannot fit 3 goats between you and the person in front of you, move away.” These types of representations can have different variations, for example six feet or one horse, or six feet or two pigs. Hen eggs were also used in visualizations that encourage people to keep social distance. In one of the memes, we see a paper egg box for 10 eggs in which there are only three – away from each other.

The few graphic visualizations of social distancing presented here clearly prove that all these often amusing pictures have two functions: (1) first of all, to convince people to keep social distance, and (2) to relieve stress related to the pandemic and various types of restrictions. A difficult situation – which a pandemic certainly is – can be approached with a bit of humor. After all, laughter can be liberating. Presenting something in an amusing way (in this case the obligation to keep social distance) serves the purpose of releasing emotions, and thus improves the quality of our life, allowing us to look at it with greater optimism.

### **Social distancing on COVID masks**

The theme of social distancing has become popular as a message presented on face masks (Głażewska & Karwatowska, 2021; Głażewska & Karwatowska, 2023)<sup>9</sup> and has assumed many, often humorous, forms. They can be divided into three main categories along with subcategories.

#### ***1. Verbal messages in English:***

– **manifesting the attitude of the message sender** (e.g., with the slogans: “Probably the best social distancer.” “Practiced social distancing before it was cool.” “I’ve been social distancing for years.” “I’m not rude, I’m just social distancing.” “I’m not shy, I’m social distancing.” “Socially and emotionally distancing.”

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<sup>9</sup> Jarosław Rokicki (2021) writes that the COVID mask is still something strange to us, that “it has not been ‘domesticated’, imperceptibly fused with us, like a ring, watch or glasses, which in everyday life become transparent, we hardly see them at all” (p. 106).



“I might be vaccinated but I still want you 6 feet away.” “When the pandemic is over, I still want some of you to stay away from me.”

– **with a clear, sometimes even rude, message/recommendation of keeping distance** (“Stay back 6 feet” or “Please keep your distance 6 ft”, or the popular message: “If you can read below the line, you approached too close, please keep social distancing!” Behind this type of verbal, highly imperative messages, there is an assumption that the recipient has, for reasons they are well aware of, to do what the author of the message wants. Among the speech genres analyzed by us, there are orders, instructions and requests. A request is an exercitive act (Austin, 1993, pp. 550–708) with a lower illocutionary force than many other communication events included in the group of directives. An order or an instruction is a statement that even imposes a pattern of behavior and may be subject to sanctions in the event of failure to comply with the directive. This type of speech behavior of the sender includes a greater or lesser emphasis on the interlocutor (Tymia-kin, 2007);

– **word-play**, e.g., “Snowcial Distancing Snowman in Globe Face Mask” (“snowcial” instead of “social”). According to Głowiński et al. (1988), word-play involves “using the sonic similarity between words to emphasize their meaning or variety of meanings, mutual strangeness or the bonds of kinship, analogy or contrast that bind them together. A play on words is a semantic technique accomplished in many ways. The most important of them is the pun, while others include: amphibology, anagram, antanaclasis, antimetabole, aprosdoketon, cacemphaton, diaphora, figura etymologica, blend words, metagram, paragram, parechesis, paronomasia, polyptoton and numerous varieties of repetition” (p. 169). It should be emphasized here that word-play is not very often used in the graphic messages we discuss, and its success depends on the linguistic competence of both the sender and the receiver/receivers. Knowledge of the rules of the language code (grammatical and semantic) and the rules of using this code (norms and usus) allows these people to notice their unusual, innovative application.

## **2. Non-verbal visualizations:**

– **referring to historical motifs** (e.g., a “Victorian social distancing” mask, with the caption “social distancing” and an image with two women in dresses with very full skirts – in this case the dress is to enforce spatial distance).

## **3. Combination of verbal and non-verbal communication:**

– **using, most often in a humorous way, animal characters or images of plants**, e.g., a squirrel communicating “I’m a Social Distancing Expert...”, or the slogan “Keep your social distance” separated by pots with two cacti;

- **with astronomical motifs**, such as the slogan “social distancing” placed between the images of the sun and earth;
- **ethnic, targeted at a specific cultural group**, e.g., face masks are available with the traditional Indian greeting “namaste” and a recommendation of keeping a 6-foot distance.

It turns out that in the representations of social distancing described here, there is a clear advantage of image (non-verbal communication) over verbal communication, which is related to civilizational changes. Contemporary man is transforming from *homo sapiens* into *homo videns* (Sartori, 2007), hence the primacy of the image, the expansion of visual (ocularcentric) culture.

### ***Social distancing on other types of artifacts***

The expression “social distancing” is an example of fashionable COVID words. According to Martyna Mielniczuk-Skibicka (2020), a number of different entities would like to have a monopoly on this term and profit from it. In just a few months from the beginning of the pandemic, over 100 trademark applications for this expression have been made worldwide (p. 336).

Many companies have supported the idea of social distancing as a method of preventing COVID-19 infection by adapting new versions of their logo to the times of the present “plague”. “The inclusion of the idea of distance to the trademarks that identify their goods or services shows, through the so-called being up to date, how you can additionally refresh brand ‘recognition’ on the market” (Fallach, 2020, p. 358). One example is the Chanel company. The overlapping C letters in the logo, known almost all over the world, were moved away from each other. The black puma that jumped over the PUMA logo, in the version emphasizing social distancing is white against the black background and leaps out of the frame leaving only the logo. The well-known company ZARA, whose logo consists of four letters connected at the bottom, separates them from each other in the “distanced” version (p. 359). McDonald’s reaction was similar: the company symbolically separated the two famous arches, while Coca Cola, separating the letters of the logo, adding “Staying apart is the best way to stay united.” In turn, the Audi concern separated the four characteristic wheels and added the caption “Keep your distance.” Volkswagen spatially separated the upper and lower parts of its logo, adding, “Thanks for keeping your social distance.”

Such actions were intended to promote social distance, but at the same time they clearly attest to the responsible attitude of entrepreneurs in these difficult times. Importantly, they show a sense of humor and self-distance of representatives of individual companies.

The order to maintain social distancing is visible not only on pandemic masks, but also other items of clothing and gadgets, for example on wine glasses with the words “I’m not drinking alone, I’m social distancing” or even T-shirts with “Writers are always social distancing (we don’t like people, lol).” You can also choose sweatshirts and boxers with similar captions, or a sleepsuit with the information “I don’t think my mummy and daddy took social distancing seriously...” and the caption “Quarantine baby”, but also mugs or doormats with the message “Go away, I’m social distancing!” etc.

The motifs appearing in these representations are similar to those that are seen on face masks, that is, they manifest the views of the sender, sometimes clearly and/or rudely communicated, use humorous elements, are based on graphic elements, although in the above cases the verbal aspect is certainly of fundamental importance.

The issue of social distancing has also become a popular topic in internet memes. One of them shows a choice between two situations: in the first picture, a woman and a man walking six feet away from each other (a horizontal arrow indicates this distance); in the other, a cross-section of the ground with a tombstone at the top, and at the bottom, underground, the man lying dead in a coffin with a vertical arrow measuring the same distance of six feet. Another, in turn, presents Santa wearing a face mask, holding a controller in his hands. A drone is hovering above with a box wrapped in red paper and tied with a yellow ribbon. It turns out, therefore, that even Santa, keeping his distance, prefers to send a gift using such unmanned aircraft than to do it in person.

Social distance, in a broader context, can also be described as being in isolation for a long time. Memes often refer to the consequences of this separation, which are related to everyday practices (e.g. eating a lot of food and gaining weight quickly, drinking alcohol without moderation) or changes in appearance – of course for the worse. Sometimes there are even desperate attempts to use hair-dressing services, as in the meme with a prostitute who makes her offer saying, “I’ll do anything you want for \$50,” and the answer of the potential client is “Can you cut my hair?”; or the painting of Mona Lisa, dated March 1, and then with a radical change of appearance on the last day of this month.

The topic of isolation is also mockingly addressed in a meme referring to a scene from James Cameron’s famous film *Titanic*. The film begins with scenes in which the main character, already an elderly woman, recalls the voyage from several dozen years ago. The meme with the same old lady reads “Thinking about the last time I wore jeans and a bra” and the answer below the image reads “It’s been 84 years...”

In another meme, presenting the long-lasting lockdown (and thus forced social distance), the face of the *Muppet Show*, Kermit the frog, clearly bored, reflects:

“When you isolate yourself to recharge for a weekend but it accidentally lasts an entire year.” The same character was used to show the unpredictability of the pandemic: “When you spent all of 2019 cancelling plans but in 2020 you have no plans to cancel.”

The pandemic has also thwarted vacation plans of many people. In one of the memes, the verbal message reads “Travel plans in 2020: Expectations – visiting the Sidney opera”, while the reality is a dish rack with plates arranged almost exactly in the shape of the opera house mentioned above. A meme showing how the pandemic makes us lose sense of time looks like a screenshot from the popular *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* show, in which the player is to answer the question: “What day is it?” There are four answers to choose from: a. Monday, b. Tuesday, c. 1982, d. Saturday. He clearly has a problem with answering this question correctly.

Isolation from other people can also be parodied by a reference to places where we can travel during quarantine – one meme presents them by showing the most popular messengers (Snapchat, Twitter) and social media platforms (Instagram) as well as Netflix and YouTube, with planes flying between them: “The only places that I’m travelling to during quarantine.” The consequences of social isolation are also presented in a humorous horoscope, which foretells the same future for all the signs of the zodiac listed in turn: “You’ll be spending time in your home.”

Sometimes the theme of separation or the need to maintain social distance is combined with other messages, e.g. the need to wash hands frequently. For example, well-known paintings also have “contemporary” COVID versions. One of Michelangelo’s most famous frescoes from the Sistine Chapel, *The Creation of Adam*, has been redesigned in such a way that yellow rubber cleaning gloves are worn over the outstretched hands of the Creator and Adam.<sup>10</sup> In another depiction of the same motif, God’s hand, instead of almost touching Adam’s hand – as Michelangelo originally painted this scene – holds a bottle with disinfectant or liquid soap and pours its contents out onto Adam’s hand. Such images, although they may outrage some, certainly also have an educational value – they can make the viewer interested in the master of the Italian Renaissance and his works (Campbell, 2021).

The theme of social distancing has also been visualized in some other works of popular culture. We can find representations of this phenomenon referring to the cover of The Beatles’ album from 1969 entitled after the street where it was recorded, that is, *Abbey Road*. This cover shows the members of the band

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.preview.ph/culture/covid-19-funny-ways-people-social-distancing-a1794-20200314>

walking through a street crossing (which is a tourist attraction in London to this day). The pandemic version consists of black outlines of band members against the background of black stripes with arrows separating individual persons and marking a distance of six feet; underneath there is a caption saying “SOCIAL DISTANCING”. Another version of the meme that uses the same motif shows John Lennon (in the original, first from the right on the crossing) turning back saying, “I forgot my mask.”<sup>11</sup> There is also a variant of the meme in which only one of the “Fab Four from Liverpool”, George Harrison, is walking across the pedestrian crossing, while the others are seen further away on Abbey Road, at some distance from one another.<sup>12</sup>

The very slogan *social distancing*, written clearly in bold and with capital letters, is to enhance the message and the effect of the undertaken preventive measures. It has become so popular that there are already, for example, photo wallpapers available, as well as pictures, stickers or posters depicting a human face covered with a surgical mask with the caption “social distancing.” You can also find social distancing graphics – emoticons with masks.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the message on the masks that calls for keeping distance is formulated in a more indirect way, as has already been mentioned, for example: “If You Can Read This You’re Standing Too Close.” In the vast expanses of the Internet, you can easily find more exclusive masks with the slogan “social distancing” written in stylized golden letters against a black background.

#### FUNCTIONS OF VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

The visualizations of social distance analyzed in this text perform specific functions, e.g.:

- information (communication) function: the sender sends a message to the receiver informing them about keeping the required distance from others in order to minimize the risk of COVID infection;
- educational function, which contributes to broadening knowledge, e.g. representations referring to works of art. After all, we learn throughout our lives,

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/festivals/comments/ihqi04/wallet\\_keys\\_phone\\_mask](https://www.reddit.com/r/festivals/comments/ihqi04/wallet_keys_phone_mask)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.adweek.com/creativity/iconic-album-covers-just-got-the-social-distancing-treatment>

<sup>13</sup> <https://stock.adobe.com/pl/images/social-distancing-smiley-emoji-vector-sign-emoji-or-emoticon-with-face-mask-in-public-social-distancing-for-covid-19-preventive-measure-vector-illustration/343663718>

acquiring critical thinking skills, discovering new ways of interacting with other people from different cultural backgrounds;

- identification (culture- or identity-related) function, e.g. the “namaste” mask;
- expressive (emotive) function – messages such as “When the pandemic is over, I still want some of you to stay away from me” or “Writers are always social distancing (we don’t like people, lol)”;

- aesthetic function – masks with the caption “social distancing” written in an original font;

- cognitive and educational function at the same time: capturing images, events, figures from the past (e.g. an image of two women in dresses with hoop skirts which widen the hips and give the fabric skirts worn over them the shape of a cone or bell, the 15th–17th centuries);

- persuasive function: urging the receiver to follow the expected mental and physical behaviors: verbal and non-verbal, e.g. messages such as “Keep your distance.” In other words, the sender of the persuading message seeks to develop such a conviction in the receiver that should trigger the desired behavior in him or her. The illocutionary power, that is the ability to exert influence, to cause effects, depends, obviously, on a wide range of means, not only linguistic ones;

- ludic (entertaining, humorous) function, e.g. motifs with a squirrel, a baby communicating that his parents did not maintain social distance. The essence of this type of message is the intent to amuse the receiver;

- creative: the artifact created by the sender reveals their ingenuity and originality of the message;

- popularizing function, which serves the purpose of disseminating and popularizing the social distancing slogan;

- integrating a community that is, after all, subject to the same requirement to keep distance.

Social distancing can be called a safety trigger that is activated by visual stimuli reminding one of the danger of physical proximity of below 1.5–2 meters.

## CONCLUSION

“Social distancing” is an expression that have become a popular phrase redefining our spatial and social relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated the process of digitization, which now appears to be irreversible. In this context, Helga Nowotny notes that “‘social distance’ is a misnomer because it prescribes a physical distance that should be kept in public and private spaces.

In fact, physical distance has transformed into virtual closeness, and social closeness has turned into physical distance, which has become virtual” (Nowotny, 2021, p. 110).

The application of norms<sup>14</sup> in social life does not happen automatically, as it requires “a certain, not always conscious effort of the subject who makes an interpretation in accordance with interpretative procedures” (Ziółkowski, 1981, p. 186), but understanding them is facilitated by explicitly expressed characteristic phrases, e.g. *move away, you must not*. The phrase “social distancing” introduces into our daily relationships a requirement which becomes a kind of a norm. We can influence another person either by using categorical messages (orders, instructions), which require absolute compliance with the expressed expectations, or by making changes in the interlocutor’s behavior without them feeling subjugated, but acting in such a way that would make them verify their previous attitude to the presented matter. Humorous messages and visualizations are one of such ways. Presenting facts and events that, in the receiver’s opinion, deviate from the common norm, from the established order, and therefore are a certain deformation, makes them smile, and laughter allows them to accept what is conveyed to them. “The basic property of humorous stimuli is incongruity, inconsistency between what I expect and what happens in reality” (Kucharski, 2009, p. 12).

Therefore, we can agree with Władysław Chłopicki (2002, p. 31) that humor facilitates communication and triggers positive emotions. Most of the representations of social distancing we have mentioned contain humorous elements. They probably contribute to entrenching the necessity to maintain distance, and at the same time allow us to domesticate it and thus respect this principle.

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<sup>14</sup> It should be explained here that, in the broad sociological sense, *norms* mean “common patterns of perception and thinking, including ways of working and dressing, common beliefs and social behaviours, especially common ways of performing and thinking about the fundamental activity of a group” (Argyle 2001, 186).

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*SOCIAL DISTANCING* IN AN INTERACTIVE APPROACH:  
A TYPOLOGY AND FUNCTIONS OF VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CONCEPT

Summary

The aim of the article is to analyze visual representations of the concept of *social distancing* on the basis of material retrieved from the Internet. The examples cited in the text primarily refer to verbal expressions and nonverbal signs operating in English-speaking countries. In the first part, we will introduce the reader to the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly changed the meaning of the term social distancing. In the next part, we draw on the theoretical work of Erving Goffman and analyze the practice of maintaining social distancing as a kind of interaction ritual. In the third part, we will place the concept of social distancing within the framework of Edward T. Hall's proxemic research. The final section of our discussion will analyze visual images referring to social distancing featured on COVID masks and other artifacts. We also propose our own typology of these visual representations of social distancing and the functions they serve.

**Keywords:** social distancing; proxemics; COVID-19 pandemic; visual representations; masks; social interactions

*SOCIAL DISTANCING* W PERSPEKTYWIE INTERAKCYJNEJ.  
TYPOLOGIE I FUNKCJE WIZUALNYCH PRZEDSTAWIEŃ POJĘCIA

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza wizualnych przedstawień pojęcia *social distancing* na podstawie materiałów pozyskanych z internetu. Przytoczone w tekście przykłady przede wszystkim odnoszą się do werbalnych wyrażań i niewerbalnych znaków funkcjonujących w krajach anglojęzycznych. W pierwszej części wprowadzamy czytelnika w szerszy kontekst pandemii COVID-19, która w istotny sposób zmieniła znaczenie kategorii dystansu społecznego. W kolejnej sięgamy do dorobku teoretycznego Ervinga Goffmana i analizom poddajemy praktykę utrzymywania dystansu społecznego jako swoistego rytuału interakcji. W trzecim segmencie rozważań umieszczamy koncepcję dystansu społecznego w ramach badań proksemicznych Edwarda T. Halla. Ostatnią część naszych dociekań koncentrujemy na analizie i interpretacji wizualnych przedstawień odnoszących się do społecznego dystansu, które znajdują się na maskach covidowych i innych artefaktach związanych z pandemią. W tekście proponujemy również własną typologię tych wizualnych reprezentacji dystansu społecznego i funkcji, którym służą.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *social distancing*; proksemika; pandemia COVID-19; przedstawienia wizualne; maski; interakcje społeczne