The Social in Social Distancing.

Changes in Communication Media Use During the First Lockdown in Germany.

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Author Note

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Currently, Corona and respective political interventions determine social life. In Germany, probably the biggest change occurred during the first lockdown (March 22, 2020), which entailed the first social distancing interventions for avoiding potential infectious contacts (Robert-Koch-Institut, 2015, p. 29). However, the term *social distancing* is often criticized, as it is more of a *physical distancing* (e.g., Bergman et al., 2020; David & Roberts, 2021). Research associated with Corona and media use has already highlighted the importance of mediated communication (David & Roberts, 2021). We address this by looking at communication media use during the first weeks of lockdown and how people adapted to it.

Following Kock's media naturalness hypothesis (2001), people are best adapted to face-to-face (ftf) communication. Media naturalness refers to "the ability of communication media to support co-located and synchronous communication employing facial expressions, body language, and speech" (Kock, 2005, p. 120). With co-located communication being restricted during the lockdown, channels close to ftf should gain popularity, buffering *social* distance while people are being physically separate. The assumption is that media use should have gained relevance—especially rich media. However, both diverse media types and diverse target groups must be examined.

RQ_1: Did media use increase for social interactions during the first lockdown?

RQ_2: Did media use change for contacting specific target groups during the first lockdown?

Method

To measure the adaptation behavior during the first lockdown, we collected data from March 31st to April 29th with an online questionnaire. A total of $N = 155$ participated ($n_m = 36$, $n_f = 118$, $M_{age} = 31.86$, $SD_{age} = 10.68$). On average, $M = 2.48$ ($SD = 1.25$) people live within the participants' households and $M = 4.73$ ($SD = 4.21$) family members outside.

Apart from demographics, participants were asked for their communication media use before and during lockdown. The use of various channels (e.g., text/voice messages, phone

calls, video chat, etc.) for contacting specific target groups was measured (1 = *never*, 6 = *often*; e.g., family living together/not living together, relatives, same-sex/opposite-sex friends, etc.; based on Wei & Lo, 2006). The participants had the possibility to skip the question by a separate no answer option (e.g., if they are single). Further, the subjective increase in media use—both as sender and receiver (e.g., "Yes, media use increased.")—was asked for. Several t-tests for dependent samples were calculated to investigate changes in media use. To not miss results, the unadjusted *p*-values are reported and interpreted (Perneger, 1998). However, the Bonferroni adjusted *p*-values are also given.

Results

With regard to mediated contact, n = 115 reported an increase in media use for getting in contact with people outside their household (n = 35 remained the same, n = 4 decreased, n = 1 no answer); n = 95 reported that others seek more contact through media (n = 55 remained the same, n = 3 contact decreased, n = 2 missing data).

Regarding the question of changes in general media use independent of target groups, no significant change in text message use, $t(151) = -0.23$, $p = .82$, ($p_{adj.} = 1.00$), $d = -0.02$, voice message use, $t(152) = -0.09$, $p = .93$, ($p_{adj.} = 1.00$), $d = -0.01$, stationary telephone use, $t(143) = -1.44$, $p = .15$, ($p_{adj.} = 1.00$), $d = -0.12$, or email, $t(152) = -1.31$, $p = .19$, ($p_{adj.} = 1.00$), $d = -0.11$, appeared. However, telephoning via smartphone, $t(153) = -5.55$, $p < .001$, ($p_{adj.} < .001$), $d = -0.45$, video chatting via smartphone, $t(152) = -7.95$, $p < .001$, ($p_{adj.} < .001$), $d = -0.64$, and via PC, $t(149) = -8.10$, $p < .001$, ($p_{adj.} < .001$), $d = -0.66$, increased.

Regarding the target groups, video chat via PC showed a significant increase for all target groups with small (e.g., relatives, $t(144) = -2.81$, $p < .01$, $p_{adj.} = .34$, $d = -0.23$) to medium effect sizes (e.g., school friends/colleagues, $t(148) = -7.57$, $p < .001$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $d = -0.62$; same-sex friends, $t(149) = -6.63$, $p < .001$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $d = -0.54$). Video chat via smartphone also increased significantly–except for video chatting with the participants' romantic partner–with small to medium effect sizes (e.g., school friends/colleagues, $t(147) = -6.21$, $p < .001$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $d = -0.51$; same-sex friends, $t(150) = -6.21$, $p < .001$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $d = -0.51$). Only in one other channel–text messages–such a large effect size appeared (partner, $t(103) = 5.20$,

$p < .001$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $d = 0.51$). However, their use decreased. Also, telephoning via smartphone increased significantly in six of seven target groups (e.g., relatives, $t(142) = -5.11$, $p < .001$, $p_{adj.} < .001$, $d = -0.43$). Further results, also on other channels (e.g., e-mail), will be presented at the conference.

Discussion

Overall, especially the rich channels–close to the ftf communication–increased in use. This can be interpreted as an adaptation to the restrictions of ftf contacts during the pandemic. However, it must also be noted that some of these channels were hardly used before and thus changes were probably more strongly reflected.

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