

Washing your hands does not mean you keep your distance in COVID-19 times

February 12 2021, by Dimitar Boyadzhiev



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Though people might take the danger of further spreading coronavirus seriously enough to pay extra attention to how often they wash their hands or whether they cough into their elbows, it does not mean that the

same people would comply with other recommendations like those concerning social distancing and vice versa. Therefore, the two main components in COVID-19 prevention need to be addressed in a different manner by authorities and future scientists.

In their study, published in the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*, an international research team sought to identify and explain how public health compliance varies amongst students in relation to nationality, key demographics and individual attitudes towards regulations and descriptive norms (behavior observed among friends and family). To do so, between April and May 2020, they surveyed a total of 7,403 undergraduate and graduate university students from twelve universities in ten countries: Belgium, Colombia, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

"Students are epidemiologically important in respect to their demographics and social behaviors: Most are young, live in shared housing, and meet many others on a daily basis," the researchers explain.

The researchers identified several groupings of countries with similar compliance, with Spain reporting slightly higher adherence to both hygiene and social distancing. However, discrepancies between the two practices within a single country were also common. For example, Sweden ranked high at enhanced hygiene, but lower than the rest in social distancing. The reverse situation turned out to be true for Italy. The researchers, however, point out that at the time of data collection, the countries had implemented various recommendations and restrictions regarding health-related behavior. Overall, the study concludes that the country of residence explains more of the variation in social distancing rather than in hygiene.

Meanwhile, the research team reports many commonalities between

countries. Attitudes towards regulations and descriptive norms were found to be related to both behaviors, but more strongly related to social distancing. This is attributed to hygiene-related behaviors being less visible, less deliberate, and less problematised and discussed in the media. Meanwhile, social distancing can be easily reproduced by following the example of relatives and friends.

Additionally, being male and being younger was found to be negatively related to social distancing and, especially, hygiene. On the other hand, being in a relationship is reported to be negatively related to [social distancing](#), but positively related to [hygiene](#).

"Taken together, our findings provide cues to scholars and [public health officials](#) interested in modeling the individual compliance and the spread of the disease and devising applicable interventions to uphold prescribed recommendations and restrictions," conclude the researchers.

More information: Annelot Wismans et al. Hygiene and social distancing as distinct public health related behaviours among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2020). [DOI: 10.32872/spb.4383](https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.4383)

Provided by Erasmus University Rotterdam

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