

# Transiting to the New Normal – Evidence and Insights to Address COVID-19 and Post-COVID-19 Challenges

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## Breakout Session 4: How Can We Promote Pro-Social Behaviours During Crisis?

By Dr Serene Koh, Professor Lorenz Goette, Ms Joycelyn Chua, and Ms Melinda Poh

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### BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS AND PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIOURS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 by DR SERENE KOH

Endemic COVID-19 is a behavioural challenge and will not go away anytime soon. Governments require citizens to adopt a series of new behaviours (safe distancing, vaccination, masking). Dr Koh shared about two experiments carried out by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to illustrate how behavioural insights (BI) can help encourage people to take-up and comply with these behaviours.

#### 1. Communicating with the public about COVID-19 vaccines in the Americas<sup>1</sup>

- There were four messages that increased confidence across groups by 3-4%, including among the most hesitant groups. They were effective in both English and Spanish.
  - Protecting loved ones: "Your loved ones need you. Get the COVID-19 vaccine to make sure you can be there for them."
  - Validated by healthcare workers: "Doctors and nurses have decided to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Now, they recommend that you do too."
  - Getting our lives back: "Now we have the chance to return to the people and places we love. Let's get our lives back again."
  - Tested and received by millions: "The COVID-19 vaccine was tested with 70,000 people. Now, more than 42 million people have gotten it. When it's your turn, you can feel confident that it is safe and effective."

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<sup>1</sup> Hallsworth, Michael, Sheena Mirpuri, and Carolina Toth. "Four messages that can increase uptake of the Covid-19 vaccines". The Behavioural Insights Team, 15 March 2021. <https://www.bi.team/blogs/four-messages-that-can-increase-uptake-of-the-covid-19-vaccines/>

- Messages that backfired:
  - Side-effects: “Get the COVID-19 vaccine: the benefit outweigh any risk of side effects.”
  - Politics: “This is not a Trump vaccine or a Biden vaccine. This is an American vaccine and we all need to get it.”
- The most trusted messenger to recommend vaccines was *doctors*, and the least trusted was *politicians*.
- Applications for Singapore:
  - Reflect on and connect with your audience to understand the barriers and their needs;
  - Integrate these messages into communications, but adapted to the audience’s needs and contexts; and
  - Activate trusted messengers, by identifying and equipping them with necessary information.

## 2. Understanding physical distancing in the workplace <sup>2</sup>

- In a 2020 study conducted in a large Australian bank, it was found that there was a peak in the number of physical distancing breaches recorded around 9am. This signalled potential for interventions to increase saliency during this time (e.g. audio messages, or ambassadors) to improve physical distancing compliance at workplaces.
- Other than the peak time, the study also found common spaces where breaches occurred:
  - Social areas, such as cafes. Most breaches occurred when people were standing in the café areas (waiting for coffee or meeting friends), as opposed to vending machines or queuing. Once the space becomes more “personal”, it gets harder to comply with physical distancing.
  - Larger tables/rooms encouraged breaches, but there were fewer instances while sitting.
- Nevertheless, most people expressed wanting to do the right thing and were willing to change their behaviours. This means that there is potential for interventions – designed to close the intention-action gap – for those willing to adhere to physical distancing.
- Applications for Singapore:
  - Workplace physical distancing is inherently behavioural and complicated.
  - We need to better understand what is viewed as “public” vs “private” spaces to design interventions that can create physical distance while maintaining the social elements.

## [Link to slides](#)

### THE ROLE OF PRO-SOCIALITY AND NUDGES IN THE NEW NORMAL by PROFESSOR LORENZ GOETTE

- Professor Goette shared that based on a study of 6,000 households in Germany<sup>3</sup>, there are stark regional differences in prosocial attitudes (altruism, reciprocity, trust). He highlighted that prosocial attitudes correlate with public health compliance (mask wearing, reducing contact, hand washing, using tracing apps); and differences in prosociality predict COVID-19 spread. He then went elaborated on a study to illustrate how nudging can play a role in encouraging pro-social behaviours.

<sup>2</sup> Gyani, Alex and Rory Gallagher. “How can we support physical distancing in the office?”. The Behavioural Insights Team, 13 October 2020. <https://www.bi.team/blogs/how-can-we-support-physical-distancing-in-the-office/>

<sup>3</sup> Fang, Ximeng et al. “Prosociality predicts individual behavior and collective outcomes in the COVID-19 pandemic” (working paper)(2021). University of Bonn & National University of Singapore.

## Can nudging help with encouraging public health behaviours?

- A tracing app is a public good that benefits society at a small cost to individuals. However, the take-up rate in Germany is low, with only 40% of the population using the app.
- A Facebook experiment in 2020, reaching 1 million Germans, tested the effectiveness of providing feedback on local incidence rates in increasing the tracing app take-up rate<sup>4</sup>. It was found that:
  - There was a 20%-30% increase in interest to take up the contact tracing app when information about local incidence rates was provided; and
  - Interest in the app increased by 15% when an above-average status in COVID-19 infections in a county was highlighted.
  - However, providing feedback on local incidence rates was less effective in high-incidence counties. This result was mostly driven by younger males.
- While nudges can tap into prosocial motivations and amplify them to curb the spread of COVID-19, there are limitations to what nudges can do:
  - They might be ineffective for the population segment, who might benefit the most. For example, in the case of COVID-19, individuals with high infection risks (young, male with lower education attainment living in urban areas) were particularly resistant to the tracing app intervention in Germany.
  - This poses a dilemma for vaccinations, where a similar pattern is seen.
  - Nudging for persuasion vs. follow-through. Nudging is particularly helpful for follow-through among those whose intentions are aligned to the intended behaviour. Hence, stronger policy instruments (shove rather than nudges) might be needed to change the mind for the unpersuaded (e.g.: laxer distancing rules or travel privileges for vaccinated people).

## [Link to slides](#)

### DESIGNING FOR A NEW BEHAVIOUR IN THE PANDEMIC by MS JOYCELYN CHUA

Ms Chua shared four key considerations when designing the community-driven contact tracing app in Singapore (TraceTogether), during the pandemic.

#### 1. Mood space

- How was our target audience feeling about it? This was especially challenging as the product had to cater to a wide range of users with different profiles and feelings. Some example of messages to address different moods are as follows:
  - i. Anxious and helpless – used reassurance and rally messages in the app (“Protect ourselves”, “Protect our loved ones”, “Protect our community”).
  - ii. Isolated – used inclusive messages (“To the people of Singapore, with love”)
  - iii. Fatigued – used affirmation to make the invisible visible (make public how much TraceTogether had shortened contact tracing time by).

#### 2. Bandwidth

- As people were dealing with many changes, the product needed to be as seamless (e.g. widgets for the app), salient (e.g. announcements on MRTs) and as easy as to use as possible, for both users and the agencies supporting TraceTogether.

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<sup>4</sup> Chen, Zihua et al. "Can locally-targeted feedback encourage the use of COVID contact tracing apps?." AEA RCT Registry. October 06 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1257/rct.6529-1.1>.

### 3. Feedback

- Given the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation, there was little time for research/testing with end users before launching the product. Instead the team gathered feedback creatively through unconventional channels and constantly iterated/updated the product to address end users' concerns.

### 4. Trust

- There were many uncertainties and speculations which could hinder support for the app.
- Trust can be built by being as clear and transparent as possible (e.g. hackers were invited to come and check the technology to ensure that it does not collect Global Positioning System (GPS) data).

## [Link to slides](#)

### IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ELECTRICITY DEMAND by MS MELINDA POH

- The Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment (MSE) carried out a study in 2020 to investigate the impact of Circuit Breaker on total electricity demand in Singapore<sup>5</sup>. Ms Poh shared that electricity consumption can provide some early insight on the impact of COVID-19 on economic activity and health as electricity generation also affects air quality. It was found that:
  - The Circuit Breaker resulted in a 9.0% decline in electricity consumption after accounting for temperature, public holidays and other variables that might affect electricity demand.
  - Phase 1 and 2 of reopening saw a slightly smaller fall in electricity consumption of 6.8% and 7.3% respectively as commercial and social activities were gradually allowed to resume.
  - Decrease in electricity consumption was concentrated in the waking hours on weekdays due to work-from-home arrangements.
  - The fall in electricity demand during Circuit Breaker and reopening phases resulted in a reduction of almost 420 kilotons of carbon dioxide emissions, leading to improved air quality.
- Reopening of the economy and shift towards hybrid working arrangements could lead to a rebound in energy use as the decrease in wholesale electricity demand was mainly driven by decreased demand from industries.
- Behavioural interventions could dampen the potential increase in energy consumption with gradual reopening of economic activity. These interventions should be used together as complements to achieve the most effective outcome.
  - Customised energy reports could make consumption more salient and encourage residents to use less energy.
  - Timely reminders/messages at switches could encourage residents to turn off appliances when not in use.
  - Over the longer term, residents could be incentivised to switch to more energy efficient appliances.
  - Reminders and messages to conserve energy where possible in offices (e.g.: switching of lights, computers)

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<sup>5</sup> Lee et al. "Impact of COVID-19 on Electricity Demand". Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment of Singapore (2020).

- Smart energy systems could reduce energy demand (e.g.: smart air conditioning systems could optimise cooling loads based on demand)

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