

Zoom (Virtual) Happy Hours and Drinking During COVID-19 in the US: An Exploratory Qualitative Study

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Objective: In this study, we investigated video conferencing platforms (eg, Zoom) used as a means to gather virtually as a unique drinking environment during the pandemic. **Methods:** Using online recruitment strategies, we conducted 42 qualitative Zoom® interviews. Interviewees were 21-64 years of age from various locations in the United States. **Results:** During the pandemic, most individuals reported higher drinking intake to offset boredom and stress. As a drinking environment, video conferencing calls were perceived as poor substitutes for in-person drinking interactions. **Conclusions:** Our data suggest drinking behaviors and contexts changed during the pandemic restrictions, but virtual happy hours did not drive this change.

Key words: alcohol consumption; SARS-CoV-2; COVID-19; coronavirus; pandemic; virtual happy hours
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The COVID-19 pandemic and its mitigation approaches, especially social and physical distancing, impacted most facets of daily life during the “lockdown,” phase of the pandemic.¹ Distress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to increased alcohol intake as a coping mechanism.¹ Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been widespread reports in the press that alcohol sales have increased in several countries, including the United States (US), Canada, and Australia.¹⁻⁶ Alcohol consumption ostensibly increasing during the COVID-19 pandemic is hardly surprising given that 2 of the main motives people commonly cite for drinking is stress reduction and to offset feelings of isolation.^{7,8} COVID-19 and responses to mitigate the virus presumably created “ideal” conditions for a spike in drinking. Additionally, impulsivity is a personality trait associated with increased alcohol use.⁹ Thus, impulsivity can moderate the relationship between alcohol use and stress mitigation.^{8,9}

Of particular interest, as the COVID 19 lockdowns began, virtual happy hours seemingly proliferated.^{10,11} The shift from in-person drinking gathering to virtual drinking gatherings raises some interesting questions: (1) Do drinkers drink more or less during virtual happy hours? and (2) How do virtual drinking events differ from in-person events? (eg, participant groups, duration, conversation, activities, and the like.) The purpose of this study was to investigate “Zoom (virtual) happy hours” as a unique drinking environment during the early stages of social distancing during the pandemic.

METHODS

We conducted 42 Zoom® interviews with participants during June and July 2020. We recruited participants using social media (eg, Instagram and Facebook), listservs, and Craigslist. To be eligible, participants had to be of legal drinking age of 21 years of old, had to have engaged in at least 2 vir-

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Table 1
Interview Questions

Age:
Gender:
City:
Thinking about your drinking prior to COVID-19 about how many days a week did you drink?
On those days you drank, about how many drinks would you consume in a single session?
Again, prior to COVID-19, how often would you have happy hours (in bars or at small gatherings in someone's home)?
Now, thinking about your drinking once the COVID-19 restrictions came into play:
Thinking about your drinking during the COVID-19 restrictions about how many days a week did you drink?
On those days you drank, about how many drinks would you consume in a single session?
Again, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, how often would you have happy hours (in bars, in-person or at small gatherings in someone's home) where you felt safe?
How would you say virtual happy hours differ from "in-person" happy hours?
Did you play any games or drinking games during the call?
Do you anticipate continuing these happy hours once the restrictions lift? If so, why?
How do you think your drinking might change now that COVID-19 came into play?
How do you anticipate your drinking changing once restrictions are lifted?

tual video conferencing happy hours during the COVID-19 pandemic, and had to access to Zoom to conduct the interview. "Zoom Happy Hours/ Zoom HH" is defined as engaging in drinking of alcoholic beverages with at least one other individual during a Zoom call. After signing informed consent, an interview was scheduled with our research team, and interviewees were asked a series of questions pertaining to their drinking behaviors prior to the pandemic and during the pandemic. We used a semi-structured interview schedule (see Table 1). Probes were used when necessary to gain clarification. Interviews lasted an average of 10 minutes, and participants were given a \$10 Amazon gift card for their contribution.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded on Zoom and transcribed by a professional transcription service. Using Atlas.ti version 8.4.4,¹² a qualitative data analyses software platform, data were coded systematically. Line-by-line coding was conducted

of the transcripts, and a variety of responses were identified by the authors.¹³ We used the constant comparative method, which is an inductive coding process for comparing data¹⁴ to label responses identified in the data. This was done per question per interview.

RESULTS

Participant Characteristics

For our data, we used participant quotations to understand pre-COVID-19 drinking behaviors, and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our sample was comprised of 42 individuals, 55% female and 45% male. The sample had a mean age of 31 (SD = 8.88) years, with the following age ranges: 21-25 (24%), 26-30 (33%), 31-35 (19%), 36-40 (7%), 41-45 (0), 46-50 (2.4%), and over 50 years old (9.5%). Participants came from several US cities, including metropolitan areas (eg, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York) as well as other cities, with 16.7% from the East Coast, 4.8% from the Midwest and 78.7% from the West Coast.

Table 2
Alcohol Intake Pre-and-During COVID-19

Drinks (per sitting)	Pre-COVID-19 N (%)	During COVID-19 N (%)
1-2 drinks	21 (50%)	17 (40.5%)
3-4 drinks	14 (33%)	16 (38.1%)
4-6 drinks	7 (17%)	8 (19%)
6+ drinks	0	1 (2.4%)

Thematic Analysis

In their open-ended interview responses, participants reported a range of drinking behaviors before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We identified the following 7 responses: (1) Drinking before COVID-19 vs during COVID-19, (2) How Zoom (virtual) happy hour socialization is different than in-person happy hour socialization, (3) During COVID-19 pandemic drinking behaviors, (4) Games played during Zoom (virtual) happy hour calls, (5) How are virtual happy hours different than in-person happy hours, (6) Anticipation of drinking behaviors post-pandemic and (7) Anticipation of Zoom (virtual) happy hour continuation post-pandemic.

Theme 1: Drinking before COVID-19 vs during COVID-19. Participants were asked to provide retrospective answers to questions regarding their alcohol intake before COVID-19. To learn about participant intake during the COVID-19 pandemic, questions were asked about number of drinks consumed. Table 2 indicates the number of drinks consumed per sitting prior to and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Additional quotations per theme can be found in Table 3.

Theme 2: How Zoom (virtual) happy hour socialization is different than in-person happy hour socialization. Participants were asked how Zoom happy hour socialization differed for them than in-person happy hours. Most respondents felt that there was a shift in the value of socializing from in-person to over video conferencing. Respondents felt prior to the pandemic, their social interactions were more meaningful, and a better social connection was established. During the pandemic, however, they reported that their social connectiveness decreased. Several respondents indicated that vir-

tual happy hours detracted from the social aspect of communal drinking.

“I would say they’re different because the energy is not the same. It just doesn’t feel the same. It doesn’t feel the same, being around my friends and family and stuff like that. It has a very different vibe to it. I feel that we’re just don’t connect nearly as much. It just kind of feels more strained, more stressed, if you will. And so, to me, it’s just not nearly as much fun.” (Participant ID#7)

“Personally, it just takes away from the camaraderie. You can’t really gauge the situation online. There’s a level of dysconnectivity. I don’t know if that’s a word, but we’ll go with it, that you don’t have virtually, as opposed to in person. I definitely prefer in.” (Participant ID#35)

“They would last longer. Our virtual happy hours tend to be with family, usually. Sometimes with friends, but not always. And they could go, usually like start at 5:30, when I log off from work to, you know, sometimes for hours. Because you just didn’t catch up at the same time with everybody. So, nobody wants to log off. And then, of course we found virtual games to play, like on house party. So, then that kind of dragged it out. So, by the time we’re done, sometimes it goes to like midnight or 1:00 a.m.” (Participant ID#40)

Theme 3: During COVID-19 pandemic drinking behaviors. Participants were asked to describe how they felt the pandemic impacted their drinking. Despite social connectivity being an issue during the pandemic, due to most socialization taking

Table 3
Additional Participant Quotations Per Theme

Theme	Participant Quotations
Theme 1: Drinking before COVID-19 vs during COVID-9	<p>“[Prior to COVID-19] Once a week. Well, if it’s cocktails, it would be 2. If it’s wine, I would say 3 or 4 glasses.” (Participant ID#4)</p> <p>“[Prior to COVID-19] I’d say, maybe once a week. I would say about 3 [drinks]” (Participant ID#5)</p> <p>“[During COVID-19] Probably about one on average [An increase from pre-pandemic]” (Participant ID#21)</p>
Theme 2: How Zoom happy hour socialization is different than in-person happy hour socialization	<p>“They’re kind of boring. It’s not the same vibe, in terms of enjoying the person’s physical company. I guess jokes and everything, just gives it a better ambience. There’s better vibes just being in a place with people. It was tough just watching people on the screen.” (Participant ID#5)</p> <p>“Well, we would be on camera still visually seeing each other, even though it’s virtual. A lot more freedom with people. Everybody was in their own house. So, people were just in PJs and shirtless and very comfortable. And I felt everybody was more lax, than having to get ready and get dressed and go out and be like, you know, beautifying themselves. You know, like, the real them. No makeup, sweats, who cares? Just very casual, including myself” (Participant ID#25)</p>
Theme 3: During COVID-19 pandemic drinking behaviors	<p>“It’s crazy. I would say probably 4-5 [times a week and number of drinks] now.” (Participant ID#10)</p> <p>“Oh God, I mean, I would put at, the restriction on the time, that I would put it more as a month, instead of weekly. I don’t drink as much, since the pandemic, since COVID. So, I would probably say, the whole month, this month, would be twice.” (Participant ID#6)</p> <p>“Just once or twice a week. Maybe 2 or 3 [drinks]” (Participant ID#7)</p>
Theme 4: Games played during Zoom happy hour calls	<p>“I don’t know if you heard that on Jackbox TV. Where it’s like, everybody puts in, guess the funniest phrase to a prompt kind of thing. Or a murder mystery game.” (Participant ID#31)</p> <p>“We tried. But it was more, drink if you’ve done this or if you haven’t done that type of thing. I’ve seen some on social media, some fun ones, but we haven’t done any of those. It was more basic. I feel like those kind of ran out of steam, though, for us at least.” (Participant ID#42)</p> <p>“Yeah, we kind of did a virtual watch the movie together, and every time the character say the phrase, we’d drink.” (Participant ID#38)</p>

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Table 3 cont
Additional Participant Quotations Per Theme

Theme	Participant Quotations
Theme 5: How are virtual happy hours different than in-person happy hours?	<p>“Well, if it’s during pandemic, I will say I feel safer to drink, virtually. We’re having a perfect distance from each other. And other than that, I think the conversation is about the same as what we’re doing at my friend’s house. So the feeling is about the same, but I feel a lot safer considering the pandemic.” (Participant ID#17)</p> <p>“I’d say that they’re a little bit less personable, almost. I don’t feel as excited or connection with the people that I’m drinking when it’s over the ZOOM, compared to when it’s more in person.” (Participant ID#14)</p> <p>“I think the virtual happy hours lack the human touch, where you’re actually sitting with someone and sharing human empathy and relationships and whatnot. But during, I feel like, if I’m not like really in the mood to socialize, I guess a virtual happy hour would kind of satisfy that condition for right now.” (Participant ID#23)</p>
Theme 6: Anticipation of drinking behaviors post-pandemic	<p>“It would probably stay the same. If not, decrease.” (Participant ID#34)</p> <p>“I assume it would probably lessen than prior to COVID-19, just because I’ve gotten used to drinking less. So, I assume my tolerance is probably lower. But essentially, I think it’ll ease back into like a weekend thing.” (Participant ID#36)</p> <p>“I could certainly anticipate wanting to go out to a bar or a restaurant with a bunch of my friends because there’s going to be such this feeling of novelty to it, almost. It’s been so long, that we just want to go out and experience that again. So, I could see as soon as the restrictions were lifted, there could be like a brief uptick, and I want to go out and see the people I haven’t been able to connect with digitally and go out to some of our favorite restaurants, have a couple margaritas together and just celebrate life, going back to what it was before.” (Participant #12)</p>
Theme 7: Anticipation of Zoom happy hour continuation post-pandemic	<p>“I would say, yes. Convenience have 3 boys at home and not having to find a sitter or having to worry about, okay, well, I got to put them to bed before I leave and things of that sort. It’s just a lot more convenient to be here and to be able to handle them if needed.” (Participant ID#16)</p> <p>“Well, I think that the people that we’re doing Zoom with, typically don’t drink that much anyway. And so, if we do choose to drink, it’s going to be in different settings. There’s only maybe 2 or 3 friends that we consistently FaceTime, and that’s pretty normal to just FaceTime, and not have to drink around it. I think the people who we’re doing Zoom happy hours with now are people we would probably normally drink with. So, since we’re not getting together in person, that’s just the way we can do it. But once everything is lifted, we’ll be able to just kind of resume our normal hanging out environment and stuff.” (Participant ID#24)</p> <p>“Yes. Maybe in the beginning I would, even though restrictions have been lifted. I would still be a little wary of being outside in crowded settings.” (Participant ID#32)</p>

place over video conferencing, most participants felt that their drinking had not changed from prior to the pandemic. However, whereas several people indicated “no or little” impact, a few reported isolation and stress related to the pandemic was particularly difficult and increased drinking behaviors.

“I’m bored, and there’s nothing else to do (but drink). How did it change? You can’t go out and go to bars and socialize with people anymore.” (Participant ID#11)

“When I had it, [COVID-19] I was really isolated and depressed, living by myself. So, I would

drink a lot more. And then, once I recovered, slowly getting back to work, I obviously had to dial it back a little bit because I need my full brain power to do my job. But, you know, being by yourself and just, you, your thoughts. You're sitting here watching movies. You're not really being as productive as you normally are. It makes you want to drink more to take your mind away from just being restricted to your house. You can't go see people. No more social events or parties.” (Participant ID#13)

“Definitely more drinking to take the edge off of the stress of, oh my God, am I going to get COVID tomorrow? Oh my God, these protests are happening. And there's definitely been a lot of stress involved. So, there's been a lot of, let me have a drink to take the edge off, as opposed to let me have a drink to have a good time” (Participant ID#35)

In contrast, many respondents did not feel alcohol was used to cope with the stress and isolation related to COVID 19 shutdowns.

“Because, yeah, COVID sucks, but I haven't turned to alcohol to get my mind off it. I still just use alcohol when I just want to kick back and relax a bit. So, I haven't really used it as a coping mechanism. So probably, it won't change that much, honestly.” (Participant ID#2)

Theme 4: Games played during Zoom (virtual) happy hour calls. To understand activities that take place during virtual happy hours, participants were asked if they played any games. This was to understand the level of engagement of the calls, and also to understand the context of the happy hours. A common theme was found in the types of games that were played and the game applications that had connectivity to video conferencing platforms such as Zoom. Jackbox, is a virtual gaming platform meant for groups of individuals was a common response.

“You can't do that as much online. It's a bit more tamed, but we would all get on a video call and play something like a card game or Jackbox. I don't know if you're familiar with that. Party games, just party games. We did a fair share of drinking games turned into regular games into drinking games. We played Risk on the PC. We

all played Risk together. We would play Pictionary and there's a game called Jackbox, you can play on your phone and stuff. We'd play Jackbox.” (Participant ID#18)

“I played piano, but no games. One thing I like to do when I hang out with friends is, I'd live stream my piano playing, and I'd be knocking back some drinks while doing that. But wasn't doing any drinking games, although that sounds fun to try.” (Participant ID#3)

Theme 5: How are virtual happy hours different than in-person happy hours? Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants said that their happy hours were more engaging, allowing them to have more fun and enjoy them more. However, during the pandemic, several participants felt that they were not enjoying themselves during the virtual happy hours as much as they enjoyed happy hours prior to the pandemic. To understand the differences between happy hours online and in-person, open ended questions were asked. Responses emerged concerning the social influence and drinking as it related to virtual versus in-person drinking events.

“I feel like when you're drinking with friends, if you're in person, I pretty much never go to bars. If I'm drinking with friends, it's at home or something. When you're with friends, if you're drinking something and you offer, “Hey, you want something to drink?” If someone else is drinking, and they say, “Hey, you want something to drink?” When you're drinking with friends, hanging out online, it's more just like, if you have a drink you have a drink. You're not going to say, “Hey, dude, I have a drink. You should go get a drink, too.” It's more just like, “Oh, cool, I'm drinking.” When I'm hanging out with friends, sometimes I'll knock back a drink. Sometimes those friends are knocking back drinks. So, I feel there's less cohesion in the drinking.” (Participant ID#2)

“Usually, we are allowed to be more rambunctious together. Me and my friends, we mess with each other a lot. You can't do that as much online. It's a bit more tamed, but we would all get on a video

call and play something like a card game or Jack-box” (Participant ID#18)

“I think probably the biggest thing between virtual and non-virtual is you don’t really have a sense of what other people are drinking, because you can’t see their cups, you can’t see them out. You can’t see how frequently they’re drinking. So that would be probably the biggest difference. You’re just kind of focused on your own drinking. Like if you’re in person with someone, let’s say, if you grab another drink you offer to get them another drink. Or, if they offer to get you another drink. So, it’s kind of like, when you’re together, there’s more consistency in the drinking, at least for me. I’m not like a self-motivated drinker, so drinking for the social aspect of it. So, if I’m just by myself, through a Zoom, I’m not really motivated to drink probably more than 2 glasses, 2 drinks.” (Participant ID#27)

Theme 6: Anticipation of drinking behaviors post-pandemic. Participants were asked about how they feel their drinking may change once the pandemic is over. Several participants indicated that they are looking forward to in-person interactions at social settings such as bars and parties. Additionally, participants indicated that they anticipate an uptick in alcohol intake to compensate for the time spent social distancing and other factors associated with COVID-19 distress. To understand future drinking behaviors, participants were asked to gauge how they felt their drinking would change post-pandemic restrictions. The question emphasized drinking once restrictions are completely lifted.

“Definitely will be more in person hang outs, with alcohol involved. My personal drinking would probably about the same.” (Participant ID#2)

“I think once the restrictions are lifted, I would probably go back to my pre-COVID drinking habits, meaning, I would have a glass of wine or 2 after work, like a few nights a week. And then, either once a week or once every 2 weeks, go out with friends and potentially have a few more drinks, maybe like 3” (Participant ID#41)

Theme 7: Anticipation of Zoom (virtual) happy hour continuation post-pandemic. Pre-pandemic, there was a steady consumption of alcohol reported, either low to moderate or high-risk drinking. During the pandemic, however, data were skewed as most individuals reported higher drinking intake due to the stressors/boredom associated with the pandemic, but not necessarily on Zoom (virtual) calls. The common consensus was that Zoom (virtual) calls cannot replace in-person drinking interactions, with only a few wanting to continue them after pandemic restrictions are completely lifted.

“One hundred percent not. Like I said earlier, there’s just that you’re disconnected. I’m more appreciative of the times with friends in person than ever before, so there’s really no reason to do it ever again considering that, you know, if everything’s back to normal, what’s the point?” (Participant ID#35)

“Virtual happy hours, I feel like I have more fun, even. Because the people that I’m doing virtual happy hours with, those are the people that I’m actually wanting to really see. Do you know what I mean? The people that you miss, and you don’t realize that you haven’t really made an effort with, those are the people that I’m reaching out to, to catch up and reconnect over a virtual happy hour.” (Participant ID#37)

“I may do it with my college friends, just because it’s something that we never really thought of before and we all live in different cities. So probably just with my college friends, but I wouldn’t do it with my work group.” (Participant ID#30)

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we examined virtual drinking events during the late winter early spring 2020 COVID-19 shutdowns. Our study aimed to understand subjective experiences of drinking during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traumatic conditions have been linked to increased alcohol intake because exposure to disaster events can threaten the masses with concerns such as health anxieties, exposure to loss, and generalized social disruption.¹⁵

We allowed participants to answer open-endedly on topics regarding prior to the pandemic drinking habits, during the pandemic drinking behaviors and anticipation of post pandemic alcohol intake. We found that several responses emerged, in which participants explained their drinking intake, how they felt about virtual happy hours in the context of conversation and socialization and what activities they engaged in during virtual happy hours to name a few. Reflecting the variation common to motives for drinking, drinking contexts, and drinking patterns found “pre-COVID 19,” we found considerable variation in our participants’ experiences with virtual happy hours.

Overall, most participants noted major differences between online happy hours and in person happy hours. The loss of social attachment was notable, as was the loss of “fun.” As Clapp et al¹⁶ note, drinking for “fun” is a common motive.

One participant did note they felt virtual happy hours were “fun,” but that sentiment was couched in the notion of having catch-up conversations with people she/he normally did not drink with pre-COVID 19. This notion of alcohol related conversation with close friends and families is consistent with “tippling” as Oldenburg¹⁷ describes. However, a more common theme noted that social connection seemed weaker during the virtual happy hours in comparison to in-person events. Several participants stated “it’s just not the same” or expressed similar sentiments. Many expressed the desire to return to in-person drinking events as soon as possible.

Similar to in-person drinking events, the playing of games emerged as a theme in the virtual happy hours. Yet, unlike drinking games in other contexts,¹⁸ the purpose here seemed related to augmenting “fun,” reducing boredom, or enhancing social connection.

Perhaps the most interesting difference between virtual and in-person happy hours was how social influence was altered during the virtual happy hours. Participants reported things like “not being able to see what others were drinking,” not being able to offer drinks to friends, and the like as major differences. Research modeling social influence based on in-person drinking events illustrates that heavy drinkers have the ability to drive drinking at the group level regardless of the lighter drinking

preferences or motives of others.¹⁹ Social cues modeling heavy drinking, purchasing others’ drinks, or influencing the selection of contexts all seem to be mitigated in the virtual drinking context.

Not surprisingly, we identified a subset of participants who reported that stress and boredom related to COVID-19 restrictions lead to increased drinking. Yet, others did not report such drinking. Overall, our participants reported only a slight uptick in drinking during the pandemic restrictions. Virtual drinking seemed to fill a social void for most participants, albeit in a less than truly optimal way, and did not seem to drive major changes in drinking behavior. Further research is needed to see if social connections were altered in a long-term way by COVID-19, or if virtual happy hours with people living in other geographic areas were maintained as restrictions lifted. Similarly, as the pandemic continues as of this writing, more research will be needed to determine the long-term influence of social and physical distancing on drinking patterns and contexts.

Limitations

Our study is novel as it assessed drinking behaviors being assessed during a unique context: the COVID-19. Our study has several limitations. First, our study has a limited sample size, and future studies would benefit from recruiting a bigger sample. Second, our study was completed during the months of June-July 2020, and therefore captures the “first wave” of a multi-wave pandemic. How drinking shifted from wave to wave would be of interest. Futures research is needed to examine the long-term impact of the pandemic. Third, our respondents averaged 31 years of age, and this study would have benefited from interviewing, heavier drinking emerging adults, to understand their alcohol intake during the COVID-19 pandemic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH BEHAVIOR OR POLICY

In line with the World Health Organization priorities, this paper aims to address an important priority, “health emergencies”.²⁰ Additionally, in accordance with *Health People 2030*, this paper also focuses on prevention of alcohol misuse.²¹ The COVID-19 pandemic is the first pandemic ex-

perienced since the Spanish Flu, nearly 100 years ago. Thus, given the novelty of the COVID-19 pandemic, for future directions, we hope that our findings help inform public health practices related to alcohol consumption during pandemic conditions. That is, during times of distress, individuals may develop maladaptive coping mechanisms such as increased alcohol intake. Furthermore, alcohol consumption *in vivo* during the pandemic was a vector for infection spread. Understanding how the virtual environment might be enhanced to encourage safer drinking, both in terms of alcohol-related problems and infection control, will be important for health professionals in future pandemics.

We propose the following actions:

- In preparation for future pandemics, public health officials should encourage “pandemic-ready regulations” to lower incidence of increased alcohol intake. To offset the lifestyle changes that come along with a pandemic, health professionals can encourage decreasing alcohol intake to facilitate a healthy immune response.
- “Pandemic-ready resources” should be promoted such as healthy coping mechanisms (ie, exercise, physically distant socializing such as “virtual happy hours”) to lower incidence of distress.
- Attempts should be made to increase understanding of how the virtual environment affects alcohol behaviors and infection control during a pandemic, such that a virtual social meeting is beneficial to facilitating physical distancing and subsequent infection control.

Humans Subjects Approval Statement

This study was approved by the University of Southern California’s Institutional Review Board, IRB #UP-20-00438.

Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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