



# Reappropriate Greeting and Dining Cultures During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

During the viral spread of COVID-19, people from all walks of life have to change their lifestyles or behaviour due to social distancing. In a more significant part, the alteration of culture and tradition especially greeting and dining, are inevitably developed. Although culture is the characteristics and knowledge that encompasses social behaviour, norms and practices of each society for a long time, it is forced to adapt to a new normal situation. This paper discusses the risk from each culture in greeting and dining through the lens of disease transmission based on a theoretical point of view. In greeting, it is revealed that the gesture of 'handshaking' tends to have a high risk in Covid-19 transmission. However, the motions such as Wai or Namaste are found to have no physical contact, which is the factor causing the Covid-19 transmission; as a result, contactless greeting as well as many alternatives, such as the elbow bump, have been adopted as a new way of greeting. Apart from this, in dining, serving dishes or serving spoons, or even using chopsticks could lead to the Covid-19 infection. Conversely, Americans or Europeans usually order food in separate dishes, which they tend to have less physical contact. Furthermore, it offers a practical suggestion for each culture; subsequently, there is increased premium deliveries and private dining facilities. Researchers believe that this theoretical discussion would provide practical approaches to reduce the risk of Covid-19 as well as suggest the modern way to cope with the alteration of culture.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Culture, Dining, Disease Transmission, Greeting



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic

Coronavirus disease of 2019, also known as COVID-19, is a dangerous contagious disease that suddenly appeared in late 2019 in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the COVID-19 outbreaks are a pandemic citing the alarming levels of spread around the world (Kumar et al., 2021). Before this viral spread of disease, we already confronted the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918, which was an uncommonly dangerous influenza pandemic caused by the H1N1 influenza A virus (Vaillant et al., 2009). After decades of the H1N1 outbreak, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) caused a threatening global pandemic in 2003 and 2012, respectively (De Wit et al., 2016). Also, research has revealed that this COVID-19 virus belongs to the genus Betacoronavirus, which is the same as SARS and MERS (Prompetchara et al., 2020). The virus that causes the COVID-19 disease to spread to other countries outside of China started with destinations near China such as Bangkok, Taipei, Tokyo and Hongkong within a short period (Bogoch et al. 2020). Also, on 14 February 2020, confirmed cases were reported in Africa (Gilbert et al., 2020), as well as, on 21 February 2020, confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported in the World Health Organization European Region (Spiteri et al., 2020). Consequently, approximately 395,926 COVID-19 cases were reported by 50 nations on 7 April and no sign of the decreasing number of COVID-19 cases.

Apart from this, most of the countries' implementation of stringent policy has been measured, for example, lockdown or social distancing. As a matter of fact, its negative repercussions have inevitably impacted the world economy as well as the livelihoods of people (Fernandes, 2020). The implication of the COVID-19 directly started from a health emergency to a more significant crisis that affected people's lifestyles in various ways. Besides the direct health impact, these health emergencies also impact individuals and societies through isolation, stigma, job insecurity, unemployment, homelessness, inadequate resources for medical treatments, healthcare services, or loss of income (Hamer et al., 2020). In addition, the majority of people strive to cope and adapt to these economic conditions. Therefore, the top priority for governments worldwide is to develop vaccines and treatments even though social distancing and lockdowns become a significant role in decreasing the rate of infected people (Sheikh et al., 2020). Measures to relieve the public health consequences of this viral spread have necessarily required governments to cure and ensure that people, households, career and businesses will be supported in this period. Furthermore, various transformations in various fields alter to digitalisation for ensuring its continuity; particularly, the education system has proven that the alteration from actual classes to online classes can be replaced via the online platform of video conference in most of the school (Bogdandy et al., 2020). As a result, it has been strongly suggested that the alteration of culture through greeting and dining has to develop to prevent further infection and facilitate health organisations to cope with the COVID-19.



## 1.2 COVID-19 Transmission

Theoretically, the SARS-CoV-2 is transmitted via mucosalivary droplets produced by those infected during the infectious period, a state starting from two days before the signs and symptoms occur (presymptomatic period) until the individual is fully recovered. However, Borak (2020) claimed that viral carriers are often asymptomatic, which means the symptoms are absent. Nevertheless, though the infectants do not show any signs of violent expiration, such as coughing or sneezing, the researchers mentioned that people unintentionally emit aerosol particles  $\leq 1 \mu\text{m}$  in diameter at all times by simply breathing and casually speaking (Asadi et al.,2020). On the other hand, the more forceful explosive exhalations, namely, sneezing, coughing, shouting, and loud singing, result in spreading up to  $5\mu\text{m}$  diameter droplets to the environment. Gao et al(2020) once said, "Larger droplets contain more viruses and pose a greater risk of transmission than smaller ones." Aerosol generating procedures initiate when the tension of fluid lining in the respiratory tract is overcome by force such as movement of the vocal cord and opening and closing terminal airways, which cause an exhalation plume of respiratory particles in varying sizes (Wilson et al.,2020). It is generally agreed that COVID-19 can be spread from contagious people to others by contacts(either direct or indirect) and airborne transmission (Borak,2020).

First and foremost, after the virus-containing droplets are emitted, they will quickly fall to the ground due to gravity and will settle on the land or splash onto the surface of objects. In social life, practically, there is a high chance that people will touch the surfaces of objects contaminated. Substantially, if the individual touches their mouth, eyes, or noses unintentionally with their unwashed, contaminated hands, they encounter a significant risk of being infected. This transmission type is considered contact mode, which can be classified into direct and indirect contact. To elaborate in greater depth, direct contact occurs when a person-to-person contact transfers the virus from hosts through physical activities such as handshaking and hugging. At the same time, an indirect contact implies transmission via fomite, an object contaminated with the infectious virus, for example, handrails, infected paper tissue, and cell phones.

Aerosol particles, which according to the World Health Organization (WHO), have a diameter smaller than five  $\mu\text{m}$ , can be captured by inspiratory airflows and deposited along the respiratory tract. Furthermore, they tend to stay airborne and distribute to larger areas due to the movement of people and air flows (Guo et al.,2021). However, no matter if there's no one touching the pathogen-containing water droplets on the surfaces of the objects, the particles have the ability to evaporate and become droplet nuclei. Therefore, it is infectious through simple inhalation.



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### 1.3 The Culture of Greeting

Firstly, greeting is an act humans make when meeting or departing to make their presence acknowledged to each other. However, greetings are more than just a way of proclaiming one's presence but also an important social phenomenon since greetings alone reveal much about the individual's identity, setting, and ethnicity (Moyo,2016).

Moreover, the act is carried out differently from person to person based on many variables. The front of greeting is highly culture-specific as determined by an individual's culture and social background. For example, some countries have a culture of girls being friendly and polite while boys are expected to be strong and dominant. Therefore, children of different gender adopted different ways of interacting (Jibreen,2010). The forms of greetings and partings mainly convey information or express emotions; the happiness of one's presence or sadness of one's leaving. Neman and Rasekh (2013) view greeting as an essential part of the communicative competence necessary for being a member of any speech community. Thus, the way of greeting is socially constructed, and that specific group usually knows it of people who belong to that community. Holmes (1992) avers that it is people's culture that determines how they do things, including greetings, as without culture, the act of greeting would be meaningless.

Nevertheless, although there is an excellent variety of customs in greeting and parting behavior across the globe, the way they are expressed is relatively simple: sets of words and non-verbal acts involving speech organs, head, hands, and body (Fontaine, 1972).

### 1.4 The Culture of Dining

Emphasising the culture of dining, the definition of *dining* is the activity of eating a meal, and the meaning of culture is the customs and beliefs of a particular country or group. Thus, the culture of dining is the custom and belief of eating a meal which is expressed differently in various countries. As a matter of fact, it does not describe only the act of eating, but many requisites are involved (Slater, 1991).

First and foremost, it is evident that utensils used for cutting and eating food are different in many countries. For example, in East Asia, chopsticks are the traditional eating utensils of some countries, including China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam. In contrast, in western countries or Southeast Asia, they use a fork as traditional cutlery. Also, Spoon has been divided into many types by the material used to compose or a feature of their appearance or structure (Mandl, 2016). That cutlery, as mentioned earlier, leads to the various art of table setting. To set a formal dinner table, the flatware is located left and right; forks are placed to the left of the plate while knives and spoons are placed to the right. Bread-and-butter plates lay above the fork, whereas stemware is set above the dinner plate's right (Hurley et al., 1955). In contrast, the informal dinner table does not have fixed regulation of utensils setting but more focus on relationships with others as well as being able to dress like a five-year-old boy without worries. Furthermore, the meal organisation has taken a significant role in dining cultures, such as the



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sequence of the dishes in full course dinner or their arrangement in the dishes to please the eye and increase a feeling of aesthetic.

Focusing on table manners, when you walk into a restaurant, the seating plans are usually used to avoid confusion and to follow etiquette. It is traditional to arrange the host and hostess at the opposite position and switch between male and female guests throughout. Apart from this, while eating, bodily manifestation such as noise or haste should be forbidden as well as the etiquette governing posture and gesture should practice improving personality (Scapp et al., 1998; Hiser et al., 1995).

### **2. The level of risk in different types of greeting that cause COVID-19 spreading**

It is widely accepted that the range of variety in the way people greet across the world is significant. Nonetheless, focusing on the way people express it, the array is not as enormous. To be more specific, it is just simple sets of words and physical acts (Fontaine,1972). In many countries, the non-verbal acts above may include direct physical contact, which is the lead of COVID-19 transmission.

According to research, the most international greeting gesture is bound to be 'handshaking.' The social interaction includes grasping the right hand of another's right hands, sometimes with a slight up and down shake. It is usually done upon arriving or leaving as a sign of friendship, caring, good wishes, mere polite etiquette, respect, reconciliation, congratulations, or good sportsmanship (Hall&Hall,2009).

Handshaking creates a high risk in covid-19 transmission as it is a proven fact that one handshake can transfer at least 124 million live organisms on an average, including the infectious Sars-CoV-2. Furthermore, studies also established that as high as 80% of disease-causing micro-organisms could retain individuals' hands after handwashing.

Besides handshaking, there are numerous different forms practiced worldwide to greet each other. For instance, a kiss on the cheek(air-kissing), a sniff on the face used in Greenland and Tuvalu, nose-bump in Tibet. However, all of the gestures mentioned produce a tremendous risk of Covid-19 transmission because the pathogen-containing aerosol particles can transfer directly from face to face by being too close to each other.

On the other hand, contactless gestures exist around the globe. For example, in a country like Thailand, people 'Wai' by bringing one's palms together, synchronizing with a dip of the head or a bow to show respect, greet, show gratitude and apologize (Powell et al.,2014). 'Namaste,' a common cultural verbal salutation practiced in India, is notably similar to wai. Bowing in Japan, Hand-to-your-heart in Malaysia, Cup-and-Clap in Zambia, Salaam of Islam, and Hand-clap used in Zimbabwe are Mozambique, are all considered contactless greeting gestures, which we should promote during the pandemic as they barely form any risk in viral spreading.



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*Figure 1: Handshaking*



*Figure 2: Wai or Namaste in Thailand and India*





### **3. The level of risk in different types of dining that cause COVID-19 spreading**

Several types of dining are the root of COVID-19 spreading, and they have a different level of risk in the spreading. In addition, this article gives an example of dining culture in different countries as well as provides suggestions for the problems.

Indian dining culture was used to share a table with strangers or known as 'Table togetherness' (Ranka, 2020). While it was meant to promote close bonding between family members or a community, communal dining in India has consistently been filled with complexities, such as different social groups or caste could not eat together. It is suggested that after the pandemic, this act of eating is probably to be nipped in the bud because it increases the chance to spread from small liquid particles when they speak or breathe with strangers (Ranka, 2020). Moreover, Indian usually have no utensils for eating. They prefer eating with their fingers; thus, it leads to infection through the surfaces that have been contaminated by the virus (Morawska et al., 2020).

On the other hand, from the past to this day, there is no doubt that forks and knives are the utensils that have been widely used worldwide, especially in America and Europe, using forks and knives as primary cutlery (Pagana & Kathleen, 2006). Likewise, when American or European people order food, they usually order in separate dishes and have no sharing plates of food. Furthermore, table manners in America include the strict rule that should not talk when your mouth full (Gallegos et al., 2006); thus, they tend to have less physical contact with each other, as well as any aerosols or droplets containing the virus will hardly come into contact with eyes, nose or mouth because of the dining etiquette in America.

In addition, the countries using chopsticks as a utensil, such as Japan, Korea, or China, should reconsider their primary tableware. The rationale behind this is that chopsticks cause oral-oral disease transmission (Chow et al., 1995). To be more precise, they have no serving chopsticks for sharing plates of food; therefore, sharing food with chopsticks is often regarded as a way to convey affection. Also, in Japanese culture of dining, it is acceptable to slurp noodles loudly (Ohnuki-Tierney & Emiko et al., 1990) because this is thought to improve the flavour. However, this increases the risk of spreading COVID-19 to let the small particle contaminated by the virus spread when slurp noodles.

Lastly, based on my own experience in Thailand, Thai people usually spend quality time with their families, thus, it is undeniable that they are likely to share a table with their family or their friends. It is undeniable that they are likely to share a table with their family or their friends. Also, Thai foods usually come as serving dishes with a serving spoon; Thai people might have a chance to touch the surface of spoons that have been contaminated by the virus and can be infected when they are having a conversation at the table through aerosols and droplets while speaking.



#### **4. Specific suggestions for each type of culture**

Although there are many suggestions created to adapt to the problem of dining culture in the COVID-19 situation, specific recommendations are provided in order to mainly cope with each aforementioned type of culture consisting of greeting and dining.

##### **4.1 The culture of dining**

Recommendations can be used for any cultures to prevent the COVID-19 from spreading. First of all, from the social distancing policies in many countries, several restaurants redesigned seating arrangements to keep more space between tables and chairs (Jianyun et al., 2020) at least one metre (3 feet) distance to ensure that the COVID-19 virus cannot be transmitted through liquid droplets from the nose or mouth. However, this might be effective only from a theoretical perspective. The rationale behind this is that many restaurants attempt to gain customers, which would lead to less distance between tables. Secondly, it is suggested that there is consumers' preference for private dining facilities (Kim et al., 2020). To be more precise, this suggestion showed that people avoid direct and indirect physical contact as well as expect the restaurant to be certified as clean and safe according to protocols despite an expensive service and foods. Lastly, while the restaurant industry was affected during the viral spread, the rise of premium deliveries are inevitable (Ranka, 2020). Many customers anticipate a better experience in delivered food, such as cooking food in clean kitchens or food packaging that protects from damage and contamination (Robertson & Gordon, 1998). Apart from previous policies, it is suggested that it should raise awareness to have mass adoption of Asian cultures to accept and receive some of the western perspectives and practices in order to prevent the high risk in the viral spread.

##### **4.2 The culture of greeting**

Because of the world's current pandemic of COVID-19, the ways people greet each other is being given a lot of attention and recognition worldwide by opting to avoid physical contact as much as possible, maintain hand hygiene, and social distancing (Sharma et al., 2021). Thus, cultural greeting gesture swap can be seen as there are many contactless gestures out there. Furthermore, many alternatives are introduced to the world. For example, Wuhan shake (foot shake), a handshake substitute named after the city where the virus originated, involves participants tapping the insoles of their feet with each other. This new creative way of greeting caught attention as high-profile political figures like Russian minister Alexander Novak and Tanzanian President John Magufuli publicly performed the Wuhan shake, debuting the world's new handshake. Elbow bumps are also an exciting alternative as many other famous politicians execute them publicly. In addition, according to research, fist bumps could substantially reduce the transmission of infectious diseases between individuals (Mela & Whitworth, 2014). Lastly, it is suggested that people from many countries, especially in the west, should avoid doing their standard and cultural ways of greeting as it may create a significant risk of transmitting this infectious disease and turn to the contactless greeting for the deeds of all human beings.



## 5. Application

The application of this study is to educate people, especially people in the new generation and youngsters, to learn about how various cultures have been forced to alter throughout this viral pandemic and interpret the up-to-date cultures that substitute the outdated cultures which could be changed permanently. Also, it should be made aware of this detrimental disease in terms of how it transmits and spread rapidly, the protection from contagious diseases, as well as how to consider the level of risk in unprecedented situations, which ought to put in the future primary curriculum in schools worldwide. This issue is expected to be a concern in the near future when young students return to their school, after the period of online learning due to the pandemic. When they return to their normal setting, teachers are required to monitor their students dinning and greeting behaviours and minimise possible contacts that may potentially lead to the transmission of microbes. This adds an extra dimension of planning and management such as classroom settings, cafeteria arrangements, and especially learning activities that require active collaboration.

## 6. Conclusion

Coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19), a communicable disease that abruptly emerged in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, can be transmitted through mucosalivary droplets emitted by those infected during the infectious period to others by contacts (either direct or indirect) and airborne. Therefore, long-existing cultures and practices of each society, such as greeting and dining, are forced to adapt to the pandemic.

Greeting, a way of proclaiming one's presence, is carried out differently based on an individual's culture and social background. It may include direct physical contact, which is the lead of COVID-19 transmission. Consequently, many alternatives are introduced to substitute the existing gestures; namely, Wuhan shake (foot shake) and Elbow bumps. Apart from this, different varieties of dining, the culture-custom activity of eating a meal, can be one of the roots of COVID-19 spreading as dining in many countries may increase the chance of spreading pathogen-containing particles—for instance, Table Togetherness, an Indian dining culture to share a meal with a stranger. Moreover, people in India typically do not use utensils when eating. These all together can create such a high risk of covid-19 transmission. Hence, numerous eateries around the globe redesigned seating forms to keep more space between tables and chairs after the social distancing policy was applied. This act was effective since it enables customers to avoid both direct and indirect contact with each other. In addition, there is a rise in premium food deliveries in order for people to enjoy the food safely at home.

To end this pandemic, all citizens should sacrifice and take action by revisiting existing cultures and reappropriating them to the current situation. It is hoped that this theoretical discussion gives a well-defined understanding of how cultural ways of greeting and dining can



increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission and recommends beneficial suggestions to avoid it.

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