

## THEME 02

# The mood of corona

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PSYCHOLOGY

SOCIAL-CULTURAL  
CHANGES

The corona crisis is forcing many people around the world to stay in quarantine and (relative) social isolation. New activities are being explored in our homes and reality is viewed differently when we go outside. Besides the radical disruption of our daily “flow” of activities, the world appears to us differently and we’re experiencing new moods as a consequence of the corona crisis. An analysis of the moods surrounding corona and quarantine teaches us about the deeper cultural and social development and issues of our modern-day societies.

## Our observations

- A large-scale comparative [literature study](#) of quarantine measures has found that the psychological effects are mostly negative. Many people forced to remain in quarantine and social isolation suffer from emotions linked to posttraumatic stress disorders, such as anger and confusion. Important stressors are the duration of the quarantine measures, fear of infection, lack of information, financial losses and the degree to which the quarantine is enforced by authorities.
- In his trilogy [Spheres](#), philosopher Sloterdijk develops a “spherology”: a phenomenological and anthropological theory about the relationship of humans to space. According to Sloterdijk, humans build different buildings and casings (e.g. houses, political systems, metaphysical systems) to protect us from the hostile, strange and ominous outside world.
- In his work [Der Untergang des Abendlandes](#), culture philosopher Oswald Spengler poses that humans, unlike animals, are aware of their inevitable death and the strange world surrounding them. That’s why they create a culture, a material space of symbols and expressions of art, to abate their fear of reality. The notion that mankind relates to spatial reality in a certain way and that spatial reality is “atmospherically” loaded, can be found in both thinkers’ works: the relationship between man and space has a certain spherical quality that includes us and is constituted by both poles. During the corona crisis and quarantine, a new relationship is also arising between humans and spatial reality, as seen in the “strange” atmosphere conjured up by [deserted streets and cities](#), or the feeling of “inappropriate” proximity when a stranger comes within 1.5 meters of us.
- Isaac Newton, founder of modern physics, made many of his most important discoveries during a [period of quarantine](#) in 1666. In social isolation, he experienced a period of great creative success, when he further developed many of his mathematical and scientific discoveries. Now that many people are in social isolation as well, stuck at home without the possibility to see friends and family, it’s conceivable that this time may also lead to a period of enormous creativity and inventiveness. [Filmmakers](#), for example, now have time to think about new formats and pieces. We’ve written before that the Zeitgeist and a “structure of feeling” manifest themselves in [art, media and popular culture](#).
- Share prices of “stay-at-home” pastime providers such as [Netflix](#), [Facebook](#) and [Nintendo](#) have surged during the corona crisis, because consumers spend more time at home than out of it (e.g. going out to dinner or clubs, travelling). Despite the fact that the activities offered by these companies can be meaningful (playing video games, binge-watching series) in themselves, this points to the “boredom” stemming from sitting at home, and with that, to a mental or spiritual impoverishment, with freed-up time now being spent on entertainment and pleasure. Besides its mental health risks, boredom can also lead to lower risk preferences, which in turn can have sociopathological effects such as political radicalization or alcoholism.
- We’ve written before that many of the [rhythms](#) that used to regulate the routines of traditional societies are disappearing because of modern technology. This means we’re freer to decide when we do what (e.g. it’s possible to live at night instead of by day because of electric lighting, we can set our own working hours in “postindustrial jobs”, and we can meet our friends from different time zones online). The downside to that is that the inner logic and quality of the time dimension is thoroughly changing, and we’re less attuned to the rhythm of social and collective reality. The corona crisis and quarantine amplify this process, as they lead to an increasing number of social activities becoming virtual (e.g. working, meeting online friends and playing games), thereby becoming separated from specific times and moments.



## Connecting the dots

In his magnum opus [Sein und Zeit](#), Martin Heidegger developed a phenomenology as a criticism of the rationalist tradition. According to Heidegger, we become familiar with the world and things around us by engaging with them in a practical sense, not through abstract, theoretical contemplation. We only learn what a hammer is by using it as such, i.e. a tool to hit nails with. That's how mankind interprets this "appearing" world, and the light humans shine on the world is a certain understanding. This isn't a rationalistic process, as man does not relate objectively or neutrally to the world that appears before him, in the way that a clock counts seconds and hours and a calculator calculates them. On the contrary, man is always in a mood, causing the world to appear to him in a certain way: man's understanding of the world is a "moody understanding". When I'm stressed, the world appears to me differently than when I'm relaxed, namely as a whole of tension-filled objects, my relationship to which is equally tense. These moods are neither merely subjective emotions or feelings nor an objective status quo or sum of facts, but the intersubjective openness of the subject that relates to the world and things as well as the way that world appears to the subject. What is the mood that characterizes the current corona crisis and the accompanying period of quarantine and social isolation?

According to Heidegger, fear is the basic mood of man, and he is left to his own devices in dealing with a strange world and his mortality. This mood is apparent in the corona crisis, as the virus tampers with our mental health as well as others', and the constitution of political institutions and social reality. It can be seen, for example, in our fear of the virus affecting ourselves or our loved ones and in the "horror-like" realization that one of the simplest life forms (a virus) is capable of bringing one of the most complex life forms (humans, or human "superorganisms" such as nations or economies) to its knees, making the outside world a possibly hostile environment to humans. In response to this, we're also seeing the return of a mood of "hope", whereby the corona crisis can be understood as a "moment of crisis": a decisive moment when we can and must make important choices for our future and make progress in long-term issues, because of a new realization of and experience with the problem. Examples of this are the [improved air quality](#) boosting our climate approach, or the reduction of mass tourism, now that citizens are having [singular experiences](#) in their own deserted cities. Besides the dialectic between fear and hope, the corona crisis is also marked by "stress". The corona virus can, after all, indirectly "move" us and cause either tense or relaxed association with others. Now that we're forced to stay at home, our relationship to our direct environment (e.g. feeling "boxed in") and others is becoming more pressing (e.g. [domestic violence](#) has increased significantly). And now that the other is presented as a possible source of infection and

social contact and interaction are only allowed under strict conditions, we're experiencing a more "tense" relationship to others and the world around us. On the other hand, for many, it's also a period of relaxation and calm, because the mandatory staying/working/living at home is creating a new rhythm and atmosphere that allows us to break away from the drudgery of our daily routine. This doesn't apply to everyone (e.g. not to those who can't work from home, have lost their job or for whom the mood of fear and stress is prevalent) but for a group of people, this is also a time to explore new activities and learn to relate to the world in a new way.

At the same time, the latter does require a certain social and cultural capital, and the way the world speaks to us or moves us and how we respond to that, is key. In his existential analysis of Western culture, Heidegger also saw the danger of the type of "boredom" that keeps us from being moved by the world: being continuously occupied with others and things around us, being "scatterbrained" when doing activities, is precisely what leads to deep boredom, because it precludes any deeper contact with others and things and the problems we face. This type of boredom can also be a sign of being overwhelmed with new possibilities regarding the great social, humanitarian, economic, political, ecological problems we are flooded with, and an apathy that may manifest itself in escapism. This is also accompanied by a mood of uncertainty or "confusion". Because the human condition is such that we are "intertwined" with the world and others, and if our practices change radically, this will also change us as persons. In order to find stability in this changing world, we look for new practices, such as migrating our social events to [virtual spaces](#) in a "1.5 meter society".

These "corona moods" together make up a palette and vary from place to place and from person to person. They expose domains and aspects of reality that remain hidden from theoretical, abstract thinking. For policymakers, the consideration of such moods and the value and effects derived from them, is an important part of solving "wicked problems" and formulating an "exit strategy" out of the quarantine. For example, what are the "costs" of loneliness as a consequence of social isolation, and how does our "fear" influence on the direction and form of globalization? Furthermore, these moods can help to get a feel of social and cultural phenomena, such as people [who've stopped reading news](#) or do so compulsively (e.g. the daily updates by the RIVM) to get a grip on the corona crisis (stress), [growing support](#) for political leadership and governments (confusion and uncertainty), new forms of [spirituality](#) (fear), loneliness (boredom), or the application of [sustainable](#) and [inclusive](#) growth and revenue models (hope). Painting a picture of these moods can help to gain insight into the dawning post-corona world.

## Implications

- **The list of moods sketched above is neither exhaustive nor are they mutually exclusive or uniformly experienced by everyone. Someone in the creative sector who can work from home naturally experiences the crisis differently from someone who has lost their job or has to travel [hundreds of kilometers](#) on foot to their place of birth in order to apply for social security benefits, who in turn has a different experience from an elderly person fearing for their health and that of their loved ones. This heterogeneity of moods may also become apparent between countries. Regions that have already had a "formative experience" with pandemics (e.g. East Asia with SARS, Africa with Ebola) have a different palette of moods, as do countries with older or younger populations making them more or less susceptible to the coronavirus. Such emotions and moods are important when it comes to the "trust" of countries (e.g. consumer trust, mutual trust among the population, trust in government). In this light, the development of a psychopolitical [geopolitics of moods](#) is not unlikely.**
- **Describing such moods is not about explicating or categorizing all kinds of psychical phenomena – the cognitive and neurosciences are much better equipped for that – but helps disclose the meaningfulness of our world and social existence. The moods of the corona crisis will determine our Zeitgeist for some time to come. This means we may expect new media that – implicitly or explicitly – is tributary to the palette of moods of the corona crisis and quarantine, in a similar vein to the ["post 9/11 media"](#) or the ["atomic culture"](#) we witnessed after Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the critical philosophy (e.g. the Frankfurter Schule) that arose in response to World War II.**