ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has spread across the globe, with cases rising daily at an unprecedented rate. Governments have resorted to strict measures to contain the virus, mainly through social distancing, to curb people-to-people transmission with varying degrees of success. Many studies have elaborated on social distancing measures taken in specific national contexts with differing political, economic, cultural, and citizenry dynamics. A year on, some measures appeared to be highly successful, while others have fallen short in controlling the pandemic. To date, a systematic review of social distancing measures and the appraisal of what differentiates their success or failure is yet to be undertaken. Understanding the contexts in which these measures work or fail is crucial, as many governments continue to struggle to contain the disease and manage the pandemic’s repercussions.

Following a realist review approach, this study examines social distancing as a significant policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic across different cities/countries worldwide, addressing specific social distancing measures such as stay-at-home orders, social gathering restrictions, school closing, and online course solutions. A realist review aims to unpack the relationships between the contexts, mechanisms, and policy effects/outcomes. The main research questions include the following: What are the specific social distancing measures taken to combat the COVID-19 pandemic? How are these measures packaged and implemented? What are the specific configurations of socio-political contexts and mechanisms that define their success as opposed to their failure to control the pandemic? Scoping of literature will be conducted on academic databases (i.e., Scopus, Web of Sciences) and non-academic sources (news articles, policy documents, and reports). Data is then extracted from the collected articles and analysed using a thematic synthesis approach. This study has significant policy implications for controlling COVID-19 transmission and preparing for future pandemic outbreaks by synthesising studies of social distancing measures in diverse contexts.