THE INTERVENTIONS OF PORTABLE ICT DEVICES ON SOCIO-SPATIAL PRACTICES IN COLOMBO URBAN PUBLIC SPACES: VIRTUAL SOCIALIZING TOWARDS SOCIAL DISTANCING DURING COVID -19 PANDEMIC.

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ABSTRACT

Urban public spaces form an integral part of city life and its built environment, facilitating space for formal and informal social gatherings, relaxation and entertainment. In this digital era, the traditional use of public space as a place of social gathering has been gradually modified due to the development of portable Information & Communication Technology (ICT) devices. Its ability to retain constant connection via digital media has resulted in the creation of virtual public spaces. On the other hand, the outbreak of Covid 19 pandemic has changed the initial use of urban public spaces due to physical distancing and other strict guidelines, and has compromised many public interactions we were accustomed to.

This study aims to explore the shift in social behaviour and formation of private realms due to the usage of portable ICT devices in public spaces and the physical elements which facilitate these shifts. Further it aims to understand design considerations that could be used to facilitate social distancing practices. In exploring the research question, an ethnographical method has been adopted. The chosen urban public spaces were studied through observational survey, activity mapping, photographic survey, and field interviews.

The findings show a distinctive intervention of these devices with social behaviour in public spaces. It shows the importance of addressing the urban public space in terms of these marked shifts based on its typology and functional characteristics.

Further, some of the above findings throw light on the future prospects of urban public spaces which are currently in limbo due to social distancing practices. This paper suggests that ICT devices can become a useful tool in maintaining an active public interaction and social inclusion in

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countering the adversities on society brought upon by drastic preventive regulatory actions in the face of an unprecedented event as experienced presently.