



**HAL**  
open science

## Collecting traces of the outside world: an alternative collective memory of the lockdown

Marta Severo, Sarah Gensburger

► **To cite this version:**

Marta Severo, Sarah Gensburger. Collecting traces of the outside world: an alternative collective memory of the lockdown. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2024, 30 (4), pp.385-403. 10.1080/13527258.2024.2303114 . hal-04384169

**HAL Id: hal-04384169**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04384169>**

Submitted on 10 Jan 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

## **Collecting traces of the outside world: an alternative collective memory of the lockdown (pre-print)**

To cite : Marta Severo & Sarah Gensburger (2024). Collecting traces of the outside world: an alternative collective memory of the lockdown, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*,  
Published online: 08 Jan 2024. DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2024.2303114

Marta Severo

*Dicen Laboratory, University Paris Nanterre, Nanterre, France*

[marta.severo@parisnanterre.fr](mailto:marta.severo@parisnanterre.fr)

Sarah Gensburger

*Sciences Po - CSO, French National for Scientific Research, Paris, France*

[sarah.gensburger@cnrs.fr](mailto:sarah.gensburger@cnrs.fr)

### **Abstract**

During the COVID-19 lockdown, cultural heritage institutions responded promptly to this difficult time by launching a series of digital collections of traces of this historical moment. Due to the limitations of the lockdown, such collections generally focused on the intimate dimension of the pandemic, representing the outside world (streets, shops, cultural venues, etc.) as a site of emptiness. This paper examines the *Windows in Lockdown* initiative, which collected photographs of the messages displayed in physical locations during the lockdown period. An action-research approach was adopted for the project, based on a participatory platform and social media. A collection of 1,224 photographs taken in France between March and May 2020 was built. This paper analyses this collection through a social semiotics approach. The analysis highlights the role played by the outside world as a generator of an alternative collective memory during COVID-19.

*Keywords:* collective memory, COVID-19, public space, crowdsourcing, outside world, photos, participatory collection.

## **Introduction**

In 2020, most European countries went into lockdown as a way to protect their populations from the deadly effects of COVID-19. From the very beginning, this pandemic was described as ‘historic’ by many commentators – from state representatives to ordinary citizens – as well as by historians, journalists, curators, and other professionals (Spinney 2020; Hoffman 2020; Hershberger 2020; Horton 2020; Vinitzky-Seroussi and Maraschin 2021). Public services, private companies, researchers, civil society non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and even groups of ordinary citizens have launched hundreds of projects around the world to preserve the traces of the 2020 lockdown events associated with COVID-19. As part of this global movement, cultural heritage institutions such as museums and archives also responded to this difficult moment by launching a range of different collections. In some ways, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the pre-existing call to preserve the fragile traces of collective events, such as the grassroots memorialisation of terrorist attacks or other tragic events, such as natural and human disasters (Doss 2010; Gardner 2002; Milosevic 2018; Recuber 2012; Littlejohn 2021).

Nevertheless, what distinguishes this global crisis from previous ones is the way it affected physical places. Indeed, the main consequences for social life were the lockdowns – that is, the restrictions on movement and access – and the closure of public places, both commercial and non-commercial, in order to slow down the spread of contagion. In view of these physical restrictions, most of the collections of traces carried out during the lockdowns were of interior spaces or intimate experiences of this difficult period. Where traces were collected from external locations, they primarily represented streets and squares as symbols of emptiness and restriction (Adams and Kopelman 2022).

In this paper we examine the *Windows in Lockdown* collection, which aimed to archive photographs of messages displayed to the outside world during the lockdown. Based on this case, we argue that during lockdown life continued in the streets and squares of our cities, where people produced tangible objects and engaged in intangible practices that need to be archived for future memory. The physical sites were not only sites of emptiness, but also sites of public expression, especially of solidarity, irony and protest, and sites of ongoing conversational interactions. Through qualitative visual analysis (Thurlow and Aiello 2007; Rose 2011), we explore the symbolic values that can be identified in the representations of physical public spaces and that constitute the collective memories of the lockdown outside world. In the expression ‘physical public spaces’, the term ‘physical’ is used neither in opposition to the term ‘digital’ (or ‘virtual’) nor in opposition to the term ‘social’. On the contrary, as will become clear in the following pages, the methodology of the project is strongly based on digital tools as public spaces of expression to the outside world through photo-sharing. In the *Windows in Lockdown* project, physical and digital public spaces are strongly connected and together contribute to the production of collective memory (Mitchell 1995; de Freitas 2010; Manovich, 2016). With regard to the term ‘social’, the main objective of the paper is to highlight and explore the social nature of streets, squares and places (Whyte 1980; Lefebvre 1991), which has been neglected in previous studies of COVID-19 collective memory. While most studies have focused on the home and intimate social life, we aim to explore the perceptions and emotions associated with physical places in the outside world. It is in this sense that the term ‘physical’ is intended.

The first part of the article describes the context of the project by defining the state of the art of collections of digital traces carried out by cultural institutions and other actors during the lockdown. The second part of the article examines the project itself and the related *Windows in Lockdown* digital collection. Starting in April 2020, we invited citizens to send us

photographs of messages related to COVID-19 displayed on shop windows, walls, balconies, and any other kind of support in physical public spaces. The focus of the participatory campaign was essentially to collect traces of the outside world by inviting participants to take photographs during their authorised walks. Through online participation on an ad hoc participatory platform and social media, we collected 1,224 photographs in France. In this paper, we analyse this corpus to explore the role that the outside world played as a generator of social representations and collective memories during the COVID-19 lockdown, and to identify which physical locations and which messages users chose to privilege in this participatory heritage-making process (Viejo-Rose 2015; Harrison et al. 2020; Bendix et al. 2013).

### **Building digital collective memories of COVID-19**

The urgency of preserving the ‘COVID memory’ has been evident since the disease emerged. The hashtag #Covidmemory appeared on social media as soon as the epidemic became a pandemic. In addition, a large number of social actors launched various initiatives, such as testimonies or other data collections, to keep track of this exceptional period (Erll 2020a; Hirst 2020; Spennemann 2021; Memory Studies 2021; Greenberg 2020; Gensburger and Lefranc 2020). The proliferation of digital technologies certainly facilitated such attempts to build collective memories (Bonacchi and Krzyzanska 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital media soon emerged as the best solution for heritage and cultural institutions to cope with the lockdown (Vayanou et al. 2020, Kist 2020, American Alliance of Museums 2020; Sofaer et al. 2021). This digital media movement was first seen in museums, libraries and archives, but was quickly extended to actors less used to digital communication, such as theatres and music festivals (Samaroudi et al. 2020; Network of European Museum Organisations 2020).

Several institutions have set up participatory collections of digital traces to record this unprecedented period for the future. Two types of collections can be identified. First, national

libraries and archives (e.g., the Library of Congress and the British Library), in line with their mission, started to record online activities related to COVID-19 for their web and media archives. This type of archive is concerned with data that exist in a born-digital format, independent of the act of collection: tweets, social media posts, websites, online videos, and so on. The second type of collection is concerned with traces produced in response to the collection process itself, which is the focus of this study. Specifically, we examined traces produced in response to calls from heritage institutions to collect or transmit elements, observations, or testimonies. Indeed, preserving the memory of COVID-19 has become a social imperative for a wide range of actors, including heritage institutions (Spinney 2020; Mazzucchelli and Panico 2021). As a result, these actors have launched various types of online initiatives to collect stories, photographs, and objects. In this second type of collection, traces are not born-digital data, but rather a digital record of something that exists in another (tangible or intangible) form, sometimes produced for the purpose of being collected. The movement was so large that several activist groups, such as the International Federation for Public History, organised joint initiatives to collect information on COVID-19 collections (<https://ifph.hypotheses.org/3225>).

A limited list of examples of such collections could include the digital collection of pandemic objects organised by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the collection of photographs and oral-visual testimonies launched by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in collaboration with Magnum Photos, and the numerous calls for testimonies from local archives. Created and shared voluntarily by individuals and groups, these contributions convey representations and perceptions of life during this period. In this way, these institutional collections of digital traces gather collective memories that are expected to become the digital heritage of the COVID-19 lockdown.

From a practical point of view, all these projects are rather similar. They provide a crowdsourced digital space where anyone can publish their contributions (Bonacchi et al. 2019;

Ridge 2014). Although the goal is the same – to collect ordinary and everyday perspectives on the lockdown period – the technical solutions these projects rely on can be quite different, depending on the resources available and the desired model of participation, ranging from top-down to bottom-up systems (Arnstein 1969; Strasser 2019). The simplest solution is to provide a top-down system, using an email or a simple form to collect stories that are later shared by the institution on its website. Other actors have created ad hoc platforms to collect and publish stories directly. For example, ‘A Journal of the Plague Year: An Archive of COVID-19’ (<https://covid-19archive.org/>) is a platform that has collected hundreds of stories from around the world. Finally, several institutions used social media to collect stories. Instagram was often used because of its suitability for collecting visual material; however, Facebook and Twitter were also used, especially by archives. This type of solution may seem the most open and democratic, but it raises important ethical and copyright issues (Bonacchi et al. 2019).

These digital collections of COVID-19 were presented by their initiators as a way of moving beyond the event, building collective memories, and drawing lessons for the future. Most of the collections deal with the experience of the lockdown itself, the individual stories lived at home, and the intimate aspects of that experience. The calls for submissions generally encouraged people to ‘document your experience’ or ‘tell us your story’. Indeed, the experience of lockdown has drawn the attention of social actors primarily to the interior spaces where people spend most of their time.

We argue in this paper that these collections tell only part of the story. Despite the restrictions imposed by lockdowns, the outside world, though emptier than usual, also bore witness to this historical period. Yet only a few collection projects focused on it – for example, the ‘Journal of the Plague Year’, the ‘COVID-19 Memories’ of the University of Luxembourg (<https://covidmemory.lu/>, Brüll 2020), and the ‘Visual ethnography of the COVID-19 pandemic’, which provide a cartographic interface to access the collected stories. In New York

City, the Queens Memory COVID-19 project invited residents to tell their stories about the city. Similarly, the Austin History Center built a collection of more than 5,000 items about life in Austin during COVID-19 (Dixon 2020). Numerous photographic projects or competitions also called for photographs from windows, such as the #PHEdesdemibalcón photo challenge promoted by PhotoEspana and the Facebook group ‘A View from your Window during Lockdown’. While these projects have the merit of focusing attention on what happened outside, scant research has been done on such collections as an alternative form of collective memory of COVID-19 or, more generally, on the social representations associated with outdoor spaces during lockdown.

### **Methods: an action-research approach for building collective memory**

The *Windows in Lockdown* project (originally in French *Vitrines en confinement*) was launched by the authors of this paper in April 2020. It is based on an innovative and participatory methodology, grounded on an action-research framework that seamlessly integrates citizen science and ethnography. First, adopting an action-research approach (Lewin 1947) meant that the project had both transformative goals for its publics (i.e., to allow the public to rediscover and nurture their relationship with the outside world during the pandemic) and research goals (i.e., to explore social representations and interactions with the outside world during this period). Second, embracing the principles of citizen science (Haklay 2013), our approach involved active collaboration with community members through crowdsourcing, empowering them as co-researchers in the systematic collection of data on the representation of physical public spaces (Goodchild 2007; Ridge 2014; Hetland et al. 2020). Third, the use of ethnographic methods lent a qualitative depth to our investigation at the same time, allowing for a nuanced exploration of social interactions and meaning-making processes within these public spaces. The combination of citizen science and ethnography not only ensured the robustness of our data, but also fostered a participatory research environment that has contributed to the co-



creation of knowledge and the development of contextually relevant interventions to strengthen the social fabric of public spaces during the pandemic.

Indeed, *Windows in Lockdown* was born out of the surprise of seeing so many messages displayed in the outside world, when that space should be empty of any audience to read them. We asked the participants to carry out an ethnographic mission. During their short, authorised outings,<sup>1</sup> they were encouraged to take close-up and landscape photographs of the messages posted on shop windows and shop fronts. The initial aim was to produce a digital cartography of the messages visible to the outside world, from both a heritage and a social science perspective. While the project was launched in both France and Italy, the corpus collected in Italy was smaller and less significant,<sup>2</sup> and a comparative analysis would therefore not be appropriate. We prefer to focus exclusively on the French corpus. A participatory platform based on the open source software Gogocarto was provided to collect the photographs. The tool presented the user with a form designed by the researcher to collect standardised data that could be easily analysed and compared. For each photograph submitted, the form asked the user to select a category (commercial and non-commercial venue), the date the photograph was recorded, as well as the address. The type of activity could be added as free text (restaurant, library, etc.). Access to the platform could be anonymous or through an ad hoc account.

After a few days of participation, it became clear that people were reluctant to use the crowdsourcing platform because it took time to master, preferring to send photographs directly to us via social media or email. We therefore decided to abandon an overly strict citizen science

---

<sup>1</sup> During the lockdown in France, people were allowed to go out and walk around, but not more than a kilometre from where they lived.

<sup>2</sup> The lower participation in Italy can be explained by the fact that the lockdown rules were more restrictive, allowing only 'very necessary' walks no more than 300 metres from people's homes.

approach to data collection and replace it with a more open approach based on the use of social media to facilitate the participation of a wider range of users. We opened a Facebook group dedicated to the project, a Twitter account and an Instagram account. Participants were invited to submit their contributions using the hashtag #windowsinlockdowns (in French #vitrinesenconfinement). The vast majority of photographs were shared on Facebook. The rest were shared on the collaborative platform, Twitter, Instagram, or by email. The Facebook group was a real place of exchange, where participants not only posted photographs, but also reacted with ‘likes’ or comments to the images posted by others. Between April 2020 and January 2021, there were 2,855 posts, 1,929 comments, and 16,272 reactions in the group. Although access to the group was moderated, there was no prior moderation of messages.

The main drawback of this choice was that the data collected was not standardised and the publication of the photographs on the project’s web archive (<https://vitrinesenconfinement.huma-num.fr/>) was a manual and time-consuming process. Although the project asked people to post messages according to a defined structure – ‘category of place, date, address, type of activity #windowsinlockdown’ (e.g., private building, 4 April 2020, 5 Avenue Gambetta Paris, balcony #windowsinlockdowns) – from a technical point of view there was no way to verify that this rule was actually applied. Nevertheless, the use of social media to collect photographs has the advantage of being truly bottom-up. Participants were able to redefine the rules and boundaries of the project through their contributions. In fact, participants quickly began to publish photographs that did not fit the preliminary categories of ‘commercial venue’ and ‘non-commercial venue’. Several photographs reflected messages on private windows and balconies, or graffiti and street art related to COVID-19. We therefore decided to adapt the categories to follow the contributions of the participants and to distinguish four categories of places: venues open to the public (including commercial places such as shops or bars or non-commercial places such as cultural centres, public offices or doctors’ surgeries

– referred to as ‘venue’ in the paper); private buildings (e.g., balconies or windows of residential buildings or private houses – referred to as ‘private building’ in the paper); urban objects that are not part of a venue or a private building (such as bus shelters, advertising posters, etc. – referred to as ‘urban object’ in the paper); and graffiti (which includes writings or drawings on walls, such as street art, graffiti, or even simple texts – referred to as ‘graffiti’ in the paper). We accepted a wide variety of submissions, giving participants the opportunity to define what the outside world was during the lockdown, and what expressions in the physical public space deserved to be remembered and commemorated. Thanks to this methodology, where the citizen is the only actor of selection, the collection that was built up can be regarded as a tool of participatory heritage making.

To address ethical concerns, all participants were informed of the research purposes of the collection before taking part. They agreed that the photographs would be archived in a public repository and made available on Creative Commons for future research. All data collection was carried out in compliance with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and was supervised by the ethics committee of the researchers’ institution. In particular, following the recommendations of this committee, street numbers were not collected for private houses and balconies. Moreover, no personal data or emails were collected from participants.

Before presenting the corpus and the analysis, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the action-research approach and the methodology chosen. First, the recruitment of participants was based primarily on the professional and personal connections of the authors. The restrictions of the lockdown and the limited time available to carry out the project made it impossible to use other recruitment methods. Consequently, the sample cannot be considered representative of the population and is biased by our profile. Second, the ethical decision not to collect personal data made it impossible to conduct a survey to better understand the motivation

of the participants. Therefore, as explained in the next paragraph, intentions were identified based on a social semiotic approach. Despite these limitations, the digital collection provides a unique opportunity to study collective perceptions of the outside world during the lockdown.

### **Materials: a photographic collection of the outside world during the lockdown**

Between April 2020 and July 2021, more than 4,000 photographs were posted in the digital spaces of the challenge by more than 1,500 contributors. These photographs have been collected, enriched with metadata, and are now freely accessible on a documented and open access platform (<https://vitrinesenconfinement.huma-num.fr/>) based on Omeka S. Omeka S is a web publishing platform designed for research collections and cultural institutions (<https://omeka.org/s/>). On this platform, the information provided by the contributors (category, date, and address) has been supplemented with other metadata based on manual tagging, which is presented in more detail in the following paragraphs. The analysis presented here focuses only on the corpus collected during the first lockdown, the most active period of the project (17 March – 10 May 2020). This corpus consists of 1,224 photographs taken in France.

The analysis is divided into two phases. In the next section we present a quantitative analysis of the corpus. We focused on the users, on the photographs, and on the physical sites represented in the photograph. We had little information about the users, mainly concerning their gender and their practice of contributing during the project. Regarding the photographs, we considered the temporal distribution, the type of message, the support, and the author of the message. Regarding the physical sites, we considered their geographical distribution and categorised the type of place represented in the photograph. Then, based on a social semiotic approach (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; Van Leeuwen, 2005; Thurlow and Aiello, 2007; Rose, 2011), we proposed a typology of the collected photographs, focusing on the intent of the message in the representation of the outside world. The analysis of intent is based on both the

tone and content of the message represented and the framing of the physical site by the photograph.

The aim was to investigate the making of meaning in relation to the physical sites and the connection the photograph creates between the contributor and the outside world: what physical sites represent for the users during lockdown, what kind of social representations they foster, and what part of the outside world the users believe should be preserved as a collective memory for future generations. In summary, the aim of the analysis was to explore the social dimension of the outside world at this particular moment in time. In this respect, it is important to emphasise the complexity of the semiotic objects we are dealing with and the limitations of social semiotic analysis, which cannot accurately reconstruct individual perceptions. Nevertheless, the size of the corpus and the important process of manual tagging allowed us to identify certain general trends that enrich the state of the art in relation to the collective memory of COVID-19.

### **The *Windows in Lockdown* collection: some figures**

In France, the first lockdown took place between 17 March and 10 May 2020. The *Windows in Lockdown* project was launched on 20 April, but we started collecting photographs before then. Thirty photographs were taken in March, 650 in April, and 544 in May. The most active days were Sunday, 26 April and Friday, 1 May, both non-working days, with more than 100 posts each day. Most photographs were published in the Facebook group (755), followed by the Gogocarto participatory platform (316), sharing personal collections or single photographs by email (99), Twitter (46), and Instagram (8).

A total of 187 contributors participated in the project during the lockdown in France, 64% of whom were women, 25% men, and 3% moral entities; the gender of the other contributors could not be identified. In the case of contributions received by the participation

platform, participants automatically indicated their gender. However, for the contributions received via social media, the gender was determined on the basis of the information in the profile (self-declaration of gender or first name). Only six contributors – all women – posted more than 30 photographs during the period analysed, with one person posting 121 photographs using different media (Facebook, the platform, and email). Nevertheless, we observed that the participation was quite evenly distributed. A total of 27 participants (men and women) posted between 30 and 10 photographs, 36 posted between 10 and 5 photographs, while the others posted fewer than 5 photographs. Women were more active in the project, publishing 78% of the photographs, compared to 15% for men.

The contributions were not randomly distributed within France. More than 40% of the photographs were taken in Paris, followed by Lille (13%), Montreuil (3%), Marseille, Lyon, and Thionville (2% each). Other places accounted for fewer than 20 photographs. As a result, the findings of this paper are not geographically representative, but relate primarily to the collective memory of lockdowns in large cities (Paris, Lyon, Marseille, and Lille being the four largest French cities). This geographical distribution can be explained by the domicile of the project leaders (and their social network). The majority of the photographs collected represent messages on venues open to the public (878), 187 on private facades, balconies or house windows, 97 on other urban objects (e.g., billboards and bus shelters), and 62 on walls in the form of graffiti. Initially, almost all the entries were messages on shop windows. In the following weeks, participants reinterpreted the project's rules and extended the scope to include individual messages in the form of banners, flags, graffiti, and other types of installations. The distribution of the various types of message is reflected in the distribution of types of support (Figure 1), with posters (985) primarily reflecting messages in commercial and non-commercial venues. Other messages were painted directly on walls (66), urban objects (43), banners (107),

and blackboards (23). The distribution of message types was also related to the type of writing: there were 715 printed and 460 handwritten messages (the rest being mixed or unclassifiable).

Within the broad categories (venue, private building, urban object, and graffiti), a wide range of activities were associated with the places represented (Figure 2). Most of the photographs were taken in ordinary places on the street (144) or on private buildings (176). Next, many photographs reflected restoration (139) and shops of various types: food (110), leisure (82), clothing (66), and beauty (47). Very few (6) were taken in shopping centres or large supermarkets. Other photographs represented different types of services or agencies (81), associations (21), schools (38), and public offices (20). Interestingly, several participants chose to share photographs of places related to their leisure activities: closed cultural or leisure facilities (30), closed open spaces (22), and sports equipment (10). Very few photographs (25) were taken in places related to health (hospitals, doctor's offices, medical equipment shops, etc.). The above categorisation clearly demonstrates that participants not only shared photographs of physical sites they had to visit during lockdown (especially food and other essential shops), but deliberately chose to take and share photographs of other closed places that represented their lives prior to COVID-19.

Certain consistencies can be observed if we link the information on gender with the activity depicted in the photographs (Figure 3). The street, restaurants, and grocery stores were the subjects preferred by men. Women, on the other hand, tended to take photographs of clothing and cosmetics shops, agencies, and private buildings. Photographs of cultural and leisure facilities were also mainly taken by women. In general, the men who participated in the project preferred open shops (e.g., the necessary destinations of their excursions during lockdown), whereas the women's contributions (which are also quantitatively more important) were more varied and also related to closed places.

Finally, focusing on the content of the message, we found that in most cases the authors of the messages were owners of shops/services (774) or residents of private houses (173). However, there were a few interesting exceptions. On the one hand, very few messages (45) were posted directly by public authorities (government, city council, police, etc.). On the other hand, we identified several contributions representing messages left on walls or other types of urban objects by unknown authors (74). This type of message is a good example of the communicative and emotional richness of the outside world during the lockdown. These messages were addressed to people on the street who were not supposed to be there. They could be offers of solidarity, messages of protest or irony, or simply handwritten poems for those who wanted to stop and read them (Figure 4).

This brief quantitative exploration reveals the variety of contributions related to the outside world that the online project was able to collect. The diversity of places and types of messages indicates the significant intentions of the contributors in the choice of the shared photographs and encourages us to deepen our analysis of the content of these photographs in order to identify the memory-making behind the participatory action.

### **A social semiotics analysis: the collective memory of the outside world**

The initial aim of the project was ethnographic: to collect photographs of messages displayed in the windows of closed shops, informing customers of the reasons for the closure. As observed, however, this participatory challenge was quickly taken up by its participants and became more than that; it became an opportunity for participants to build collective memories of the outside world. The diversity and scale of the collection illustrates the enduring semiotic and social meanings of public spaces for participants during lockdown (Cabrera-Barona and Carrion 2020; Adams and Kopelman 2022).



We adopted a social semiotic approach in order to investigate this meaning-making in relation to the outside world during lockdown (Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2005; Thurlow and Aiello, 2007; Rose, 2011) to identify ‘the meaningful choices made in the way images are designed’ (Thurlow et al. 2020). The semiosis of the photographs was interpreted as a social action aimed at constructing a collective memory of the outside world during lockdown. In particular, we aimed to create a typology of these photographs that took into account the contributors’ viewpoints and intentions in relation to the outside world (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). The aim of the research was therefore not to carry out a detailed representational, interactional, and compositional analysis of each photograph, but to identify the main framing that each photograph applied to the physical site and, based on this, to define the digitally mediated imaginaries (Rose 2022) of the outside world that the contributors decided to preserve as collective memory. This process was not obvious. We recognised the semiotic richness of these images, which combine numerous layers of meaning, but felt it was useful to identify the main intention of each photograph. Such a process certainly runs the risk of being simplistic, but at the same time it is a way of making sense of the content of a large corpus of photographs such as those collected in this project.

In order to carry out this complex task, the researchers involved proposed, discussed, and tested various types of categorisation. Categorisation took into account the visual material as well as the text of the messages.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, we agreed on five types of intention: documentary, solidarity, protest, irony, and sadness. This typology was applied to all the photographs by three researchers. Divergent or difficult interpretations were collectively discussed until agreement was reached on a reading; moreover, 43 photographs were excluded

---

<sup>3</sup> The analysis of the textual content of the messages is beyond the scope of this paper. An analysis of it can be read in Gensburger et al. 2022.

from the corpus because they were too small or too blurred to be assigned an intention. The vast majority of photographs were categorised as documentary (739), followed by images of solidarity (268), protest (116), and irony (53). There were very few photographs of sadness (5). The physical locations where the messages were displayed were, of course, important when it came to analysing their meaning. Messages displayed in commercial and non-commercial venues tended to be documentary. Conversely, expressions of protest, solidarity, or irony were more likely to be found on private buildings or in graffiti (Figure 5).

The documentary photographs generally depicted printed notices on shops or establishments that provide services, giving factual information about their closure, opening hours, or commercial offers. They often mentioned the government decision or the text of the lockdown order, emphasising that the lockdown had been imposed from outside. This type of photograph was the most common, as it was more in line with the initial challenge. However, it is interesting to note that participants often preferred to take photographs of messages that combined informative content with other elements such as solidarity, irony, concern, or disapproval. In general, these messages addressed the readers directly. They revealed the shopkeepers' conversational intentions towards customers or neighbours, often including specifics that indicated a shared space between the creator of the message and the anticipated audience. Most of the shopkeepers signed their messages with their first names or personalised their texts, sometimes including their telephone numbers (Figure 6).

Solidarity photographs drew attention to the spirit of care and mutual support that spread through the outside world during lockdown. These messages were more varied in form and content. As observed, they were often pasted on the outside walls of private homes (messages of support for carers, for passers-by, or for neighbours). Even when the messages were not personal, there was still a sense of care at their core, allowing passers-by to feel part of a larger community that had come together in solidarity (Figure 7). Again, the outside world was

represented as a space for conversation. The geolocation of the messages in the collection enabled us to highlight certain concentrated hubs of messages or conversations, where neighbours appeared to be implicitly encouraging each other to express themselves in response to or in conversation with others. In one of these hubs, residents of a classic Parisian apartment building left messages for the residents of the retirement home across the street. The retirement home staff responded with a big ‘Thank you’. In another location (Figure 8), residents of neighbouring buildings all put up banners to thank the medical staff or hung French flags to celebrate France and its resistance. In other places, neighbours called each other to their windows every evening at 8 p.m. to celebrate the medical staff with ritual applause, sometimes including protest messages against Macron and the government. Sharing this kind of photograph in the context of the *Windows in Lockdown* challenge is itself an act of support and solidarity with the other participants in the project. In a way, the contributors are appropriating the message and redirecting it to a new audience in the present, but also in the future.

The ironic photographs are messages that appeared in the later weeks of the lockdown and aimed to generate different kinds of humour about the crisis. We can distinguish three types of messages: interventions on factual messages (usually handwritten text on a printed message) to make a kind of joke about the government’s decision; ironic messages from shop owners/service providers that tried to play down the lockdown obligation; and messages from residents or artists on private houses or walls proposing alternative ways of coping with the difficulty of the situation. Several of these messages played with the materiality of support by including objects related to the pandemic (e.g., masks) in the message or by creating out-and-out installations in public space (Figure 9). In several cases these ironic messages were quite sarcastic and included some form of protest. Some of this irony was charged with sexual innuendo, which is quite typical in the French context, and in this case, often linked to protest (Figure 10).

Protest photographs appeared in late April and early May. These photographs represent protest positions and take a political stance. Similar to the case of ironic messages, we can distinguish the following: interventions on documentary messages; protest messages from shop owners/service providers; and citizen messages on private houses or urban objects, usually in the form of hand-written banners or posters. Many of these messages asked for more money for the public health system and were addressed directly to the head of government, Macron, or more generally to the government or the state (Figure 11). Today, a few years after the start of the pandemic, the issue of social and political conflict in relation to the pandemic has become a major topic of research, but in the spring of 2020 it was not as pressing an issue. Since a message displayed in public space is, by its very nature, always intended to be read publicly, it is more likely to express political conflict and call for social mobilisation than messages displayed in indoor spaces. The *Windows in Lockdown* collection proved crucial in tracing the politicisation of the pandemic from its inception, while most of the other collections naturally focused on humanitarian rhetoric and readings. Consequently, it testifies to the anteriority of the political tensions that have since blossomed in public and political debate.

Finally, while the sadness photographs are few in number, they are nevertheless significant. They convey messages similar to those of the previous categories, but they insist on the difficulty and sadness of the lockdown situation (Figure 12). The rarity of this type of image is another sign of the collective mission of the photographs shared by the participants and of the messages represented; the intention was not to present an introverted expression of the crisis, but rather a conversational effort to maintain social connection during the lockdown.

## **Conclusion**

What is the legacy of the COVID-19 lockdown likely to be? What will this period leave behind for posterity (Erl1 2020b)? Given that the current discourse on this topic has predominantly centred on collective memories related to the intimate experience of the pandemic within our private homes, this paper seeks to explore the heritage-making processes associated with the outside world – a dimension that has received comparatively less attention in previous studies. The objective is to investigate whether and how physical places, initially deemed void, became hubs for social interaction, emotions, and representations. In essence, we inquire whether the supposedly empty city was, in reality, a social city.

In this context, the *Windows in Lockdown* action-research project proved highly valuable. Not only did it facilitate the collection of data relating to physical sites during the lockdown, but it also underscored the significance of the outside world as a catalyst for social interaction, representations, and, consequently, collective memories. The primary indicator of this was the proactive approach of the participants, who chose not to adhere strictly to the guidelines of the participatory project. First, participants did not adhere to the categories initially stipulated by the researchers. Instead of capturing photographs exclusively of shop windows, they began submitting images of balconies, graffiti, banners, installations, and closed public spaces. Second, they went beyond merely taking documentary photographs; they also insisted on preserving expressions of solidarity, irony, protest, and sadness as collective memories of the world outside during the COVID-19 lockdown.

These voluntary actions unequivocally highlight the social role played by the external world during lockdown. As demonstrated by Adams and Kopelman (2022) in a recent article based on a slightly different case study in London, it is crucial to incorporate such collaborative heritage from outside when documenting lockdowns for the future. This is significant not only for historians, but also to ensure that the narrative of people's experiences during this period extends beyond individual or family-focused events to encompass the conversational, social,

and political dimensions of lockdown. By documenting ‘the outside world’ as a fully social public space, a venue for public and conversational expression, *Windows in Lockdown* stresses the importance of participatory heritage-making processes and how individuals can reflexively appropriate them even in times of crisis.

Linked to this, we can highlight a second point that emerged in this paper, namely the impact of methodological choices. Indeed, the cross-media and participatory collection protocol allowed for the gathering of a wide variety of viewpoints on physical sites and the definition of the heritage-making process from the bottom up. Confronted with an unprecedented subject, we chose to consider all types of contributions, putting our initial methodological choices up for discussion and accepting the input of the participants. Consequently, the act of collecting itself defined the object of collective memory, encompassing categories and aspects initially overlooked. Had we confined our data collection to the collaborative platform, where categories were defined from the top down, we would undoubtedly have lost part of the multiple social meanings of the outside world conveyed through the non-standardised messages on social media.

This project offers an important opportunity to reflect on the role of digital heritage in shaping ‘new meanings about our shared past, constructed and shaped by broader cultural participation through digital platforms’ (Burkey 2019). As highlighted by Brant Burkey (2019), ‘digital platforms not only provide new presentation tools but also expand the overall experience of heritage collections, shifting the roles of heritage practitioners and participants in exploring new interpretations and new forms of engagement with cultural artefacts. The heritage community is invited to contribute their own versions of what should be preserved, privilege their perspectives, and highlight their interpretations of how it should be remembered.’ In our case study, by photographing the messages displayed on physical sites and sharing them via digital platforms, participants have testified to the fact that life outside continued throughout

the crisis, and that the outside world played a key role in fostering social relations, which took the form of written messages on the street rather than physical conversations. By taking photographs of these messages, participants could reveal the complexity of social representations and contrasting emotions that this moment generated. This paper constitutes merely a first step in the valorisation of this corpus; a corpus which is today available on an open repository both as a source for researchers willing to deepen the richness of such complexity and as a digital heritage archive for the participants themselves and for future generations, aimed at conserving the memory of the outside world during the COVID-19 lockdown.

#### **Acknowledgements.**

We would like to thank you Luca Bourcier for his support for data treatments.

#### **Funding details.**

This work was supported by the ANR under Grant ANR COLLABORA [ANR-18-CE38-0005]; Institut Universitaire de France under Grant Severo (IUF Junior).

#### **Disclosure statement.**

The authors report there are no conflicting interests to declare.

#### **Data availability statement.**

All photos and related metadata are available at the url: <https://vitrinesenconfinement.huma-num.fr/>.

## **References**

- Adams, Trace, and Sarah Kopelman. 2022. "Remembering COVID-19: memory, crisis, and social media." *Media, Culture & Society* 44 (2): 266–285.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211048377>.
- American Alliance of Museums. 2020. *National Survey of COVID-19 Impact on United States Museums*. <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/07/22/a-snapshot-of-us-museums-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.
- Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A ladder of citizen participation." *Journal of the American Institute of planners* 35 (4): 216–224.
- Bendix, Regina F., Aditya Eggert, and Arnika Peselmann. 2013. *Heritage Regimes and the State*. Göttingen: Göttingen University Press.

- Bonacchi, Chiara, and Marta Krzyzanska. 2019. "Digital heritage research re-theorised: ontologies and epistemologies in a world of big data." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25 (12): 1235–1247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1578989>.
- Bonacchi, Chiara, Andrew Bevan, Adi Keinan-Schoonbaert, Daniel Pett, and Jennifer Wexler. 2019. "Participation in heritage crowdsourcing." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 34 (2): 166–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2018.1559080>.
- Brüll, Christoph. 2020. "When historians create their archives: the making of covidmemory project." *16th History of European Integration Research Society (HEIRS) Conference*. <http://hdl.handle.net/10993/43770>.
- Burkey, Brant. 2019. "Total recall: how cultural heritage communities use digital initiatives and platforms for collective remembering". *Journal of Creative Communications* 14 (3): 235–253.
- Cabrera-Barona, Pablo, and Andrea Carrion. 2020. "Voiding Public Spaces, Enclosing Domestic Places: Place Attachment at the Onset of the Pandemic in Quito." *Journal of Latin American Geography* 19 (3): 234–239.
- De Freitas, Alex C. 2010. "Changing Spaces: Locating Public Space at the Intersection of the Physical and Digital." *Geography Compass* 4: 630–643. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00312.x>
- Dixon, Jennifer A. 2020. "Documenting the Pandemic: Libraries Launch COVID-19 Archival Projects." *Library Journal*, April 28, 2020.
- Doss, Erika. 2010. *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Erl, Astrid. 2020a. "Afterword: Memory worlds in times of Corona." *Memory Studies* 13 (5): 861–874. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020943014>
- Erl, Astrid. 2020b. "Will Covid-19 become part of collective memory?" In *13 Perspectives on the pandemic: Thinking in a state of exception*, 46–50. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Gardner, James B., and Sarah M. Henry. 2002. "September 11 and the Mourning After: Reflections on Collecting and Interpreting the History of Tragedy." *The Public Historian* 24(3): 37–52.
- Gensburger, Sarah, and Sandrine Lefranc. 2020. *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn from the Past?*. Berlin: Springer Nature.
- Gensburger, Sarah, Marta Severo, and Vincent Ruiz. 2022. "Les mots de la Covid dans l'espace public. Retour sur le projet participatif 'Vitrines en confinement' ". In *Les écritures confinées. Créer, afficher, diffuser*. Edited by Sylvie Ducas, Rossana de Angelis, Agathe Cormier. Paris : Hermann.
- Goodchild, Michael. 2007. "Citizens as sensors: The world of volunteered geography". *GeoJournal* 69: 211–221.
- Greenberg, Stephen J. 2020. "History Matters. Resilience, relevance, remembering: history in the time of coronavirus." *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 108 (3): 494–497.
- Haklay, Muki. 2013. "Citizen science and volunteered geographic information: Overview and typology of participation." *Crowdsourcing geographic knowledge*. 105–122.
- Harrison, Rodney C., Caitlin DeSilvey, Cornelius Holtorf, Sharon Macdonald, Nadia Bartolini, Esther Breithoff, Harald Fredheim, Antony Lyons, Sarah May, Jennie Morgan, and Sefryn Penrose. 2020. *Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices*. London: UCL Press.
- Hetland, er., Parmyre Pierroux, and Line Esborg. 2020. *A history of participation in museums and archives: Traversing citizen science and citizen humanities*. London: Routledge.
- Hershberger, Scott. 2020. "The Pandemic we forgot. The 1918 flu killed millions, then faded from collective memory. Could the same happen with COVID-19?" *Scientific American* 323 (5): 66–69.
- Hirst, William. 2020. "Remembering COVID-19." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 87 (2): 251–252.



- Hodge, Robert, and Gunther Kress. 1988. *Social Semiotics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hoffmann, Bert. 2020. "Repressed memory: Rethinking the impact of Latin America's forgotten pandemics." *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* (109): 203–211.
- Horton, Richard. 2020. "COVID-19 and the ethics of memory." *The Lancet* (395): 1750. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31279-4
- Kist, Cassandra. 2020. "Museums, Challenging Heritage and Social Media During COVID-19." *Museum and Society* 18 (3): 345–348.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. 1996. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. 2001. *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. London: Arnold.
- Lefebvre, Henry. 1991. *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lewin, Kurt. 1947. "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria and Social Change". *Human Relations* 1 (1), 5–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872674700100103>.
- Littlejohn, Andrew. 2021. "The potential of intangible loss: reassembling heritage and reconstructing the social in post-disaster Japan." *Social Anthropology* (29): 944–959. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.13095>.
- Mazzucchelli, Francesco, and Marxo Panico. 2021. "Pre-emptive memories: Anticipating narratives of Covid-19 in practices of commemoration." *Memory Studies* 14 (6): 1414–1430.
- Milosevic, Ana. 2018. "Historicizing the present: Brussels attacks and heritagization of spontaneous memorials". *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24 (1): 53–65.
- Mitchell, William J. 1995. *City of bits; space, place and the infobahn*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Network of European Museum Organisations. 2020. *NEMO report on the impact of COVID-19 on museums in Europe*. [https://www.nemo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO\\_documents/NEMO\\_COVID19\\_Report\\_12.05.2020.pdf](https://www.nemo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_Report_12.05.2020.pdf)
- Recuber, Timothy. 2012. "The prosumption of commemoration: Disasters, digital memory banks, and online collective memory." *American Behavioral Scientist* 56 (4): 531–549.
- Ridge, Mia. 2014. *Crowdsourcing our cultural heritage*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Rose, Gillian. 2011. *Visual Methodologies: Interpreting Visual Materials*. London: Sage.
- Rose, Gillian. 2022. *Seeing the City Digitally: Processing Urban Space and Time*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Samaroudi, Myrsini, Karina Rodriguez Echavarria, and Laea Perry. 2020. "Heritage in lockdown: digital provision of memory institutions in the UK and US of America during the COVID-19 pandemic." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 35 (4): 337–361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2020.1810483>.
- Sofaer, Joanna, Ben Davenport, Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, Eirini Gallou, and David Uzzell. 2021. "Heritage sites, value and wellbeing: learning from the COVID-19 pandemic in England." *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 27 (11): 1117–1132.
- Spennemann, Dirk H. 2022. "Curating the Contemporary: A Case for National and Local COVID-19 Collections." *Curator* 65 (1): 27–42. doi: 10.1111/cura.12451.
- Spinney, Laura. 2020. "What are COVID archivists keeping for tomorrow's historians?". *Nature* 588 (7839): 578–580.
- Strasser, Bruno, Jérôme Baudry, Dana Mahr, Gabriela Sanchez and Elise Tancoigne. 2019. "'Citizen Science'? Rethinking Science and Public Participation". *Science & Technology Studies* 32 (2): 52–76.
- Thurlow, Crispin, and Giorgia Aiello. 2007. "National pride, global capital: a social semiotic analysis of transnational visual branding in the airline industry." *Visual Communication* 6 (3): 305–344.

- Thurlow, Crispin, Giorgia Aiello, and Lara Portmann. 2020. "Visualizing teens and technology: A social semiotic analysis of stock photography and news media imagery." *New Media & Society* 22 (3), 528–549.
- Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2005. *Introducing Social Semiotics*. London: Routledge.
- Vayanou, Mari, Akrivi Katifori, Angeliki Chrysanthi, and Angeliki Antoniou. 2020. "Cultural Heritage and Social Experiences in the Times of COVID 19". In *AVI 2CH 2020*. September 29: 1-4. Italy: Island of Ischia.
- Viejo-Rose, Dacia. 2015. "Cultural heritage and memory: untangling the ties that bind." *Culture & History Digital Journal* 4 (2): e018.
- Vinitzky-Seroussi, Vered, and Mathias Jalfim Maraschin,. 2021. "Between remembrance and knowledge: The Spanish Flu, COVID-19, and the two poles of collective memory." *Memory Studies* 14 (6): 1475–1488.

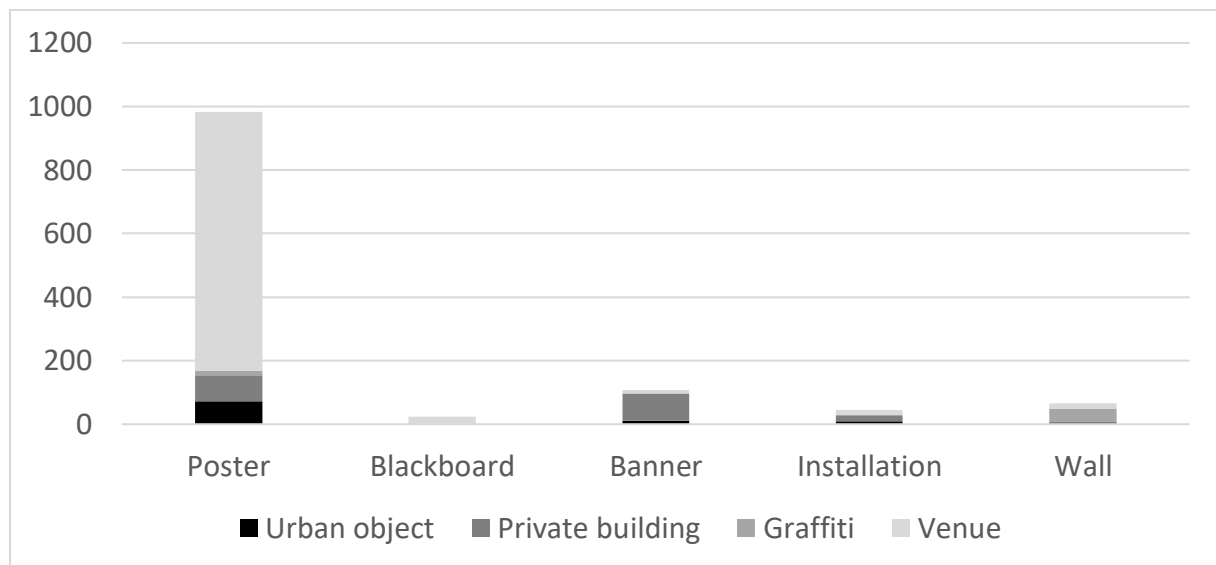


Figure 1. Distribution of photos by support and type of message.

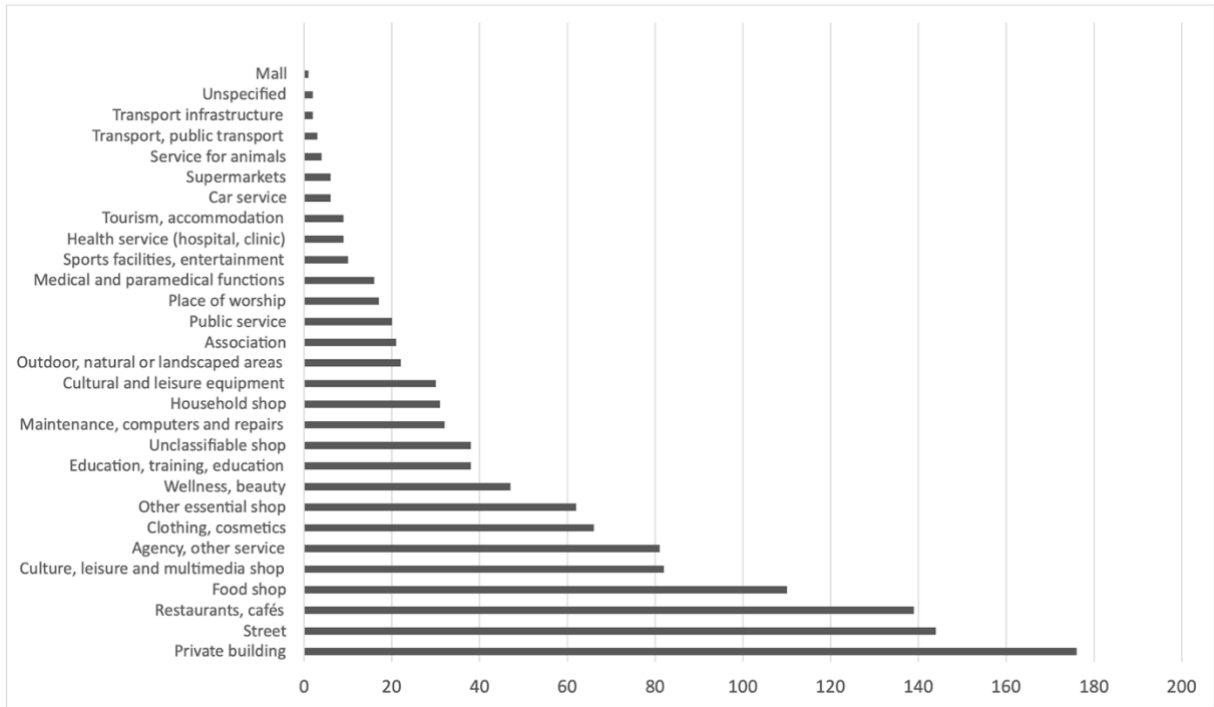


Figure 2. Distribution of photos by type of represented place.

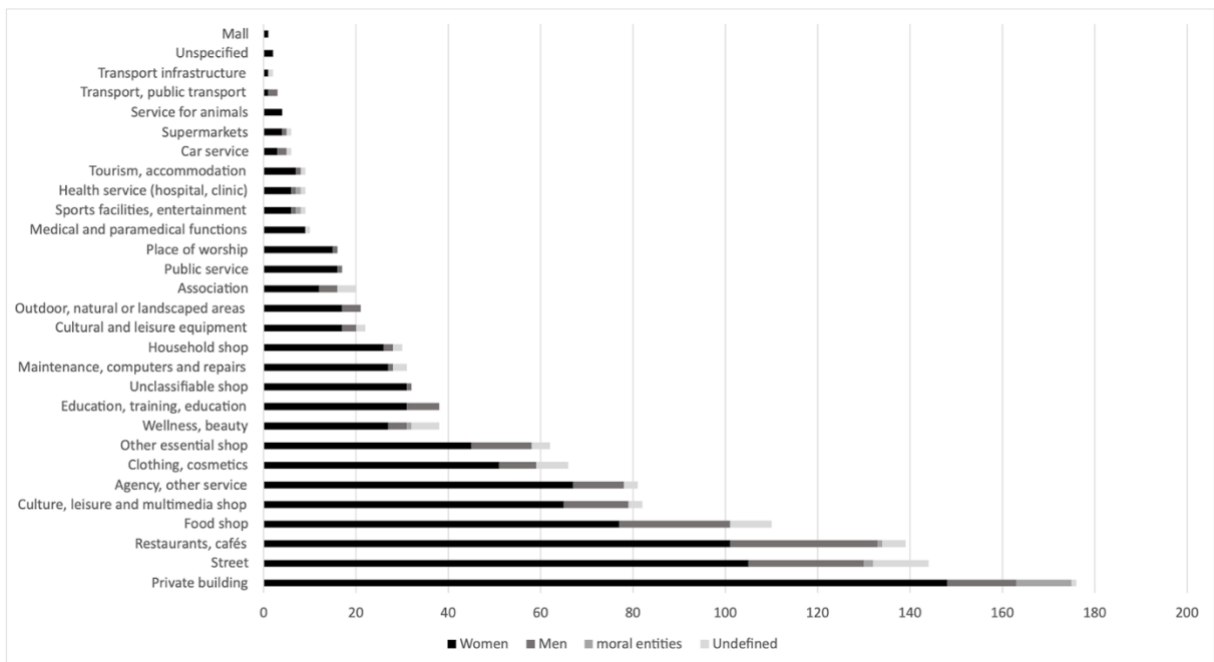


Figure 3. Distribution of photos by type of represented place and by gender.



Figure 4. Example of photos where the author of the message is an unknown passer-by (on the left © Marion Dupuis, on the right © Sofia Tchouikina).

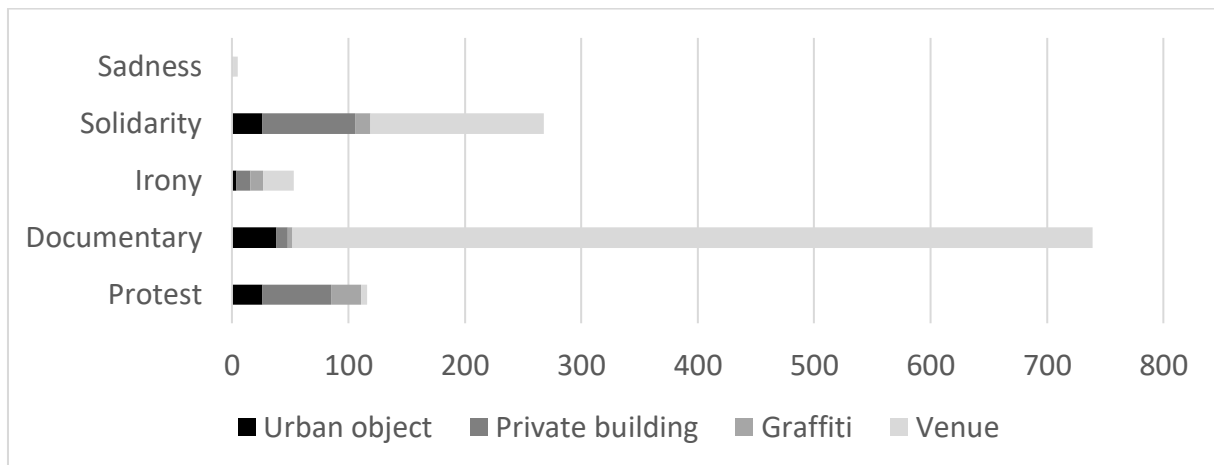


Figure 5. Distribution of the photos by intention and by represented place.

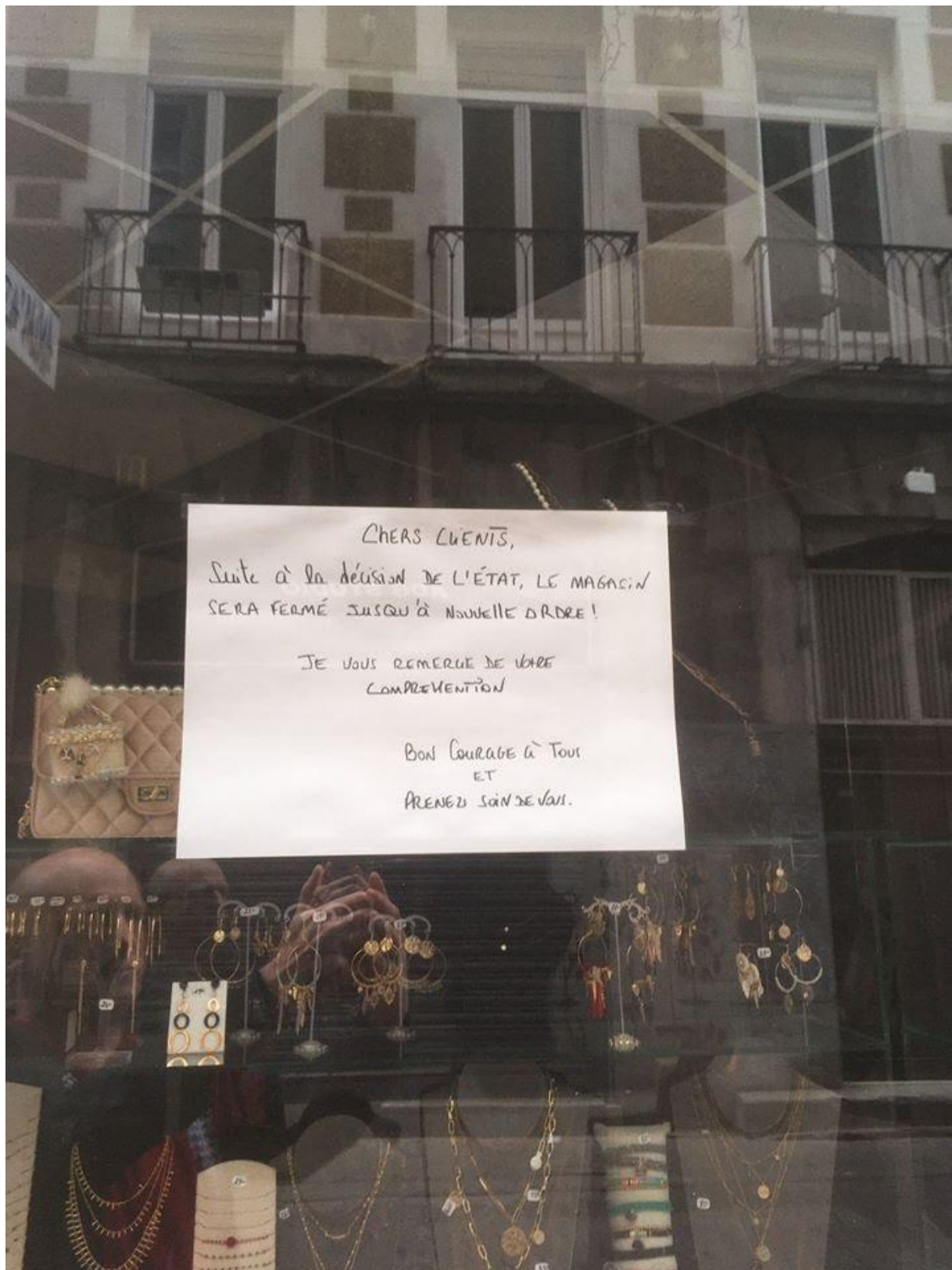


Figure 6. Example of documentary message that combines informative and solidarity content.

Bijouterie [Grenoble], 21 Avril 2020, © Tal Bruttman. ("Dear customers, Following the

State's decision, the store will be closed until further notice !Thank you for your understanding / Good luck to all and take care of you”).



Figure 7. Example of solidarity photo. Restaurant [Metz], 17 April 2020, © Laetitia Boyer <https://vitrinesenconfinement.huma-num.fr/items/show/365>



Figure 8. Examples of solidarity photos. “Merci aux travailleurs.es les transparents.es de la République”/ “Thank you to the workers of the Republic” [Montreuil], 5 May 2020, © Rafaèle Le-Dû.



Figure 9. Example of irony photos. Galerie d’art / Atelier [Châtillon], 25 April 2020, © Françoise Bhk.



Figure 10. Example of irony photos. Bar [Paris], 6 May 2020. “Sorry were are closed, make the most it, make babies” ©Cristian Rimoldi





Figure 11. Examples of protest photos. On the left, Porte de Garage [Laroque-d’Olmes], 18 March 2020 © Jean-Charles Sutra (“Macron more tests” ). On the right, Balcon privé [Montreuil], 5 May 2020, © Rafaèle Le-Dû (« Money for hospital, not for the capital”).

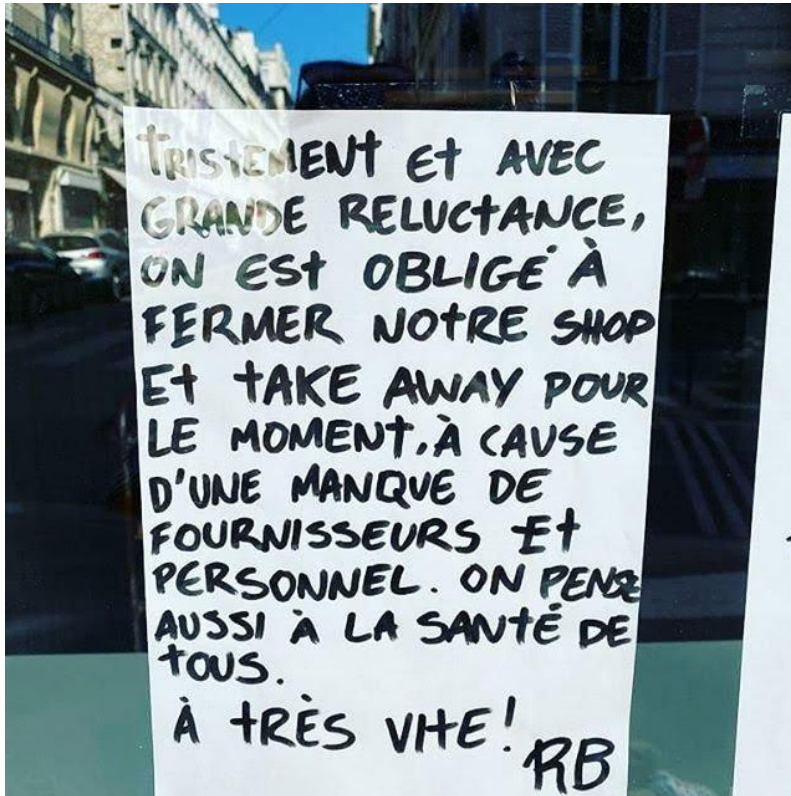


Figure 12. Example of sadness photos. On the left, Restaurant [Paris], 24 April 2020 © anonymised, (“Sadly and with great reluctance, we are forced to close our shop and take away for the moment, due to a lack of suppliers and staff. We also think about everyone’s health.”).