Hashtagging, Duetting, Sound-linking: TikTok Gestures and Methods of (In)distinction

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Abstract

My contribution investigates the features of hashtagging, duetting, and sound-linking on TikTok. By discussing the circulation of disinfectant memes in the wake of Trump's Coronavirus press briefing from April 23, 2020, it pursues two main objectives: The first objective is to address the specificity of TikTok as a multifaceted gestural assemblage by drawing on critical considerations of affect and social media. Starting from Vilém Flusser's notion of gestures, I move to the analysis of digital video material and its engaging characteristics. The second objective is oriented toward experimentation with the methodological potential of TikTok metadata—hashtags, post captions, duets, sounds, stickers, and engagement metrics—for meme research. Reflecting on a small set of #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant posts through a series of analytical visualizations, I address the ambiguous role that TikTok sharing plays in the composition of embodied memetic production. Both objectives invite a discussion of the extent to which memes challenge distinctions in the viral logic of repetition and networked mutation, feeding into a complex ensemble of attention, meaning, and (non)sense-generating social media.

Keywords: gesture; affect; video memes; methods; data; TikTok

Introduction: On Studying TikTok Gestures

According to different thesaurus definitions, the term "gesture" implies a movement as a means of connective expression: "A movement usually of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasizes an idea, sentiment, or attitude" (*Merriam-Webster*), gesture further stands for something that you do "to communicate a feeling or instruction" (*Macmillan Dictionary*). In the context of social networking sites, a gesture is both an attentional impulse and "an icon which represents a type of action you can select to share with others" (*Macmillan Dictionary*). How social media elements—visual, textual, and auditive—look and behave "should indicate if gestures can be performed on them" (*Material Design*). But what can we do to study the "gestural virality" (Bilem) of platforms such as TikTok? And under which conditions?

Vilém Flusser proposed in 1991 that, in addition to interpreting the meanings that gestures transport, we must account for the specificity of what gestures can do. In the study of gestural assemblages, he saw a phenomenological effort to "take *affect* by surprise" (*Gestures* 1) by exploring how—through gestures—moods become formalized into repeatable symbolic statements. Repetition, however, especially in its relation to affect, is never identical or straightforward. Rather than being merely instrumental, it involves a sense of mixed potentiality connected to a sociotechnical apparatus that gestures set into motion. The apparatus of TikTok sharing, as I will argue below, unfolds its engaging potential through gestures that challenge distinctions in the viral logic of repetition and networked mutation. Drawing on critical considerations of affect and social media (Sampson; Dean; Parikka; Chun; Paasonen), I suggest that methodological inquiry sensitive to this logic is central to exploring the circulation of embodied memetic content as contingent upon the platform's technical features and experiential environments.

Tracing this symbiotic relationship, this article engages with the gestural characteristics of video memes that on TikTok are said to follow the organizing principles of imitation (Zulli and Zulli) and templatability (Abidin; Abidin and Kaye). By discussing how these principles affected the circulation of disinfectant memes in the wake of Trump's Coronavirus press briefing from April 23, 2020, it offers an analysis of 1,078 posts published with #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant. With a methodology attuned to the specificity of TikTok-native digital objects, three sections reflect on the features of hashtagging, duetting, and sound-linking. Different visualization and analysis techniques will help to understand the "multifarious character" (Marres and Gerlitz 23) of these features within the sociotechnical composition of seemingly distinct memetic formations. With each new layer of interpretation, a new perspective on #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant memes will emerge, providing a multisituated account of how—through networked video sharing—words, music, and body images overlap.

TikTok-mediated Affect, Disinfectant Memes, and Methods of (In)distinction

It is important to point out that this approach necessitates recognition of social media engagement as something that is about liveliness and polyvalent constitution rather than straightforward technical amplification (Marres and Gerlitz). User-generated content is co-produced by platforms that distribute it, which means that a clear separation of technicity and context is no longer feasible (Niederer; Rogers and Giorgi). Adaptive to the interface design provided by the platform, the recurring patterns of dance moves, body performances, and lip sync battles on TikTok enact complex scenarios of memeification by combining the features of editability, visibility, persistence, and association (Treem and Leonardi). Within this engaging formation, one feature does not simply replace another (Dean). They overlap, modifying preceding connections in a process through which *distinct platform artifacts*—such as hashtags,

sounds, stickers, effects, and likes—*become indistinct* in the flow of recommended videos and memetic riffing.

Posing the question of the extent to which platform experience can be rendered tangible through networked engagement, TikTok sharing is inextricably linked to affect modulation. By linking users' video performances through co-hashtags, editing features, and searchable sounds, TikTok's "affective affordances" (Geboers; Hautea et al.) activate unique formations of embodied memetic content. Understood in this vein, and following Jussi Parikka's helpful definition, an affect mediated through the gesture of sharing involves "multiple layers [. . .] across which social organization, visibility, and empowerment—but also data above all those things—flows" (65). Most of this data results from users engaging with platform features that enable complex multifaceted interaction in the front end. In the back end, affective impulses which intermesh in the flows of user-generated content translate into pre-structured data points and associated metadata (Gerlitz). The logic of connection these features entail is fuzzy. Affordances of the "effects tab" and "use this sound" button encourage immediate responses toward emerging trends and simultaneously provide a long-term basis for algorithmic manipulation of the affective environments in which memes circulate (Grandinetti and Bruinsma). On an infrastructural level, the very same affordances facilitate imitation as a means of creating traceable units of cultural information. However, as soon as a trend goes viral, both searchable effects and listed sounds turn into a messy cascade of audiovisual riffs that disturb the logic of source and adaptation. While allowing the platform to track engagement through distinct communicative functions, TikTok sharing therefore resists clear-cut categorizations. A multifaceted relational gesture, it blurs the moments of contact and capture in online social environments.

Understanding the role of affect in this gestural assemblage also requires accounting for the linkages of the body to the memetic aspect of the Internet (Bilem). A gesture never repeats without transforming the states of relations in which it becomes registered. For Flusser, it comes into force as "a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation" (*Gestures* 2). Not only, for example, does the "gesture of video" (*Gestures* 142–6) absorb movements of the video maker, but it also attempts to produce an event in which the maker participates. The "gesture of searching" (*Gestures* 147–61) changes the relationship between subject and object. The "gesture of listening to music" (*Gestures* 111–17) connects human bodies through acoustic vibrations. The gestures of "pressing buttons" and "tapping with the fingertips on the keys" blur the line between experience and expression even further: stemming from an apparatus that Flusser calls "calculate and compute" (*Into the Universe* 134–6), these gestures produce a universe of technical images, in which all events feed into high-speed feedback loops of image production and processing.

While Flusser's considerations need to be further attuned to the specificity of media objects and events in question (De Rosa; Büscher and Horáková), they already pick up some of the characteristics that the gesture of sharing on TikTok entails. Partially as a result of global pandemic lockdowns, TikTok engagement reached its peak during the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak when the platform made headlines as the most downloaded non-gaming app and as "one of the world's biggest distractions" (Wells et al.). Along with other headlines promoting TikTok "as the perfect antidote to social isolation" (Haigney), music parodies and voice impressions emerged as characteristic vernaculars, with TikTokers garnering millions of views on their humorous portrayals of global leaders (Stratton). Imitation and irony are key to the affective transactions of

this kind, and memes circulating in response to topical events are no exception, especially when it comes to Trump.

During an April 22, 2020, White House Coronavirus press briefing, the then US President delivered his remarks on the medical use of light and disinfectants. In his speech that instantly went viral, he discussed the possibility of combatting the virus by injecting disinfectants into the human body. While public health organizations urged everyone not to follow Trump's suggestions, the ensuing long tail of clickbait headlines, outraged reactions, and memes, above all, caused backlash and distraction. On TikTok, lip-sync comedians duetting one another combined gestural humor with searchable sound templates, using Trump's characteristic voice tone to deliver a punchline. Lysol, Dettol, Clorox, and other household cleaners became trending hashtags along with #trumptini, #injectdisinfectant, #tidepodpresident, and #dontdrinkbleach. Soon enough, Twitter and other platforms blocked some of these trends due to the violation of the COVID-19 misinformation policy, leaving behind an erratic space of junk information and political satire (Culliford). The alternate memetic universe initiated by this exchange had a fragmented social media afterlife, resulting in somewhat restrained tactics of trend hijacking. In my interpretation of these tactics on TikTok, I focus less on the specific contents and more on the time-bound associations they provoked in relation to the event, highlighting "zones of indistinction" (Sampson) in the environments of social media circulation. By defining such zones through their imitative capacities, I draw on Tony Sampson's discussion of mimicry, adaptation, and alignment that constitute today's viral trends and memetic phenomena. Here, distinction and indistinction work hand in hand, activating mutable forms of engagement through collective appropriation of variously networked platform content.

Inspired by critical reflections on affect and social media, I then put forward (in)distinction as a multisituated method that recognizes how body images and gestures become entangled within TikTok's mediated settings. By engaging with videos attached to #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant through a series of synthetic data visualizations or "composite images" (Colombo), I reflect on a set of questions: Can we deploy co-occurrences of hashtags and other TikTok entities to explore how "imitation publics" (Zulli and Zulli) blend into platform-mediated communicative environments? How can we address less visible content formations which are becoming active through minor deviations in response to the events of peak intensity? And, specifically in relation to the embodied aspect of disinfectant memes, what happens at the edges of networks that amplify their engaging potential through gestures and sounds?

#dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant: Cross-reading Co-hashtags

In this analysis, I initially focused on two explicitly ironic, fairly nonsensical, and heavily moderated hashtags that emerged in the wake of Trump's Coronavirus press briefing on April 23, 2020—#dontdrinkbleach (2.4 million views) and #injectdisinfectant (1.9 million views). Assuming that related co-tagging practices would be more likely to intermesh than to polarize, I built a co-occurrence network that elevates divergences and alignments between #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant in three temporally bound zones. To explore the drifts of content circulating within these zones and to work around the problem of moderation, TikToks published with the main co-occurring hashtag #disinfectant in April and May 2020 were also included in the dataset. Deriving from a total of 1,078 curated posts, larger nodes of the network fragment in figure 1 represent the main shared co-hashtags. Smaller nodes represent contextual variations of more specific word collocations embedded in post captions. Edges represent the intensity of bonds along with the shifts in relations of association between different

memetic communities. The network they span highlights variability and fuzziness in users'

repeated attempts to attune novel content to the short-lived virality of Trump's COVID-19

treatment speech, emphasizing the ephemeral concentration of attention around the event through
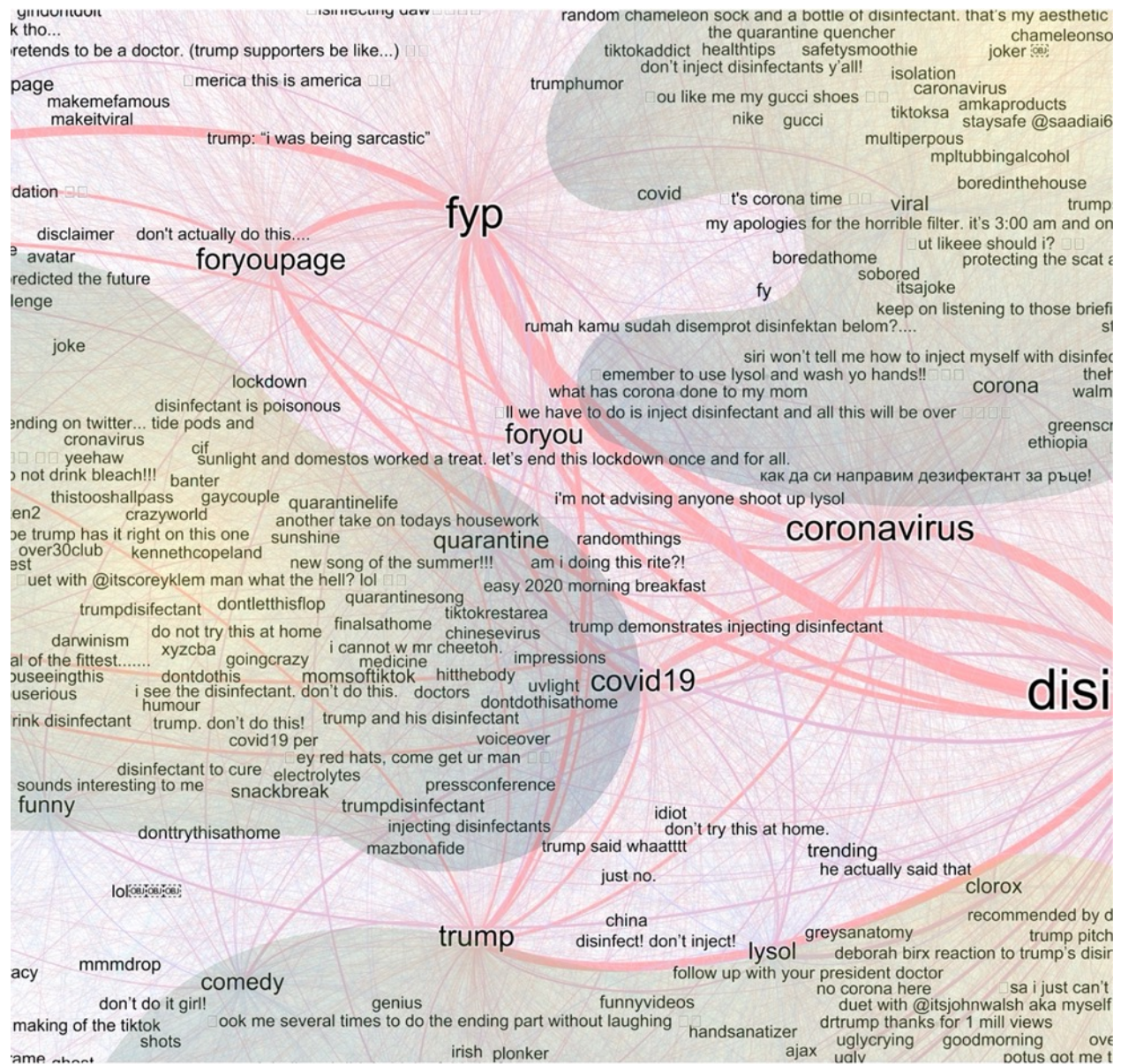
its TikTok-specific reverberations.

Fig 1. A fragment of TikTok co-occurrence network connecting #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant with their main shared co-hashtags and specific post captions: smaller nodes represent situated associations deriving from post captions; bigger nodes with strong connections represent resonant co-hashtags such as #foryoupage, #trump, and #covid19. Extracted in May 2020 with TikTok scraper, visualized with Gephi.

As a relational approach interested in the memetic workings of TikTok sharing, a co-occurrence analysis of hashtags and post captions helps in understanding both user- and platform-driven dynamics of content circulation. By highlighting proximities and distances between the network elements, it elevates the contingency of viral events upon the logic of imitation and contextual play. Following Zizi Papacharissi, affective attunement through hashtags invites imitation without necessarily producing a sense of collectivity. Hashtag-distributed interactions organize individual posts into searchable units of platform experience, comprising "an organically developed pattern of impulses, restraints, and tonality" (321). The analysis of co-hashtag relations contextualized through more specific post captions, therefore, depends as much on their emergent temporality as on the platform used to access the issue. While common co-hashtags amplify the characteristic sense of overabundance and blurriness, post captions tend to be singular in their stance, facilitating affective alignments between personal experience and collective expression.

What is it then that connects #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant in the first place? On TikTok, every gesture involved in the process of memeification is attached to the mechanisms of visibility labor with the aid of TikTok's algorithmic content feed also known as FYP or "For You Page" (Kaye et al.). Platform-native strategies of attention harvesting associated with the habit of tagging new contributions with #foryoupage, #foryou, and #fyp are closely interwoven with this page as a source of affective amplification (Schellewald). The act of posting #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant with #fyp hashtags, therefore, partially derives from a communally informed belief in the miraculous performance of TikTok's attentional infrastructures. A gesture that is more about "the showing of sharedness" (Frosh 123) rather than the actual promise of visibility, it explicates the dynamics through which hashtag publics gain

traction as they fight for space and intermesh. The resulting network, while operating through

creative anticipations of viral success, may thus well inspire modes of engagement that go

beyond vanity metrics (Rogers). Instead of providing a homogeneous view of imitation-driven

virality, it allows for the articulation of competing sentiments that emerge as users share novel

contributions and content formations develop density and texture.

Proportional to the number of posts in which #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant

were used together with other hashtags, the central fragment of the network in figure 1 represents

the range and impact of users' temporally bound engagement. Node size and the density of edges

correspond with the varying degree of connection between three main co-hashtag formations

revolving around #trump, #quarantine, and #coronavirus in April and May 2020 (for a detailed

overview of each co-hashtag formation, see also fig. 2). The first cluster of associations with

#trump, #comedy, and #disinfectant connects to how the trend of Trump impersonator videos,

initially circulating within comedy related TikTok communities, has become identified as a

source of value generation in the wake of the White House Coronavirus press briefing.

Accompanied by the creation of gestural video memes reacting to Trump's comments, #lysol and

#clorox inspired TikTokers to riff on the original speech, positioning disinfectants in absurd, but

strategic and popularity-oriented ways.

The second cluster further explicates the engaging potentials of networked irony (Phillips

and Milner). In the process of memeification, the gesture of mixing disinfectant cocktails has

grown into a continuum of #quarantinelife jokes, suggesting to "follow up with the president

doctor" through co-hashtags #quarantine, #funny, #lockdown, and #momsoftiktok warning
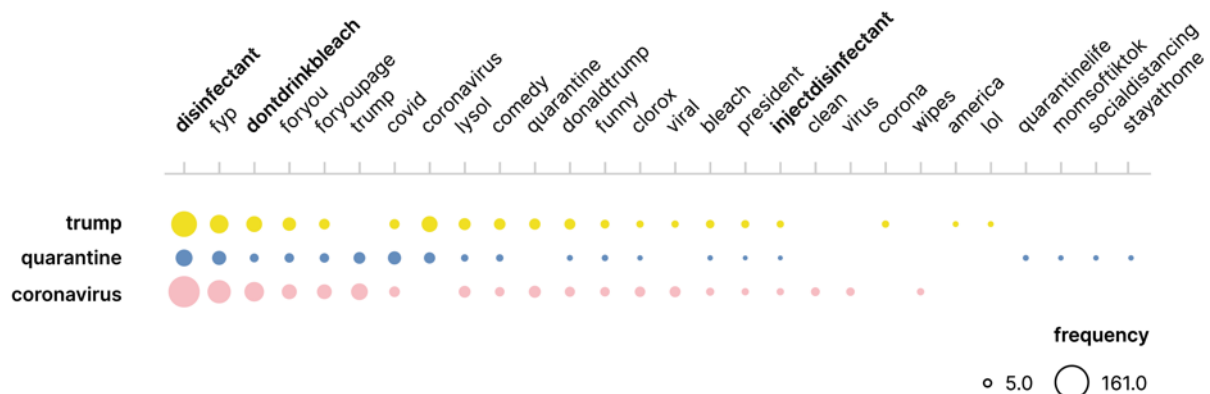
Fig 2. Top 20 co-hashtags used in combination with #trump, #quarantine, and #coronavirus. Size encodes the number of cooccurrences per co-hashtag (5<340). Made with RawGraphs.

#dontdrinkbleachkids. Similarly, hashtags used in the third cluster were turned into an additional attractor for tongue-in-cheek #coronavirus videos relating #dontdrinkbleach to #boredinthehouse—a viral TikTok song published by Detroit-based rapper Curtis Roach in March 2020 and connected to the broader network of concerns and interests emerging in the context of the pandemic (Kendall, "From Binge-Watching to Binge-Scrolling"). Revolving around playful post captions such as "siri won't tell me how to inject myself with disinfectant" or "random chameleon sock and a bottle of disinfectant. That's my aesthetic," this last memetic scenario positions #disinfectant within the ambiguous realm of platform-facilitated boredom and distraction (Paasonen, *Dependent*).

The shifting affective registers, both restraining and intensifying, that such interactions emerge from encourage us to look at networks not as a method of trend detection but for the analysis of "happening content" (Marres and Gerlitz 40). TikTok hashtags, like other digital objects, do not work in isolation but as part of an increasingly blended system (Dean 2-4) of embodied engagement in league with moving images, stickers, effects, and sounds. Affect is a

key driver of social media circulation, and the formation of viral body image events on TikTok builds upon the recurrent moments of experiential intensification that indicate memetic power (Tanni). Exploring which memetic scenarios emerged in relation to #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant, the next sections focus on the confluences of gestures and movements that TikTok facilitates through its dynamic short-video format.

Networked Templatability: What Happens at the Edges?

If TikTok sharing is a multimodal act that heavily relies on embodied performance, then which methods does it take to understand its main memetic currency—videos—as networked objects encouraging imitation? The extent to which hashtag co-occurrences can be repurposed for studying the affective appeal of memes or any other type of spreadable content depends on the willingness to acknowledge the dynamism of networked exchanges that are determined not by the main visible nodes but by what happens at the edges (Chun). As suggested above, such exchanges frustrate neat separations between bodies and social media environments, creating "porous self-other relations" and "zones of indistinction" (Sampson) in the referential dynamics of memetic events. Instead of demarcating which elements of the network were active in terms of their visibility, co-hashtag co-occurrences of #trump, #quarantine, and #coronavirus draw attention to these zones, highlighting networked templatability of the body as the main driving force of TikTok disinfectant memes.

In continuation of considerations suggesting that templatability on social media platforms "leads to specific aesthetic choices, ways of crafting content, and strategies of attention grabbing" (Abidin and Kaye 60; Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin), I explore the capacity of TikTok video sharing to steer itself toward networked imitation. To account for the dynamism of body movements and gestures repeating across a variety of #dontdrinkbleach and

#injectdisinfectant videos, I adapt a visualization technique known as "image stack" (Colombo; Bogers et al.).

In figure 3, cross-hashtagged video memes that were first deconstructed into a series of static frames and then stacked back together into composite visual artifacts guide the process of interpretation. The images are blurred, and the settings show little detail. However, by prioritizing movement over singular deidentified images, the method allows researchers to explore the embodied component of TikTok sharing. Focusing on the templatability of gestures through combinations of #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant co-hashtags, one can explore inter-liked and cross-hashtagged choreographies of imitation. A stack, here, is first "a sort of computationally generated moodboard that can be used to synthesize textures, colors, and objects contained in a set of images" (Colombo 56). Second, it is a method of indistinction and "ethical fabrication" (Markham) that allows bricolage-style transfiguration of the original images. Third, it presents an opportunity to study embodiment as part of a multisensory universe of "collective mimicry" (Sampson 7; see also Goriunova), where each contribution is rendered into a social template to be copied and passed on. With each stacked image exposing a slightly different perspective on the same event through multimodal combinations of co-hashtags and stickers, the method offers a visual summary of contextually embedded and variously embodied meme action.

Fifteen video stacks arranged in the figure by their association with a selection of relevant co-hashtags reveal the dynamics of mutual adaptation in users' #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant performances. In all three scenarios revolving around #trump #comedy, #quarantine #funny, and #coronavirus #viral, the centrality of the body is immediately evident. Almost every performance pretends to follow Trump's absurd COVID-19 treatment instructions,
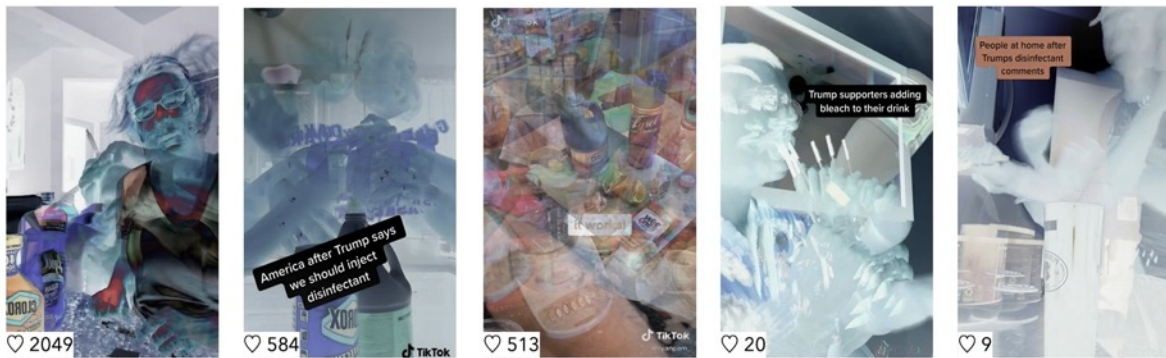
Fig 3. Fifteen video stacks for three co-hashtag pairs connecting #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant presented in a grid and sorted according to like count. Visualized with ImageJ.

showing bodies engaged in receiving fake disinfectant injections, mixing Lysol cocktails, and mimicking drinking bleach. What these human-nonhuman relations capture are staged body image events that feed into a (counter)imitative formation of content connecting #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant. The gestures and movements of the bodies (human and nonhuman) that these composite images have in common raise questions concerning the increasing disintegration of the TikTok-mediated self. Prompted into action through imitation and visualized in a grid to enable a comparative reading, the resultant gestural juxtaposition elevates the memetic nature of the videos as well as their hashtag-driven associations that connect performing bodies into one networked expressive formation.

A feeling of shared nonsense these videos generate becomes intensified not only through video stickers mocking Trump supporters but also through the feature of duet. Duetting on TikTok affords the capacity to activate templatable forms of embodiment and video storytelling. Unlike the stitch, which can incorporate up to five seconds of someone else's content in a new video sequence, duets allow for a juxtaposition of two videos playing next to one another at the same time, often for purposes of attention hijacking. As a platform-embedded means of "memetic association" (Treem and Leonardi; Hautea et al.), the feature of duet helps to conceptualize networked templatability in terms of relational play. While thriving on repeatable gestures—as indicated by two examples featuring most liked #trump and #comedy videos in figure 4—it simultaneously remains open to counterimitation. Here, indeed, "the sense of self comes into contagious relation with others to such a degree of intensity that [it] potentially collapses" (Sampson 71), disturbing the separation of mutually reinforcing memetic scenarios.

Fig 4. Duets with two most liked #trump and #comedy videos, visualized as stacks or layers of static video frames superimposed one upon another. Visualized with ImageJ.

For some, the self-recorded act of mixing disinfectant cocktails or impersonating Trump might have been a strategic investment into TikTok's attention economy, while for others it might be just fun. Some would mime the most ridiculous scenarios of disinfection or ironize about the best cleaning spray flavors out of boredom; others might remember the dangerous Tide Pod challenge that went viral in 2018 encouraging teenagers to film themselves while they attempt to eat detergent (Ritschel). Some would add text stickers to their videos to specify that "adding bleach to their drinks" is precisely "what Trump supporters be like." Others would indicate irony by duetting famous female comedian and Trump impersonator Sarah Cooper or simply use the Oval Office background effect to give a more elaborate acting performance. Regardless of motivations, however, drastic fluctuations in video metrics represented through the number of likes suggest that the initial visibility of disinfectant memes was rather of a momentary kind. While strategically cross-hashtagged TikToks full of disinfectant bottles, performing bodies, and flashy effects were indeed intended for viral circulation, only several performances managed to gain traction.

What Resonates? From Hashtags to Sounds

Along with questions of interpretability it gives rise to, TikTok video-sharing comes with a range of possibilities for navigation. Because of the "multifarious character" (Marres and Gerlitz 23) of platform artifacts, different modalities of sharing may serve to provide different perspectives on the same online event in different platform settings. Different settings also have different logics of alignment: hashtag combinations, for example, activate a variety of associations, the purposes of which may not always be clearly distinguished as they transform from one context of appropriation to another. On TikTok, what hashtags make visible, at the same time, might be less prominent when accessed through sounds and vice versa. In their role as mediators of affect, hashtags and sounds can turn into a source of mutual amplification or may remain disengaged even when united through technical means. The resultant experiential formations can, following Susanna Paasonen, be conceptualized as instances of networked resonance, "the intensities of which grow, linger, and fade away at varying speeds as user attention and interest perpetually circulates, moves, shifts, and relocates" ("Resonant Networks" 60).

Exploring these associations, as in figure 5, opens a relational perspective on such intensities. The thickness of edges and the size of nodes in the diagram represent the extent to which hashtags and sounds are attuned to one another.

The polyvocal "original sound" used in 605 out of 1,078 posts comprises the main scene of contestation through users' performances both mimicking Trump's voice and randomly commenting on the event. Event-specific listed sounds such as "Bleach boys," "Inject the disinfectant," or "Trump disinfectant" allow researchers to locate competing sentiments that emerged in response to Trump's speech through practices of vernacular aural parody (Matamoros-Fernández et al.). Titles also related to other contexts like "Monkeys Spinning
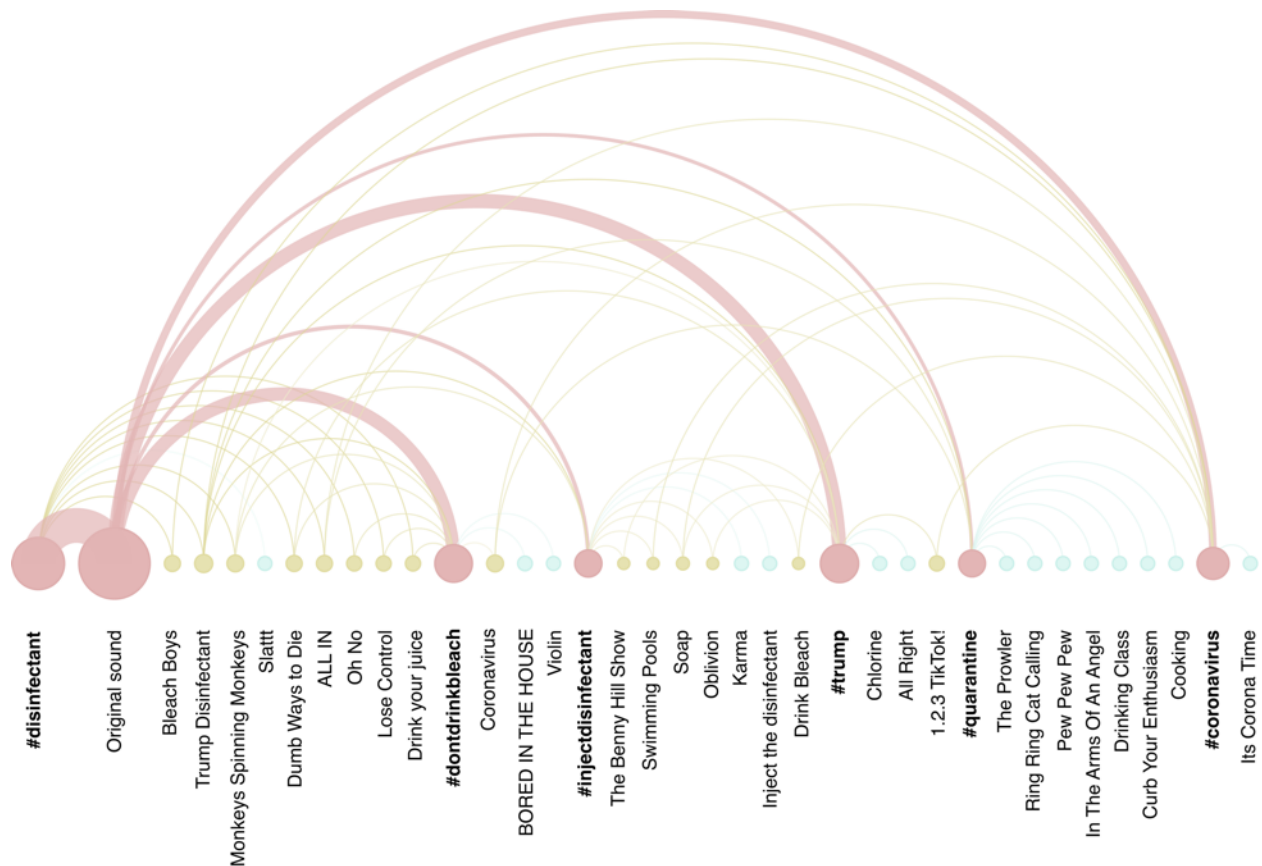
Fig 5. A network of unique and shared sounds attuned to five selected hashtags. Flow size represents the number of times a hashtag appears together with a given sound (2<406). Made with RawGraphs.

Monkeys" and popular pandemic tunes such as "Bored in the house" or "Corona virus" point to an expanded environment of memeification with some sounds being shared and some being unique to specific co-hashtags. By relying on the networkedness (Niederer) of hashtags and sounds, the clustering technique encourages a multilayered interpretation of TikTok engagement that permits affective attunement through various forms of expression.

A sound attuned to a specific TikTok trend may therefore add a new trajectory to a formation of content that was previously shaped by other means, creating a shift in relations of relevance and association. With everyday practices of audio-remix available in the "use this sound" feature, the "aural turn" (Abidin and Kaye) of TikTok plays out both on the

infrastructural level that encourages scale and on the basis of social micro-events that involve

drift and displacement. Even though less visible in terms of metrics, the latter, more flexible

foundation is central in terms of understanding mundane memetic exchanges resembling the

vernacular languages of oral cultures (Phillips and Milner; Tuters). Premised on repetition and

contextual variation, TikTok-mediated affect is contained in neither of these dimensions but

aggregates into blended and partially contested amalgamations thereof. Multimodal in that it

augments dynamic textual, visual, embodied, and aural characteristics, it activates ambiguous

forms of alignment driven by simultaneous acts of networked sharing.

A focused exploration of TikTok-native expressive micro-formations can thus be

performed by grouping sounds in relation to associated co-hashtags and video content. Such an

approach focuses on the engaging logic according to which practices of video-sharing operate as

part of platform infrastructures and in turn creatively repurpose these infrastructures for various

affective ends. Figure 6 draws attention to the centrality of music in users' video creation and

sharing practices. The method of montage—originally developed by Lev Manovich—draws

together the sequential narrative of cross-hashtagged video performances and the spatial

narrative of assembling these performances through sound.

The sequential narrative translates into a series of movements, facial expressions, and

gestures displayed side by side in a montage of video frames. The spatial narrative revealing

these movements comes to the fore in the juxtaposition of "Bored in the house" sound and its

semantic neighborhoods demarcated through #dontdrinkbleach co-hashtags. Here, the gesture of

sharing is rendered analyzable as a passage between the affective space of Curtis Roach's viral

tune and the temporally bound formation of #dontdrinkbleach humor, tapping into the ordinary

♫ *BORED IN THE HOUSE by Curtis Roach*

#boredindahouse #quarantinelife #challenge #dontdrinkbleach

#boredinthehouse #dontdrinkbleach #itsfake #fyp

Fig 6. A montage of video frames extracted from two TikTok videos connected through #dontdrinkbleach and "Bored in the house," visualized with ImageJ. The figure displays de-identified sequences of shots side by side. Play count ranges between 169 and 359, and like count ranges between 10 and 16.

aesthetic of home video footage. "Bored in the House" was selected based on its high popularity within the soundscape of pandemic memes, generating hundreds of thousands of posts as a sound and later also as a hashtag. In a content formation assembled through #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant, however, its fleeting appearance highlights users' vernacular attempts to re-attune a trend to new engagement venues—a practice that might amplify one memetic movement and dilute another (Bainotti et al.).

As a form of reciprocal trend attunement, #dontdrinkbleach and "Bored in the House" involve imitative practices linking the storyboards of the videos to popular TikTok challenges. Connected via popular co-hashtags, the videos draw together engaging dynamics which, while aiming at further amplification through #fyp, shift our attention toward minor resonances of quarantine-related boredom and (non)sense-making. Reminiscent of Vine clips depicting users in domestic settings, the sequences of shots that show bodies engaged in internet browsing, balancing objects, and cutting hair highlight gestures as key sites of affective modulation fostered by participatory networks of social media (Kendall, "(Not) Doing It"). The shots

depicting the same bodies mimicking drinking bleach attach "Bored in the House" to the viral

formation of Trump disinfectant jokes, feeding the mundane experience of boredom into a larger

stream of content competing for likes, views, and comments. Indicative of a long tail of posts

attuned to the viral song, the gesture of sharing employed in this affective formation is volatile in

its impact with some content that gets picked up by many in one affective constellation—

quarantine boredom—and yet remains relatively unnoticed when entering concurrent venues of

unfolding events—#dontdrinkbleach.

What Else Can We Do to Study Gestures?

The ambiguous role of hashtagging, duetting, and sound-linking in this gestural assemblage can

be understood in terms of non-linear passages or feedback loops (Flusser, *Into the Universe*) that

may both intensify and diminish the engaging potential of an event in question. As platform-

mediated networks of capture and user practices become increasingly integrated, the gesture of

sharing, according to Flusser, leads us to "a set of variations of chance events, namely, accidents,

coincidences, mishaps, and occurrences" (*Gestures* 116). Oscillating between moments of peak

intensity and habitual encounters, such passages produce blurred articulations of shared

experience by moving from one state of mediation to another. Considered in this vein, TikTok

gestures need to be further explored in their capacity to activate mutable relations of momentary

impact and contagious intensity that resist being separated into distinct categories.

What these relations may allow us to study is the extent to which memetic formations

connected through TikTok's various features—hashtags, captions, sounds, effects, stickers, and

duets—activate imitation as a force that attempts to "raise memes to the level of platform

infrastructure" (Zulli and Zulli 5). The workings of (in)distinction here address the ways in

which memes reverberate, resonate, and intermingle, competing for views and likes in constant

anticipation of novel adaptations. As objects of circulation that become active through repeated

acts of sharing, memes generate value in response to events of peak intensity. By stimulating

engagement in real-time, such events enable dynamic networks of content where, as Wendy

Chun puts it, each variation "implies a potential interaction based on repeated past interactions"

(52). On the one hand, this engaging temporality highlights the immediacy at which user

interactions are organized in relation to unfolding events. On the other hand, spreadable

formations of memetic content necessarily merge instances of heightened impact with more

banal encounters where multilayered, affect-laden messages become captured as vernacular

gestures and data-intensive practices.[1]

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