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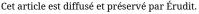
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Résumé de l'article

En période de bouleversements sociaux, les gens créent ou consomment de l'art verbal pour se divertir et se sentir connectés. Alors que des millions de personnes étaient contraintes de rester chez elles pour réduire la propagation de la COVID-19 entre mars et juillet 2020, des praticiens de l'art verbal ont mis en ligne des performances enregistrées, et les spectateurs ont eu plus de temps pour les regarder et les partager. L'art verbal COVID, ce sont des chansons, des poèmes et des sketches comiques qui évoquent la distanciation sociale et physique, la quarantaine et l'isolement, les pratiques d'hygiène et de nettoyage, les expériences quotidiennes pendant la pandémie, ou encore des critiques sociales et politiques de mesures et pratiques faisant explicitement référence à la COVID-19 ou au coronavirus. L'étude de 227 performances artistiques verbales publiées sur YouTube et TikTok dresse un portrait ethnographique de l'évolution de la vie quotidienne au cours de la pandémie de COVID-19 ainsi que du passage d'un état de confusion initiale à la critique politique.

What Does a Pandemic Sound Like?

The Emergence of COVID Verbal Art

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Abstract: In times of social upheaval, people create and engage with verbal art for entertainment and a feeling of connection. While millions of people were forced to stay home to reduce the spread of COVID-19 from March to July 2020, verbal artists posted recorded performances online and viewers had more time than usual to watch and share them. COVID verbal art refers to songs, poems, and comedy skits that mention social and physical distancing, quarantine and isolation, hygiene and cleaning practices, everyday experiences during the pandemic, as well as social and political critiques of policies and practices that explicitly mention COVID-19 or coronavirus. An examination of 227 verbal art performances posted on YouTube and TikTok provides an ethnographic record of how everyday life has changed over time during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the focus shifted from initial confusion to political critique.

Keywords: verbal art; performance; parody; COVID-19; coronavirus; pandemic; YouTube

Résumé: En période de bouleversements sociaux, les gens créent ou consomment de l'art verbal pour se divertir et se sentir connectés. Alors que des millions de personnes étaient contraintes de rester chez elles pour réduire la propagation de la COVID-19 entre mars et juillet 2020, des praticiens de l'art verbal ont mis en ligne des performances enregistrées, et les spectateurs ont eu plus de temps pour les regarder et les partager. L'art verbal COVID, ce sont des chansons, des poèmes et des sketches comiques qui évoquent la distanciation sociale et physique, la quarantaine et l'isolement, les pratiques d'hygiène et de nettoyage, les expériences quotidiennes pendant la pandémie, ou encore des critiques sociales et politiques de mesures et pratiques faisant explicitement référence à la COVID-19 ou au coronavirus. L'étude de 227 performances artistiques verbales publiées sur YouTube et TikTok dresse un portrait ethnographique de l'évolution de la vie quotidienne au cours de la pandémie de COVID-19 ainsi que du passage d'un état de confusion initiale à la critique politique.

Discovering COVID Verbal Art

Do you have a COVID-19 playlist? I started mine one night back in March when everything was shutting down and my husband and I were trying to organize working from home around keeping our two children occupied. I needed some mental relief after a long day, so I clicked on a video someone had posted on Facebook. It was Chris Mann's parody of an Adele song "*Hello (from the inside)*" (Mann 2020a). His face was pressed up against the window as he sang:

> Hello from the inside
> It's just me and myself and I

It made me and my son both laugh so I clicked on the next related video YouTube recommended: another Chris Mann parody of "MySharona" called, naturally, "*My Corona*" (Mann 2020b).

> I need toilet paper, toilet paper, toilet paper
> I'm out of toilet paper, it's my Corona

It was silly and we both laughed again as I found myself singing along with the captioned lyrics. I used to love the Knack's "My Sharona" when I was a kid and I already knew the tune. I started looking for more COVID parodies and my son would ask me each day if there were any new ones to watch. As it turns out, millions of people around the world were doing the same thing, at the same time. People were posting, watching and sharing not just songs, but other kinds of verbal art like spoken word poetry and comedy skits. Talented people were putting out high-quality productions with professional equipment and technical skills, along with others just playing around with an idea in their bedroom, using their phone to record themselves talking or singing over simple chord progressions on a guitar or an electric keyboard. In response to the isolation, boredom, fear, uncertainty and upheaval brought on by the pandemic, people were turning to art to help make sense of the changing world around them, and to release some of their anxiety. As a linguistic anthropologist whose summer field work in Brazil had just been cancelled, I knew I had found my next project.

Taking a Closer Look at Verbal Art Online

According to Sherzer and Webster (2015), "playfully imaginative and artistically creative language constitute the richest point of intersection of the relationship among language, culture, society, and individual expression." Examining verbal art can provide an insightful look at cultural, social and individual interpretations and expressions of human life during a pandemic. A verbal artist manipulates linguistic forms and structures to create something new and aesthetically pleasing, such as a poem, song, or comedic monologue (Sherzer 2002). A verbal art performance puts those linguistic skills on display, with the intent of provoking in the audience more intense feelings or new perspectives to consider than plain language would do (Bauman 2011). Posting videos online is part of the "metapragmatic orienting framework" that signals to the audience that they are invited to watch a performance and to evaluate the performer's skill and effectiveness in entertaining or impressing them (Bauman 2011, 711). Audience participation is a key aspect in the performance of verbal art, so what happens when the performance is recorded with no audience and any interaction happens asynchronously, mediated by layers of technology? The questions I reflect on here are:

1. Why are people creating verbal art about COVID-19 and what sociocultural purposes does it serve?

2. What does COVID verbal art tell us about living in a pandemic?

3. How do the technological constraints and affordances of the online environment affect the interaction between verbal art performers and their audiences?

Collecting COVID Verbal Art

With the help of an undergraduate research assistant, Sydney Dawson, I collected pieces of verbal art related to COVID-19 that were posted online between March and July 2020. To count as verbal art, we looked for evidence of skillful linguistic manipulation as found in recognizable genres of song, poetry and comedy (that is, not conversation or expository monologue). We chose only works that had original contributions to the words or lyrics (that is, not covers of an existing song). I define "COVID verbal art" as those pieces referring to social and physical distancing, quarantine and isolation, hygiene and cleaning practices, everyday experiences during the pandemic, as well as social and political critiques of policies and practices that explicitly mention COVID-19.

There are thousands of songs, poems and comedy skits about pandemic life, created by both professional artists and amateurs, who record and post their videos to a social media or video-sharing account. Our collection consists of publicly accessible videos we found on YouTube and TikTok, using relevant keywords like "COVID song," "COVID poem," "coronavirus parody," and by following related videos suggested by the algorithms of each platform. Of the 227 items, 189 are songs (91 original songs and 98 parodies), while 20 are poems and 18 are comedy (skits and monologues). We deliberately sought out under-represented voices to counterbalance the popular or trending videos suggested by YouTube or TikTok. We chose YouTube as a platform because it is widely used by both creators and viewers. TikTok tends to be used by more amateur artists, providing us with a more diverse set of creators. To gain insight into the creative process and the influence of technology on the ways artists interacted with collaborators and audiences, we also interviewed five professional songwriters who performed and posted at least one COVID song in our collection: Lester McLean, Barbra Lica, Deryck Roche, Chris Mann, and Parmida Kakavand.[1] Given the limits of my linguistic capacities in conducting the analysis, our data set is limited to works in English or with English subtitles, and the few in Spanish or French that came up in the searches we did on YouTube and TikTok.

Verbal Art in Hard Times: What's Different Now?

In the interviews and in the descriptions posted to introduce individual videos, creators state that their intent is to help people feel better during these difficult times. Many of the comments left below videos express gratitude for providing entertainment, laughs, a brighter outlook, a lighter mood, some emotional relief or validation for their thoughts and feelings.

> It puts us in such a better mood! Thank you for the lovely music and positive vibes.

> It pulled me out of such a funk that I kept watching it over and over since it was the only thing that would make me laugh.

> This is so true! This is my life now!

The prevailing feeling of positivity toward this verbal art is especially noticeable in an online environment like the YouTube comments section, which so often deteriorates into negative, ignorant, petty criticisms and personal attacks. Chris Mann, who wrote some of the most popular parody songs, noted in his

interview how remarkable it was that virtually all of the comments directed both to him and to other commenters were positive and supportive. As a participant observer, I sought out COVID videos because they were enjoyable to watch and listen to. It offered a break in my otherwise stressful day of working in my windowless basement and taking care of the house and kids. They reminded me of the absurdities of the current pandemic situation even as we are trying our best to make things seem normal. Collecting the data for this research and talking to people about it motivated me to work during times when I could not face another set of "How To" instructions for teaching online. I needed something positive to make me feel better about spending the warm, summer days staring at a screen.

Creating and listening to songs, poetry and comedy during times of social upheaval and personal crisis is not new. We are comforted by familiar music in the midst of anxious uncertainty (Ansari 2020). The soundtrack for the Great Depression included many upbeat songs like "Happy Days Are Here Again." Black comedians like Adele Givens, Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle make people laugh about racism and poverty. Spoken word poets articulate feelings of anxiety, exclusion, anger, hope and inner strength that help people make it through each day. One thing that is different with COVID verbal art is the number of works being created and distributed so quickly, and the reach that any one song or poem can have through social media and online news sources. An important driver of the surge of online COVID videos was that so many people were at home when schools and workplaces shut down. The professional songwriters, poets and comedians suddenly found themselves with no live shows and time to fill. All the interviewees said they took this opportunity to learn something new, whether it was developing sound and video editing skills, collaborating remotely with others to produce a song, or exploring a new genre of lyric-writing, like parody. Amateurs also had time to try new creative expressions. Millions of people turned to internet videos and social media for entertainment and for a sense of community to stave off feelings of boredom and isolation. They watched and shared and searched for more. As Chris Mann explains it: "This is also like the perfect storm. The entire world was stopped. And they all were home and they were all on their computers and they were all confused. And my videos came out like right … at the beginning of it." The most popular videos people posted in March, April and May got over a million views, some as high as twenty million, and several of these are by amateurs or creators who previously did not have large number of followers or subscribers.

Todrick Hall's song _TikTok_² (Hall 2020) pokes fun at how everybody and their mom was suddenly making and posting videos and some were becoming Internet famous overnight.

> COVID-19 just slapped me and my plans were all ruined
> I got this app just to see what everybody was doing...
> Posted a vid online, now I'm internet famous
> Look, I'm on TikTok
> Check out my TikTok...
> I got famous on a Wednesday
> Showed my mom on Thursday
> She was posting vids by Friday...
> Now she's on TikTok
> My mom's on TikTok

The story of the STAY HOMAS trio illustrates how the conditions were favourable for some verbal artists to thrive. Klaus Stroink, Guillem Bolltó and Rai Benet are professional musicians and roommates living in Barcelona, Spain. They began writing songs together and recording them with a phone on their terrace during the lockdown, sometimes inviting other singers to join them by video. They called themselves STAY HOMAS and invented the term "confination songs" (_confinamiento_ in Spanish means "lockdown" or "confinement"). The YouTube videos of their original songs, which mix English, Spanish, Catalan and Portuguese in their playful lyrics, were appreciated by people around the world and they quickly had over 100,000 subscribers. By July, they had a recording contract (Cantor-Navas 2020) and several covers of their songs were already circulating, including one by _Michael Bublé, the Barenaked Ladies and Sofia Reyes_. The appeal of STAY HOMAS is their happy, relaxed sound—often in a reggae or bossa nova style—and that they are obviously having fun as they sing and play. As I watch them and move with the beat, I feel like I'm hanging out on the terrace with them.

> "_Stay Homa_"
> (STAY HOMAS and Sr. Wilson 2020)
> Please stay home-a...
> Don't want the corona...
> Oh, God, please stay home-a...
> It's okay to be alone-a

<p style="text-align:center">"<u>Gotta Be Patient</u>"</p>
<p style="text-align:center">(STAY HOMAS and Judit Neddermann 2020)</p>
<p style="text-align:center">I just wanna see my friends</p>
<p style="text-align:center">I wanna walk the streets again</p>
<p style="text-align:center">But I gotta be patient</p>
<p style="text-align:center">Let's enjoy this confination...</p>
<p style="text-align:center">Everyday we'll sing a song</p>
<p style="text-align:center">To make you dance</p>
<p style="text-align:center">Until this ends</p>

COVID Verbal Art as a Reflection of Life in a Pandemic

Aside from addressing the emotional impact of living in fear and isolation during a pandemic, verbal artists are helping people make sense of what is going on around them. They are able to put into words what people are thinking, seeing and doing in ways that people recognize and relate to. This specificity is another thing that distinguishes COVID verbal art from that which emerged during past socioeconomic crises. Protest songs, love songs and "hope for better days" songs tend to have timeless elements that allow them to fit into various contexts, which is what keeps them relevant across generations. COVID verbal art tends to make specific references to experiences that are common to many people at the moment the piece is written, but those experiences are unique to a particular situation, and the current situation changes rapidly. Examining the content of our pieces of COVID verbal art in relation to what was happening in terms of public health announcements, laws, guidelines and economic circumstances provides an ethnographic record of how everyday life has changed over time during the pandemic, and how people's focus has shifted throughout. What follows is a sketch of the relationship between the context and content of COVID verbal art. I describe the context from my perspective as a participant observer in Canada. Click on the links to hear the examples, which were selected to illustrate different genres and voices.

March

Context

The health care systems in European countries like Italy were overwhelmed and the number of COVID-19 cases was on the rise in North America. Borders were closed for non-residents. Schools, childcare centres, and workplaces were suddenly closed for what was expected to be a few weeks. Governments and

public health officials told people to stay home, use more stringent and regular cleaning practices, and maintain social or physical distancing from others. This was commonly described as the "shutdown," "lockdown," "isolation" or "quarantine".

Verbal Art Content

Many parody songs were quickly posted, followed by some original songs and poems, that conveyed the essential messages from public health sources and governments: stay home, wash your hands, don't touch your face, keep your distance. Often amusing, these pieces helped normalize the idea that such actions were necessary and beneficial to everyone, while also acknowledging the inconvenience and negative feelings around the requirements and prohibitions. Typically, these pieces described feelings of loneliness and boredom, watching too much "bad" TV or Netflix (for example, Tiger King), extra house cleaning, excessive sleeping, drinking and overeating. There were references to not bothering to get dressed (for example, not wearing pants or a bra, wearing pyjamas all day). They expressed fear about catching the coronavirus. There were points of confusion and frustration (for example, stockpiling toilet paper; grocery stores lacking essential items). There were some messages of hope telling us that "we will get through this together" and that we should be patient.

Examples

- "*Stay Home Vogue*" (Chris Mann)
- "*Corona Clap*" (Dee-1)
- "*Torn Parody*" (Kathy Makattack)
- "*The Coronavirus Rap*" (Tom Stockdale)
- "*Corona: a poem by me*" (Lettucecore)
- "*Gotta Be Patient*" (STAY HOMAS and Judit Nedderman)

April

Context

The number of COVID cases was spreading geographically and the number of deaths was rising. Schools remained closed indefinitely and people began to realize that the "stay home" orders were going to be in effect for several months. Streets and other public places were empty. Large numbers of people were either unemployed or struggling to work at home with distractions and inadequate resources. "Essential workers" in health care, grocery stores, sanitation and delivery continued to work, at high risk for contracting the virus. People showed support by putting out signs saying, "Thank you essential workers." Wearing masks was becoming more common in public spaces.

Verbal Art Content

There were more serious pieces, such as tributes to "essential" or "frontline" workers and calls for unity in crisis. References to boredom, loneliness and mental strain from being stuck at home continued, but some artists also talked about having time to think and take stock of life. A common theme was finding ways to stay connected to friends and family, offering support through video calls and making music together. There were complaints about being confined with annoying others. Many focused on the difficulties of keeping children occupied. Students described their dissatisfaction with online classes and how they missed their friends. References to personal care shifted to needing a haircut and gaining weight due to lack of exercise and overeating.

Examples

- "*Quarantine Confessions*" (Rodia Comedy)
- "*Every mom in America right now*" (Trey Kennedy)
- "*Daycare Closed*" (Chris Mann)
- "*Coronatime School Vibes*" (Chakira Clark)
- "*Let it Play Out*" (Lester McLean)
- "*The Sound of Sirens*" (The Kiffness)
- "*Day 22*" (Paterverse)
- "*Corona Virus: The Power of Collaboration*" (George the Poet)

May

Context

North Americans had been stuck at home and missing social interactions for three months; for people in Asia and Europe, it had been even longer. The situation was becoming familiar, but stresses were compounding. People were overwhelmed with information and struggling to decide what to believe. There were protests against wearing masks and imposed lockdowns—measures which some interpreted as unwarranted government control. Many were tired of video calls for work, socializing and school. The financial strain of unemployment and lost revenue was felt acutely. Some found creative alternatives for their usual ways of doing things, such as organizing "drive-by" birthday celebrations, while others longed for time when things would be "back to normal." Then George Floyd was murdered by police in the US on 25 May and suddenly there was a new source of social upheaval as millions took to the streets in worldwide protests against anti-Black racism and police brutality.[3]

Verbal Art Content

There were complaints about inconsistency in following the rules for distancing and hygiene, difficulties using Zoom, and having to wait in lines for things. In response, there were reminders about the rules, calls for kindness, and messages of consolation pointing out that "at least" there was a bright side to a particular circumstance. A few videos expressed doubt about the severity of the situation and questioned the truth of information being presented by scientists, government authorities and mainstream news media.[4] Some artists made fun of conspiracy theories that had emerged to explain the "coronavirus hoax," criticizing people who refused to wear masks or maintain distance, and admonishing their foolishness in not taking the threat to public health seriously.

Examples
- "*Day 1 in Quarantine vs Day 50*" (Trey Kennedy)
- "*I Knew Zoom Was Trouble*" (The Holderness Family)
- "*A Cart Apart" – A No Frills Track*" (No Frills)
- "*Real Friends Before COVID*" (Chris Mann)
- "*(I've Had) the Hold of my Life*" (Chris Mann)
- "*The Great Realization*" (Tom Foolery)
- "*Covidiot*" (Goldie Lookin Chain)
- "*COVID-19 Rap Song Truth Bomb*" (Justin Stephens)

June

Context

Anti-racism protests continued to occupy the news and to be a dominant topic on social media. In Canada, the government began to "reopen the economy" as some businesses, services and public spaces started to operate again, with restrictions to comply with public health recommendations, such as wearing masks, maintaining distance and regular cleaning. Online learning ended for students. People began to look ahead to summer plans. Near the end of the month, the public focus on COVID was decreasing somewhat, even as the number of cases of COVID-19 and related deaths rose dramatically in the USA.

Verbal Art Content

American artists were taking increasingly political stances, criticizing COVID-19 policies and practices. The videos included more calls to action, not just expressions of feelings and descriptions of experiences. Some videos were made as fundraisers to benefit healthcare workers or food banks. There were references to cancelled or changed plans for vacations, camps and other summer activities.

Some artists who had been posting COVID videos regularly shifted topics to Black Lives Matter, while others delayed the release of COVID material.

Examples

- "*How bout a Round of Applause*" (Deryck Roche)
- "*Cover Your Freakin' Face*" (Randy Rainbow)
- "*Bummertime – Summertime Parody*" (The Holderness Family)
- "*Hello from my Basement*" (Barbra Lica)
- "*Monday Morning Upbeat but Still Mostly Bad News Song XV*" (Caitlin Cook)
- "*My Kid Won't Sleep at Night*" (Chris Mann)

July

Context

In Canada, restaurants and retail stores reopen, along with public parks and services, such as hair salons. Some people talk about the "new normal" of getting on with life during a pandemic, while others worry about the "second wave" of increased transmission of COVID-19 because people are interacting more. By the end of the month, there is already concern about schools opening in September. The number of COVID-19 cases in the US continues to rise.

Verbal Art Content

There are more references to wearing masks as a normal and expected practice. There continue to be more overt political stances taken in verbal art. Some pieces are reflective, looking back at what has happened since March and putting COVID in a broader context of other problems, such as racism.

Examples

- "*Keep Them Home (Betsy DeVos v. CNN's Dana Bash)*" (Chris Mann)
- "*Gee, Anthony Fauci!*" (Randy Rainbow)
- "*Happy Pride*" (King Ragel)
- "*Keeping You Alive*" (Hussain Manawer) – posted in June in UK
- "*2020 Is A Mess*" (Henry Moodie) – posted in June in UK

Audience Interaction

Working from home blurs the distinction between professional and amateur creators. While professional artists may have better microphones or lighting, the settings are almost always people's homes, yards and balconies. This gives the audience the sense that they are being let into the inner circle, as if they are watching their friends on a video chat or a home movie. It helps create a connection between performer and audience that is missing when they are not co-present as in a live show. The comments indicate that viewers appreciate the personal

experiences and sincere feelings being expressed through these verbal art pieces.[5] Most of them seem to be written quickly, in a matter of hours or a few days (though the editing process may take much longer for some). Barbra Lica wrote "Hello from my Basement" while going on a run around Toronto the day after everything shut down. Caitlin Cook posts videos of her original good news and bad news songs every Friday and Monday, offering her interpretation of current events: "Friday Morning Everything Sucks, But There's Still Some Good News Out There Songs" and "Monday Morning Upbeat But Still Mostly Bad News Songs." The speed of production reflects the intensity of the feelings, the as-it-is-happening descriptions, and the immediacy of the interpretations. The creators are writing about themselves and what they are going through right now. Professionals, who in other circumstances sing lyrics written by others, or write lyrics from the point of view of a certain persona, wrote COVID pieces using first person pronouns and directly describing their own thoughts, feelings and experiences. Rather than deliberating over how to produce something that might prompt a listener to buy a song or tickets to a show, they met their own need for self-expression and the needs of others to feel good in hard times. Chris Mann says he was not thinking about an audience when writing his first few COVID songs. In fact, it was the first time in his career that he was not trying to figure out what his listeners wanted to hear or might respond to.

> When I stopped editing myself, I had this huge resonance [referring to the millions of views on his first six COVID song parodies]… And so now I think that's why I write these songs so fast. (Chris Mann, 11 August 2020)

Similarly, the three musicians of STAY HOMAS wrote 29 original songs over 76 days and recorded them on an iPhone with little editing. Comments on the STAY HOMAS's videos frequently mention the evident spontaneity of the performances, with improvised percussion instruments (for example, a bucket, tapping fingers on a table, rubbing hands, drum sticks on a railing) and the outdoor setting, as what contributes to the charm of the songs. The raw look of the videos lets viewers know that the creators are going through the same things as them.

Posting recordings of verbal art performances online allows a more intimate interaction with the audience. At a live event, people applaud and cheer but then they leave and have little engagement with the performer or each other. Online, viewers leave comments that are read by other viewers as well as the artists, and many artists reply to those messages. Jon Bon Jovi even invited people to send him a verse about their pandemic experiences to add to his song "*Do What You Can*" and then he sang them in a series of videos. Barbra Lica sent

a request on Facebook for people to send recorded "Hello from…" messages, which she included in her song. People share links to videos they like, helping grow and diversify the audience for an artist far beyond what they could achieve with only live shows. For most amateurs, online performances give them an audience which they otherwise would not have at all.

As I continue to explore COVID verbal art, I will look more closely at the relationship between content and genre, as well as whose experiences are being represented and whose are missing. For example, we did not find any verbal art from survivors of COVID-19, though there are plenty of recorded interviews and narratives online. We found only one item from an essential worker ("*Doctor Emeka"*); perhaps they are too busy to make videos. There was one video of an elementary school teacher _screaming in frustration_ while playing a ukulele, but while I could identify with the sentiment, I did not count it as verbal art. So, if any other professors want a break from posting recorded lectures, try writing a song or a poem instead. Then send me the link!

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Notes

[1] This research is ongoing; future interviews will include amateur verbal artists as well those who perform poetry and comedy.

[2] The original video is currently unavailable so I have included the link to the official audio only version of TikTok.

3 At that point I decided to expand the research to include verbal art on Black Lives Matter and anti-racism, so Sydney Dawson and I created another collection to compare with the COVID collection. That comparison will be the focus of a future article.

4 YouTube has been "moving aggressively to clamp down on disinformation about the pandemic and to counteract it" by identifying and removing videos promoting conspiracy theories, and excluding them from its recommendations feature (Thompson 2020). Therefore, it is difficult to find videos featuring verbal art that supports conspiracy theories related to COVID-19. Search terms like "COVID conspiracy" or "coronavirus hoax" bring up many videos that debunk or mock such conspiracy theories and other sources of misinformation. This explains the low number of videos expressing these views in our data set.

5 One exception to this was a video posted by _Gal Godot_ of her and other celebrities each (poorly) singing a line of John Lennon's song, "Imagine." It was widely criticized as self-serving and insincere because it showed rich celebrities isolating in their luxurious homes and there was no original contribution to the song.

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