

Fuzzy, Nonsensical, Mundane: The Gesture of Sharing #dontdrinkbleach and the TikTok Lockdown Aesthetic

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Establishing connection on social media platforms is a matter of infrastructure. It is also a matter of being engaged in this infrastructure repeatedly and intensely. Whether we are dealing with compassion, aggression, automation, shock or boredom, social networking sites rely on recurrent use for maintenance of connection. This connection is fuzzy. It does not facilitate action by default. Instead of transmitting affect from A to B, it performs in a highly mediated, contagious manner.

Tony Sampson wrote in *Virality* that the force of social media contagion is inventive in Tardean sense – it is our desire for shared experience that drives the circulation of content and data through open-ended acts of repetition. Distributed in networks rather than merely unifying, contagion performs through imitative patterns of connection within an endless environment of use situations. It is about how conscious user experience and nonconscious habitual use coincide, finding expression in a series of microrelational gestures and encounters.

This short contribution draws attention to the gesture of sharing on TikTok. By discussing how TikTok's infrastructural and creative affordances affected the spread of #dontdrinkbleach videos in the wake of Donald Trump's now infamous comments on treating Coronavirus, it pursues two main objectives: The first is to address the lockdown aesthetic of TikTok through recent theories about the circulation of natively digital visual material. The second is oriented towards methodological experimentation with the capacity of this material to mediate fuzzy experiences of sharing nonsensical content.

Both objectives invite for a discussion of the conditions under which today's viral phenomena operate, while accounting for their experiential and expressive dynamics.

What is gesture?

The gesture of sharing is the most powerful mediator of affect on social media platforms. On the one hand, its power comes from being universal. On the other hand, the specific actions through which sharing takes place

vary in both quality and intensity. We share when we upload content, click on reaction buttons, use hashtags, post comments and mention other users. In all these situations ranging from machinic capture to creative imitation, platforms feed user affect into infrastructures of data-intensive exchange.

When the gesture of sharing establishes connection through which content circulates, it simultaneously feeds affect back on itself and carries it forward. This double-fold movement is arguably the defining force that shapes the capacity of networked connection to transform as it spreads. An affect mediated through the gesture of sharing on social media is not just accumulated affect. It is an affect characterized by an increase or decrease in power and materialized in multiple overlapping registers of engagement – visual, textual, embodied and algorithmically modulated.

Vilem Flusser proposed in 1985 that in order to get closer to the meaning of mediated affect, we must interpret gestures on which technical images depend. To paraphrase his comments on the photographic apparatus, the circulation of technical images on social media platforms results from a gesture of sharing that is doubly self-involved – the platforms do as users desire, but the users can only desire what platforms do. Any user-generated image uploaded on a platform moves in accordance with the logic of platform distribution. This makes both the gesture of sharing and the intention of use part of the infrastructure.

The role of visual gestures in mobilizing affect is therefore tricky to define. From Giorgio Agamben's notion of cinematic gestures as “pure exhibition of mediality” to Carrie Noland's more recent discussion of digital gestures as “rhythmic inscriptions of kinetic energies”, various theoretical concepts have been appropriated to emphasize both fixity and flexibility in the affective entanglements of born-digital media content.

Our expectations towards such content increasingly involve engaging user-generated contributions. Diverse creative possibilities for sharing and appropriation bridge the circulation of viral trends with emergent issues and subcultural practices.

Fuzzy, nonsensical, mundane: or what do we see when we look at #dontdrinkbleach on TikTok

Chinese entertainment platform TikTok had great success in matching these expectations. Learning from the popularity of Vine clips and Instagram stories, it became known for its flashy lip-syncing video items repeating in loops and circulating from user to user via trending hashtags and internal platform recommendations.

During Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, the specific aesthetic of TikTok micro-entertainment featuring (often simultaneous) acts of singing, dancing, cooking, doing tricks, or miming celebrities and politicians gained traction.

According to headlines promoting the platform as the perfect antidote to social isolation, most TikToks share the same affective qualities: They are addictive. They offer fun. They do not make much sense (see an example below). As the Guardian put it: “TikTok is the medium of global lockdowns. It is perfect for a splintered attention span that is suddenly plunged into a boredom so extreme that nothing in particular will satiate it.”

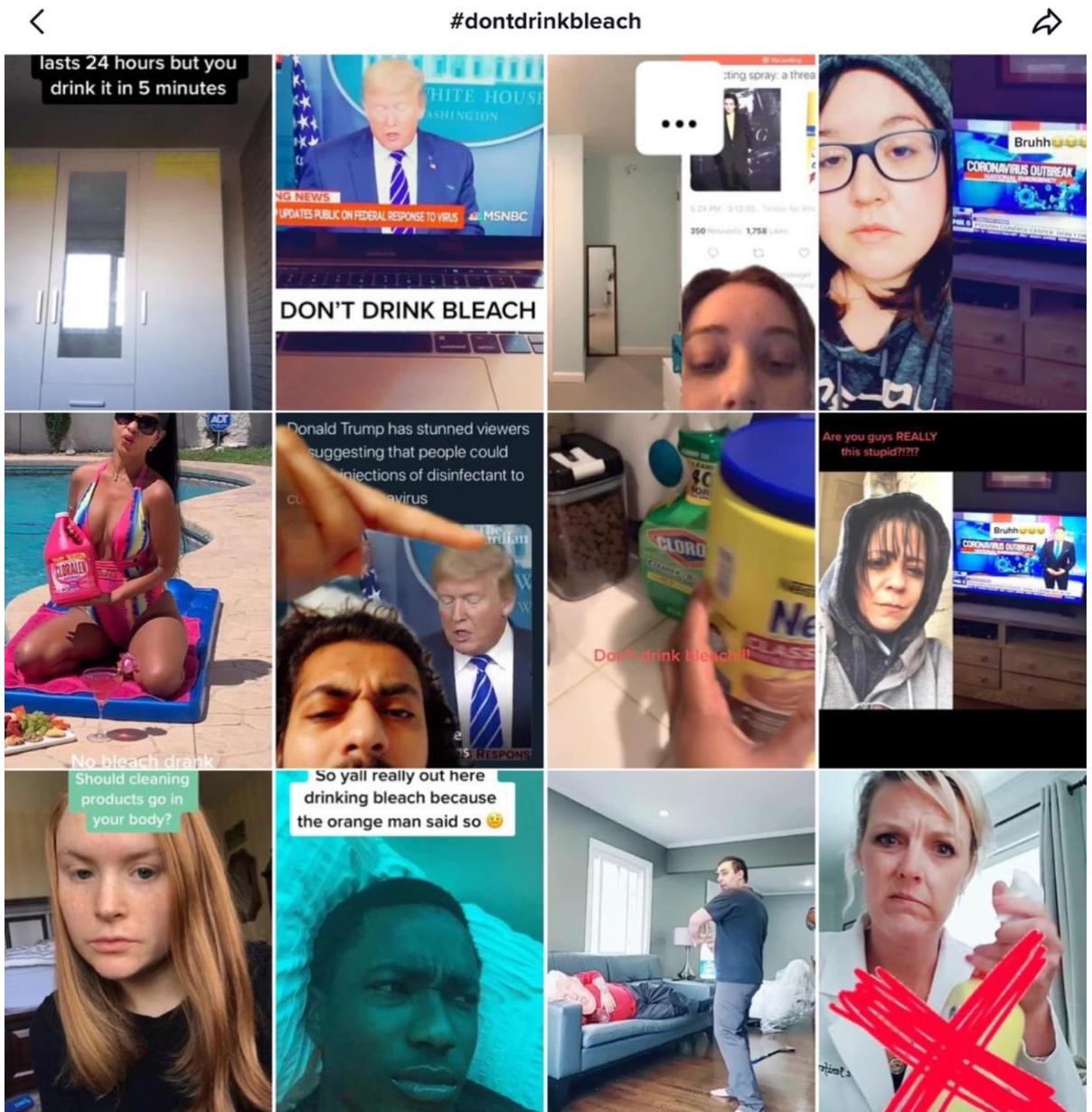
Humour, ridiculousness, nonsense and fun are key to the transactions on which memetic cultures and the internet attention economy in general depend. However, expectations of ongoing entertainment have the potential to create peculiar hybrids of attention and distraction, work and play.

Memes circulating through topical hashtags are caught in this dynamic. Especially in the situations of crisis, the gesture of sharing memes has proven itself as a highly contagious means of spreading provocation, nonsense, misinformation and critique.

Such conflictual affective entanglements are at play in anything related to Donald Trump. A recent example in the context of global coronavirus pandemic were his bizarre speculations about the medical use of light and disinfectants. During a White House press briefing in April 2020, Trump suggested that medical experts should “somehow” try to “inject” disinfectants into the human body to kill the virus.

After this, the internet exploded with memes. While health experts urged people not to follow Trump’s suggestions, Lysol, Dettol, Clorox, Tide Pods and other household cleaners became trending hashtags along with #injectdisinfectant, #dontdrinkbleach, #tidepodpresident and #trumptini. Soon enough, Twitter blocked some of these trends due to the violation of COVID-19 misinformation policy.

On TikTok, #dontdrinkbleach was one of the hashtags that brought together users’ most weird memetic video responses featuring text stickers like “Me facetimeing Trump to see if I can use Fabuloso, cuz that’s all I have”. Another popular variation shows a guy staring into space “wondering how to use Clorox and Christmas lights as a suppository to find COVID 19”. Mysterious sounds complete the scene. The video stops after 5 seconds and starts again.



A screenshot of TikTok's user interface presenting recommended content when searching for #dontdrinkbleach

Such contributions are illustrative of TikTok's aesthetic and experiential environment, in which hashtags organize new content into searchable flows around topical issues and recommended trends.

To dig deeper into this logic, I created a hashtag co-occurrence network for 1000 videos that TikTok recommends when searching for #dontdrinkbleach and #disinfectant. This method allows to detect which other hashtags were used more frequently together with #dontdrinkbleach and #disinfectant, generating a network file that I explored with Gephi network analysis and visualization software.

In methodological terms, a co-tag network analysis of social media phenomena makes it possible to see the shifts in relations of relevance around a specific issue through a lens provided by the communicative affordances of the platform.

In this particular case, it also delivers a mediated view of the attentional dynamics that TikTok activates when sharing vernacular niche content in response to a highly visible political event.

The density of edges in the central fragment of the network corresponds with the number of posts in which #dontdrinkbleach and #injectdisinfectant were used with other hashtags. That is, the more often any of these tags appeared together, the bigger the nodes and the stronger the links between them.

Typical for TikTok, hashtags such as #foryoupage, #fyp and #foryou appear as bridging nodes that hold the network together. “For your page” refers to the algorithmically curated main page that TikTok uses to update personal recommendations in accordance with ‘your’ current preferences.

Other densely connected hashtags such as #trump, #quarantine and #coronavirus distribute users associations with #dontdrinkbleach and #disinfectant in three co-tag clusters or semantic neighborhoods:

The first cluster in the middle situates #dontdrinkbleach as part of the #quarantinelife jokes trend through hashtags such as #quarantine, #funny, #lockdown and #momsoftiktok warning: #dontdrinkbleachkids.

The second cluster in the bottom right corner presents a continuum of associations between #trump and #disinfectant through #lysol and #clorox hashtags.

The third cluster in the upper right corner assembles expressions of #viral boredom during #corona through #boredathome and #boredinthehouse linked to more specific comments 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”.

The experiential-expressive fuzziness that comes to the fore in the videos that these hashtags circulate arises from the affective entanglement of play and imitation. In her comments on such apparently trivial but culturally ubiquitous media content, Sianne Ngai refers to the aesthetic quality of the zany.

When platforms act ‘zany’: The TikTok lockdown aesthetic

Unlike the cute, which usually provokes straightforwardly positive response (LOLcats), the zany is an aesthetic category characterised by forms of engagement that are ambivalent, sometimes even contradictory.

On social media platforms, zaniness comes to the fore when a limitless capacity to perform coincides with situations of suspended agency. Intensely affective, the experience of TikTok during the pandemic compares to an aesthetic of nonstop action. In Ngai’s terms, it is “essentially the experience of an agent confronted by too many things coming at her quickly and at once”.

On a platform that monetizes mundane user engagement precisely within this affective register, the circulation of memes employs the gesture of sharing not as a principle of sameness but as a principle of imitation, invention or relational transformation.

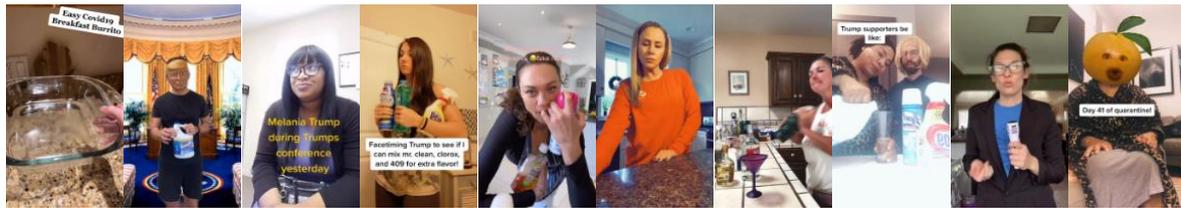
Here, I conceptualize the gestural qualities of memes as mediators by drawing on Ngai’s notion of passages, through which affects acquire the semantic density of meanings, and meanings conversely translate into affects, into ways of mattering. As they spread through volatile contact between large communities of users, memes accumulate temporary engagement. At the same time, they also transform in relation to other memes, evolving into heterogeneous networks of appropriation.

The imitative momentum of such transactions is not given, it is made. The capacity of memes to go viral is performed within a space of simultaneous contact and capture where seemingly imperceptible attentional gestures fold and mutate into cascades of social adaptation.

To see how three memetic scenarios of #dontdrinkbleach hashtag co-occurrences discussed above are communicated through images, I selected the top 10 most liked videos for each of the cooccurrences related to #quarantine, #trump and #corona and visualized them in grids.

What these images capture are strange ways of performing mundane activities that feed into the contagious intensity of #dontdrinkbleach. A feeling of shared nonsense they generate corresponds with something that grabs people’s attention for a short period of time. Plugging into TikTok’s #dontdrinkbleach assemblage to combat anxiety, boredom and social isolation is therefore characteristic of a situation in which one responds to particular affects with other affects.

#quarantine #funny #momsoftiktok



#trump #lysol #clorox



#corona #viral #boredathome



A selection of images that were shared with three #dontdrinkbleach and #disinfectant hashtag co-occurrences: #quarantine, #trump, and #corona. Co-tags highlighted in grey are conditional co-tag variations.

For one individual the self-recorded act of mixing disinfectant cocktails might be a conscious investment into TikTok's attention economy, while for another it might be just fun.

Some would mime the most ridiculous scenarios of disinfection or ironize about the best TidePod flavors out of boredom, others might remember the dangerous TidePod challenge that went viral in 2018 encouraging teenagers to film themselves while they attempt to eat detergent.

Some would simply curse in front of the camera while driving past one of Donald Trump's campaign billboards. Others would dress-up as Trump to give a more elaborated acting performance.

In each of the three scenarios, #dontdrinkbleach automates affective reactions within different visceral registers of TikTok zaniness.

Though seemingly mutually exclusive, the excitement of shock in the situation of global pandemic, the dullness we associate with the lockdown boredom and the fun of memetic nonsense are all responses that come to act through this particular form of engagement.

Corresponding with a state of mind caught in-between the registers of isolation and total affective overload, the gesture of sharing #dontdrinkbleach on TikTok offers a means of ironic distance without taking itself too seriously. It even seems that, in a situation, in which the individual becomes part of a crowd via technical images, the less an image informs, the better it communicates.