

Influence and Culture in Virtual Spaces: Population health campaigns and the role of social media
on beliefs, bias and stigma during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The “digital revolution” is both an overused term and at the same time perhaps the only way to approach a description of the times we find ourselves in. Instances of digital human interaction, interface, and use of computers to communicate with each other have exponentially accelerated since the advent of the smartphone. In 2020, we found ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic and not able to communicate face-to-face for fear of spreading communicable disease. Our use of digital accelerated to what was once unimaginable levels. We currently have whole generations of kids that are likely more comfortable speaking through a device than they are when standing in front of someone.

We accelerated into this digitally dominated communication era with little fore thought or research on the potential impacts it will have on culture and on human experience. Social interaction via digital communication changes so much about how we live our lives and yet we haven’t even begun to really understand it. This research aims to delve deeply into pandemic communications and understand how our culture is evolving around it.

Culture was once shared with the people in our most immediate circles—now it can be live streamed on TikTok. For population health professionals who wish to influence human behavior to save lives, what do we think we know and how is that changing? This work aims to answer this question as it takes a snapshot of COVID-era digital communications and culture. The document is also an archive to the moment in time that was a global pandemic.

When at all possible, I chose to record the social media posts along with its associated comments and responses as they were at the moment of viewing. I chose this partly for historical purposes so that decades or centuries from now, anthropologists and others could view the burgeoning social media phenomena and related cultural cues as close to their original posting format as possible. It made for a painstaking process in the short term but hopefully it will be appreciated more, the further we get away from the original posting dates and long after the related links no longer function. I observed them and shared them as I found them.

Authors Biographical Sketch

Lawrence Montgomery has 20 years of experience designing and implementing large public health campaigns all over the United States for various government and not for profit health organizations. He is currently the Chief Marketing Officer for a large hospital system. He has deep experience leading advertising, marketing, communications and strategic partnerships functions in the health care space.

Montgomery previously served as Executive Director of National Brand Advertising and Strategic Partnerships for Kaiser Permanente in Oakland, Calif., where he held multiple leadership roles over 12 years. Prior to that, he served at the University of California, Davis Health System and the State of California, Department of Public Health. Montgomery also serves as chairman of the board at Montgomery, Hathaway and Clark, the oldest black owned family operated funeral home in the state of Kentucky.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my family whose love and support makes my efforts possible. To my wife Jasmine, thank you for always showing deep interest in what I do and for your unwavering belief in the person I am. You're an amazing thought partner and an inspiration to always learn from the world we see. And to my kids Kasey, Lawrence and Klayton. Your thirst for learning and discovery is a daily inspiration. Your interest in cultures, travel and world history is remarkable. I have no doubt all three of you are already making this world a better place and I can't wait to see what you'll do next.

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Chapter I.

Virtual Community and the Influence of Culture

The virtual world has real life impact and influence far beyond the digital realm it originates. The online and offline worlds are merging as digital users are exposed to more influence and culture from all parts of the globe.

Research Problem: Influence in the social media age

So much of our behavior is influenced by others around us. The circles we keep have an impact on how we see the world and how we process information. In fact, social and cultural influences are two of the single most influential factors in understanding human behavior across many topics. One new and rapidly evolving phenomenon is culture in the digital world. Our culture is more than ever influenced by individuals we likely will never meet physically— in the traditional, face-to-face way humans have done for millennia. Because of the absence of traditional physical contact, the typical demographic characteristics we use to define and describe culture have never been more inadequate. We interact constantly with individuals that make up our cultural circles that are increasingly solely interacted with virtually, through social media. As the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff described, virtual social worlds are very much real and can manifest meaningful social influences:

Virtual worlds are places of imagination that encompass practices of play, performance, creativity, and ritual. The social lifeworld's that emerge within them are very real. They represent a complex transaction between their designers, who have certain goals and desires about what people will do, and the denizens of virtual worlds themselves, who exercise individual

and collective agency. They draw upon physical world cultures in multiple ways yet at the same time create possibilities for the emergence of new cultures and practices.¹

As cultural anthropologists like Boellstorff have studied, humans are on the precipice of a cultural revolution, the likes of which humans have never seen. The old paradigms of how culture was formed, taught and transferred are dying at worst and at best are being redefined through the digital intermediaries through which we increasingly interact.

Social media is not only influencing culture, it is in many ways becoming and defining culture. When health professionals are trying to control a health crisis through education, motivation and ultimately influencing behavior change, be it for a pandemic or mental health crisis, they must deeply understand a population's cultural dynamics for messages to be both relevant and properly received. This study seeks to bridge the gap in our understanding of traditional culture and the current influences of culture in the digital and social media era. In what ways does culture have an impact on how individuals and groups react to and interact with health messages in the digital space? Can we better identify and define cultural influence in the digital world surrounding health interventions? How does culture manifest itself via social media? By starting with the first steps of identifying, understanding and classifying, we can contribute to how health interventionist practitioners build and execute these campaigns effectively.

One of the most important components to health is timely and relevant education. An individual must both be aware of a potential health issue and understand the

¹ Boellstorff, Tom. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton University Press, 2012, 25.

interventions they can take to mitigate a current or potential health issue.² Whether applied to a viral pandemic (SARS, COVID-19), chronic disease (diabetes, heart conditions, lung-cancer), or mental psychosis (depression, bi-polar disorder), public health marketing campaigns are critical tools in helping to prevent or stop the spread of illness.

We can look across these many different public health crises and study the types of mass communication that have been most effective in curbing, slowing, preventing and eliminating disease. Ultimately, we want to know the best public health communication techniques that motivate the right kind of behavior change that make individuals and populations healthier. More so than ever we see cultural lines defining and separating how people perceive fact from fiction. Individuals are taking in cultural cues before they decide the worthiness and validity of information they interact with online. For the purposes of this study, we will specifically look at COVID-19 and our ability to manage the public health crisis at the population level.

We will look at the anthropological factors that impact an individual's and population's ability to receive the efficacy of public health efforts in this space. Our goal is understanding the role of cultural commitments and by extension the way in which these public health messages are realized and interacted with by groups and individuals. Cultural relevance is the key to these messages being received and the anthropological lens is a useful construct to understanding campaign efficacy.

² Chang, C. Increasing mental health literacy via narrative advertising, *Journal of Health Communication*, 2008, 13(1), 37-55.

This study looks at the virtual world of social media on the TikTok and Twitter platforms. The study will observe and analyze social media posts and content through an anthropological view. Using both discourse analysis and content analysis the study will better define how culture is represented and expressed in the confines of public health campaigns aimed at controlling the COVID-19 pandemic.

TikTok and Twitter are being chosen as platforms because they currently represent the social media platforms that create the most interaction. Social media posts on both TikTok and Twitter garner millions of views and responses in a way that creates a very open and public conversation on topics. Individuals feel free to interact with less worry of consequences. Just as importantly, users interact with people outside of their conventional circles on both platforms. Unlike Facebook or SnapChat, who primarily engage individuals who already know each other or have had physical proximity, both Twitter and TikTok aren't much constrained by real world interactions.

Chapter II.

Definition of Terms:

“Cultural Circles”: refers to communities that gather virtually in exchange of ideas, thoughts and entertainment. Increasing with the advent of social media, these circles are not just confined to individuals in the same geographic region.

“Population Health”: is the health field focused on treating and preventing disease at the group or population level. It is a discipline rooted in the idea that healthy behaviors are learned actions that can save lives. A significant part of population health is communication for the purpose of education and motivation of action. Behavior change is the ultimate outcome population health practitioners seek. Using tools of mass-communication to reach individuals by the thousands, population health experts can save lives on a scale individual interventions could never reach. Social media has become a primary mode of communication for population health campaigns in the United States.

“Social Influence”: is the impact an individual, campaign or communication has on its audience or individual observer. Social influence encompasses impacts on what people believe as truth and how they choose to act. It represents the collective influence social media interactions can have on an individual’s or groups of individuals’ thinking and actions.

“Social Media”: is any digital social sharing platform or app that allows users to communicate and share ideas either via language, emojis or images. Users use social media for information sharing and gathering and typically see it as a form of entertainment. Oftentimes it has become a primary source of social interaction. Many individuals can spend multiple hours a day viewing and interacting with social posts by

others and creating their own content to post. Social media can include any one of hundreds of digital platforms and users often bounce between multiple platforms throughout their day as they communicate with individuals in their immediate geographical location or anywhere in the world.

“TikTok”: TikTok is a video based social media app used to share short clips of content that communicate a story or idea. Users both create original videos and respond to others video with comments, reactions or response videos. While it originally started out as a music and dancing app it has more recently become the app of choice for many to interact with an increasingly global world. Users can scroll through dozens of videos consuming many different ideas in a matter of minutes.

Chapter III.

Literature Review

This chapter will put into context the other academic discussion around public health campaigns and cultural influence.

The geographical boundaries and guiderails which once framed how cultural norms form and persist are not what they were. With physical constraints lifting rapidly, a new paradigm is forming. A paradigm that is more defined by psychographics and ideologies than one that is limited to our physical interactions. One's physical proximity to another individual or station in life does not carry the same almost automatic influence it once did. Authors like Dan Sperber and Ilya Leven have studied how the digital revolution is profoundly changing culture. Leven describes the way we communicate has changed significantly in the digital age with mass communication of many cultural ideas:

The information revolution has brought the capacity to easily communicate with every other person and to access myriad forms of information and knowledge without any concerns. In addition, as a result of significant advances in artificial intelligence (AI) today's digital technologies are becoming increasingly smart and personalized. The interaction of almost every human experience is mediated through a sophisticated shell connected to big data. This shell provides a person with context-oriented information prepared exclusively for that individual, which is necessary for making a wide variety of decisions. Thus, the principles of human behavior, which mostly consist of sequences of these decisions, have been changed.³

Current literature defines a few different ideas when it comes to the shift we're seeing in the way the digital world influences culture. Below I outline authors and

³ Levin, Ilya & Mamlok, Dan. Culture and Society in the Digital Age. Information, 2021, 12.

researchers who view the digital shift across three different lenses: technology driven problem statement, information abundance, and an awakening (or revolution) in human consciousness. These schools of thought are not mutually exclusive, and I find they actually work well together when interpreted holistically.

Dan Sperber also supports these signifiers of digital on current culture and examines the digital shift through the lens of cultural studies. In the book *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic*, he argues a new understanding of culture is needed. Ideas are more powerful now than ever because they are ubiquitous to whoever wants to find them. Sperber states: “culture is not a space inhabited by people, but rather a network whose outlines allow exploring how individuals’ behaviors create sustainable, long-lasting patterns that become culture”.⁴ We also see a literature focus on how digital technology is leveraged by corporations to influence behavior. Bernard Stiegler gives a somewhat pessimistic view of digital culture by suggesting that current digital culture, driven by the big business profits, corrupts cultures and exploits individuals for monetary gain.

Big businesses like Google (the world's biggest advertiser) use complex algorithms to make fake culture and exploit consumers into spending money: “Our individual brain is each inhabited by a large number of ideas that determine your behavior. Thus my brain is inhabited by ideas about culture... observing behavior gives rise to ideas”.⁵ Stiegler is arguing that we are very heavily influenced by the culture we interact with each day and those experiences directly translate to our actions and behavior. Stiegler describes digital technology as: “pharmakon, a Greek term that can be

4 Sperber, Dan. *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*. Blackwell, 2002.

5 Stiegler, Bernard. *Acting Out*. Stanford University Press, 2009, <http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=16155>

understood both as a cure and a poison”.⁶ By this he means that technology has fundamentally altered our daily lives and conceptions of the world in both good and bad ways. It both contributes to human culture while simultaneously taking away from it. It can be used to spread true and false information both widely and quickly to disrupt social interactions and an individual’s own cognitive ability to think independently.

We see a build and further elaboration on the theory of digital manipulation and adds the need for regulation on digital platforms and the cultures they exploit. Ganaele Langlois highlights the inherent transformation of the human experience that we are changing drastically but spending very little energy understating or directing what is moral or even desired. Yes, we are capable of using culture and algorithms to manipulate human thought and behavior in the digital space— but do we want to live in a world where this type of behavior goes unchecked? She calls for mediation of online spaces to better create a world that is advantageous to all and not just profiteers.

Alberto Acerbi argues that what we think about as social can no longer just be constrained to physical interaction. In fact, many of our interactions will shift to digital in the coming years, if they haven’t already. By extension what we think about as the human experience is changing to become, and maybe predominantly, digital integration. Acerbi’s book, *Cultural Evolution in the Digital Age*, depicts multiple human experiences that have been disrupted by the digital revolution. The availability of knowledge means humans know more than just one culture. The culture each is born with does not have to be the one they choose to practice. In fact, they don’t have to practice just one culture, we

⁶ Stiegler, Bernard. *Acting Out*. Stanford University Press, 2009, <http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=16155>

can now be an amalgamation of many cultures at our choosing. He calls this “fluidity of knowledge” that has given new definition to the human “sense of being”.⁷

As COVID-19 is an evolving disease, we will look at other ailments to understand how culture interacts with our health efforts. Specifically, we will look at the impacts of culture on mental health and the public health attempts to manage population health. Our goal is to extrapolate cultural understanding in the midst of population health interventions.

Like COVID-19, mental health can often not be seen until symptoms are more severe. Mental health also often has a more exaggerated influence from culture because of the related stigma. When looking at mental illness, significant social stigma in US culture and worldwide often presents as the first barrier to diagnosis and ultimately to treatment. As a society, the US generally— and historically— has had a negative view of mental health-related topics and individuals who suffer from mental illness. Stigma is a major factor prohibiting mental health treatment. Studies have also shown that the simple act of increasing conversations and dialogue about mental health and helping people feel more comfortable about mental health-related topics can reduce the stigma.⁸ Reducing mental health stigma within the general population can greatly contribute to allowing more people access to mental health treatment, ultimately improving, and saving lives.

Our goal is to look across past public health campaigns and understand better how culture plays a role in our health. By looking at mental health campaigns we can see a

⁷ Acerbi, Alberto. *Cultural Evolution in the Digital Age*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁸ Boardman, F., Griffiths, F., Kokanovic, R., Potiradis, M., Dowrick, C., & Gunn, J. Resilience as a response to the stigma of depression: A mixed methods analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 2011, 135(1-3), 267-276. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2011.08.007

long history of public health campaigns playing a role in influencing behavior change. We can also see how culture has played a role in how these messages are received. We often see stats quoted in the news on how different race or ethnic groups are faring during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reality is these differences have little to do with innate biological or racial factors and everything to do with cultural differences in how groups interact with the disease. Cultural anthropology provides a solid lens for us to both understand and attribute these differences. As we understand the differences better we can apply them to improve public health interventions.

We can look at global pandemics like the Covid-19 and the adoption of preventative measures like vaccines and masks as well as the public health response campaigns as key tools in managing population health.⁹ We can use mass communication like TV commercials and social media campaigns to inform and inspire vulnerable audiences to practice appropriate behavior to prevent the spread and severity of contagious viruses. But how effective are these campaigns at influencing public behavior? Can we look at reach and response data from these campaigns to determine effectiveness and the role culture played in development?

One of the debates seen in literature on public health campaigns is what drives the influence of behavior change the most. We see campaigns featuring scare tactics, inspirational messages, sadness, humor, incentivization, celebrity influence and pure education as focuses of many public health campaigns. In one example, conducted a study aimed at increasing mental health literacy as a bridge to stigma reduction via

⁹ Auxier, Brooke. "How Americans See Digital Privacy Issues amid the COVID-19 Outbreak." Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 27 Aug. 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/04/how-americans-see-digital-privacy-issues-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/>.

advertising. Defining mental health literacy as “the ability to gain access to, understand, and use information in ways which promote and maintain good mental health”¹⁰, he has demonstrated that advertising indeed has the ability to draw people with mental illness into engaging in through the ability of discussing their personal histories, suggesting that being able to discuss the topic of mental illness on a personal level is a key to a first step in reducing stigma. Chang uses primarily education as a means of influencing behavior change. However, Chang’s research, like many studies in this field, made little to no mention of cultural factors that impact how messages are perceived, spread and received. And while the communication tactics and messages are very important to any campaign, what the collective literature fails to focus on is culture. As it pertains to COVID-19, publicly engaging through discussing personal histories, doesn't seem to work in digital stories if you are not connecting to culture as part of the digital community.

The communities that gather virtually in exchange of ideas, thoughts and entertainment have an outsized impact on how the campaigns are received. Increasingly, with the advent of social media, these circles are not just confined to individuals in the same geographic region or demographic grouping. Culture in the internet age can be much more complex to identify and define but it is arguably a more powerful influence than ever. People of like ideologies gather and socialize with the exchange of information and ideas that creates a tremendous gravitational pull. In fact this pull can be so powerful it often trumps reason, facts and even common sense. It is no longer sufficient to try and understand groups via demographics like age, gender, race or location.

10 Chang, C. Increasing mental health literacy via narrative advertising. *Journal of Health Communication*, 2008, 13(1), 37-55. doi:10.1080/10810730701807027

If public health campaign practitioners are to better influence behavior change, they must shift to understanding mindsets and building campaigns that target audiences' state of mind via culture. I could not find a single study that began or went into depth about the culture of the audience being reached. I believe this dearth is troubling for the field of public health research and as more of the world increases digital interaction via social media, it will only become a bigger opportunity to gain influence over behavior change.

Although most of us understand that stigma exists, the causes of stigma may be more elusive. Cook and Wang have conducted a study within the general population to examine causation beliefs and stigma against depression.¹¹ Their findings indicated that even though most people recognize that depression has a biological cause, many also associate depression with negative social behaviors such as “being a nervous person.” Specifically, over 63% of their participants endorsed the idea that “being a nervous person” causes depression, leading to an increased likelihood of their having stigmatized attitudes toward those with depression. Thus, truly to move social stigma around mental illness, we must further and significantly distance people from the idea that mental illness is a soft health problem, just as much associated with personality choices as with biological factors. Likewise you can move a digital cultural group from viewing COVID-19 as just a soft issue that is associated with current personal healthy habits.

Although a number of studies have begun to work on persuading people with depression to seek help,¹² persuasion on the population level is a relatively new focus for

¹¹ Cook, T. M., & Wang, J. Causation beliefs and stigma against depression: Results from a population-based study. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 2011, 133(1-2), 86-92. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2011.03.030

¹² Chang, C. Increasing mental health literacy via narrative advertising. *Journal of Health Communication*, 2008,13(1), 37-55. doi:10.1080/10810730701807027

research on mental illness. The mass media has been used effectively for alcohol, drug, and smoking abatement but, with few exceptions, has been largely unsupported in the possibility of its reducing mental health stigma. With this research how can we learn which messages break through to produce cultural relevance and reduce COVID-19 skepticism?

Reducing stigma as a strategy to persuade people to seek help is a common method of depression-related PSAs. However, Lienemann, Siegel, and Crano reported it is very challenging to show causation in PSAs altering behavior in those suffering from mental health issues.¹³ Overall, people suffering from mental illness report significantly more negative effects related to help seeking. Further, campaigns seeking to increase help seeking for people with mental illness have the potential to backfire. The situation is complicated and requires advertising creatively that moves people to action through both education and emotion. PSAs that “preach” or just tell people information or “what to do” fall short of being compelling and could potentially turn people off to their messages. Emotion must be an essential piece of delivering any message on public health awareness.

Stigma is a major factor prohibiting mental health treatment. They looked at the impact of social stigma on individuals seeking help. The study showed that the simple act of increasing positive social conversations and dialogue about mental health and helping people feel more comfortable about mental health-related topics reduced the stigma. They specifically looked at attitudes toward help seeking and how social conversations

¹³ Lienemann, B. A., Siegel, J. T., & Crano, W. D. Persuading People with Depression to Seek Help: Respect the Boomerang. *Health Communication*, 2013, 28(7), 718-728.
doi:10.1080/10410236.2012.712091

influenced those attitudes. Reducing mental health stigma within the populations can greatly contribute to allowing more people to seek access to mental health treatment, ultimately improving, and saving lives. Can these efforts be used in the digital cultural spaces to save lives with all public health issues such as COVID-19?

Wakefield looks at multiple mass media campaigns and examines the efficacy of each effort.¹⁴ They examine tobacco cessation, drug reduction and other campaigns. They conclude that while campaigns can have an impact to induce positive behavior or reduce negative behavior, the results and the extent of impact still vary widely. They also suggest a number of ways to improve these campaigns such as longer running media and a better understanding and incorporation of culture of the target audience. They also suggest better connecting the media campaigns to community based efforts that drive back to services and resources.

Pew Research has done a number of surveys to gauge the sentiment of Americans as it relates to COVID-19 attitudes as they relate to things like privacy. Auxier sources data from before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and seeks to understand how audiences in the United States feel about covid restrictions and privacy. The data shows that most Americans have significant privacy concerns around how their digital data is used and these concerns have only grown during the pandemic.

This wide skepticism contributes to the further skepticism in information individuals receive about COVID-19. Often people will put more trust in information from individuals in, or perceived to be in, their cultural group than they will from experts

¹⁴ Lienemann, B. A., Siegel, J. T., & Crano, W. D. Persuading People with Depression to Seek Help: Respect the Boomerang. *Health Communication*, 2013, 28(7), 718-728.
doi:10.1080/10410236.2012.712091

on the topic. Privacy is an ongoing concern of most Americans and it translates into how they perceive the world and other information on COVID-19. So the tools used in public health awareness of campaigns featuring scare tactics, inspirational messages, sadness, humor, incentivization, celebrity influence and pure education don't by themselves break the cultural influence lines. It is the combination of communicator (influencer) and properly used cultural cues that allow messages to be received as relevant and understood in the social media space.

Chapter IV.

The Approach

The best way to understand this problem is not in a lab but in the real digital world.

Methodology

The research conducted is ethnographic in nature and was structured to observe real interaction and conversation happening publicly. I observed communities of conversations in an authentic setting as it happened and unmanipulated by myself or other research interventions. Because the primary focus of my observation is understanding cultural influences on behavior, it was critical that I observed the interactions and conversations as they naturally happen and are made public by individuals. As Boellstorff posits, ethnography in the digital world is rich with new found possibilities:

Ethnography, an approach for studying everyday life as lived by groups of people, provides powerful resources for the study of the cultures of virtual worlds. As ethnographers, what interests us about virtual worlds is not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary. We are intrigued not only by the individuals in a group, but by the sum of the parts. We aim to study virtual worlds as valid venues for cultural practice, seeking to understand both how they resemble and how they differ from other forms of culture.¹⁵

Throughout this process I act as a nonparticipant observer, sometimes observing conversation real time and other times after the fact. As a nonparticipant observation I

¹⁵ Boellstorff, Tom. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

unobtrusively observe the interactions between posters. Extensive field notes taken and individuals and conversations were categorized as needed. Data will be collected via observation of social media conversations and video posts. Specifically, I focus on conversations via the social media platform TikTok. TikTok is a video-based app used to share videos, music and comments. I was able to observe content and interactions without logging in or needing to receive permission to view. IRB approval was determined not to be needed as human subjects are not interacted with and all data is already published.

I was particularly interested in analyzing conversational tone, sentiment and influence across multiple different conversations on a like topic. The topic I focused on included conversations related to COVID-19. The study observed and analyzed social media posts and content through an anthropological view. Using both discourse analysis and content analysis the study will better define how culture is represented and expressed in the confinements of public health campaigns aimed at controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. The contrast with stigma reduction in mental health campaign evolution will be made. Attacking the issue through addressing cultural barriers is key to problem solving and progressing the population understanding.

The research sought to identify cultural barriers for the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic new information and medical recommendations are introduced. I observed how conversations began, evolved and were influenced by different individuals and how culture plays a role:

Cultures, as shared systems of meaning and practice, shape our hopes and beliefs; our ideas about family, identity, and society; our deepest assumptions about being a person in this world. We now face a contemporary moment when the phrase “in this world” requires fresh inquiry. With the rise of virtual worlds, we find novel possibilities for

human culture, even as we discover continuities with long-standing physical world conventions and practices.¹⁶

This intersection of culture, community and behavior change was ultimately the focal point of this research.

Because of the volume of conversations happening, I have identified groupings based on campaigns and then observed participants who engaged and added to the particular campaigns in the form of responses. It was key that I leverage a campaign categorization structure that allows for organization of individuals in a way they can be studied together as a response to particular campaign messaging. I did not use personally identifiable information as the observer or of those being observed.

TikTok and Twitter as platforms are likened to any public notice space that allows speakers to have communications observed without the restrictions of passwords or required identity cues. Their posts are communicated and available for all to see. As my research is about cultural cues and not specific to an individual's personal identity, I did record my observations without using real names. I structured my research using design formats pioneered in the anthropological space.

I used traditional anthropological observation techniques and protocols applied to the digital space. This resulted in a structured qualitative observation recording for the data collected and discussed. I then used the data collected to make cultural observations and extrapolate findings.

¹⁶ Boellstorff, Tom. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton University Press, 2012.

Research Limitations

A number of factors contributed to the limitations of the research I undertook. As this research was conducted during a very real and challenging pandemic, it was limited by the actual health interventions and interactions happening during the window of evaluation. The research was ultimately to evaluate a 24-month window of social interactions over a number of TikTok and Twitter campaigns and communications.

The research will also be limited by the platform used for these communications. By design TikTok and Twitter are created to be short form video and copy blogging. They both also allow a maximum number of interactions with easy comment features and abilities to post short response videos. Both the videos and comment features are short in nature so the interactions are typically around one minute in video length and two sentences for comment length.

The research did not require the researcher to interact with the subjects in any form. As TikTok and Twitter are open platforms it did not require a login to view videos or comments. I was able to both look at past campaign posts and more recent campaign posts as part of data collection. For demographic information, it was limited and only observed for each individual in related posts when actually mentioned as relevant to the post.

Chapter V.

Research: Social Media Campaign Reviews

In this section we'll review a number of public health campaigns aimed at reaching various populations and to influence behavior and ultimately limit the spread of COVID-19. For each campaign reviewed, we'll look at the publicly available content released by the campaign's producers in both social media posts and statements on content approach. Then we will look at the reactions in the form of engagement from the communities of individuals reacting to the campaign content.

Health and Human Services Campaign – “We can Do This”

The US Department of Health and Human services demonstrates how culture is leveraged in digital posts to garner relevance and credibility. All social media relies on relevance and credibility to be seen and understood.

A national campaign implemented by the US Department of Health and Human Services to increase confidence in and use of COVID-19 vaccines has been running in various forms since mid-2021. The campaign is intended to educate on proper COVID-19 treatments and to prevent the spread of the virus. “Through a nationwide network of trusted messengers and consistent, fact-based public health messaging, the Campaign helps the public make informed decisions about their health and COVID-19, including

steps to protect themselves and their communities. The effort is driven by communication science and provides tailored information for at-risk groups.”¹⁷

The “*We Can Do This*” Campaign is built to target different cultural groups with messaging and images that are more relevant to that group. The six specific cultural groups targeted in this campaign include: Asian Americans (including Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander), Blacks, Native American Indians, General Audience, Latinos and Rural. Each target group comes with an evolved strategy and bespoke creative to reach that group. While the campaign includes many tactics, including events and paid media, this research will focus exclusively on the culture and community engagement via TikTok. The interaction took place under the key hashtag: #wecandothis and made it fairly simple to find posts supporting our engaging with this campaign.

A post dated December 23, 2022 from @HHSGov aimed to resonate with its audience in the midst of holiday celebrations with family. “Show your loved ones that they are in your thoughts.” It included an image of nine presumed family members of all ages sitting around a traditionally set American dining table. All individuals on the photo are smiling while the oldest gentleman with gray and balding hair brings a traditional bone in roasted ham to the table. The image could not look more staged with the food and the people in the photo looking very stiff and contrived. The food looks perfectly manicured and plastic with little to no authenticity. Instantly the image reeks of staged or fake photography and a very poor attempt to manipulate viewers into seeing themselves or their own family as part of the image.

¹⁷ HHS, “About the Campaign.” *WECANDOTHIS.HHS.GOV*, 17 Jan. 2023, wecandothis.hhs.gov/about.

It is a simple photo that on the outside appears to do no harm but it seems to send the opposite signals of what the government is trying to do. Rather than using cultural cues to resonate in an authentic and genuine way, it instantly gives off cues of fake and disingenuous communication. It is no wonder the community response to the post is 100% negative.

The first 3 responses begin with flat “No” followed by a series of speculations around truthfulness and motives behind the postings. Posts like this one are doing more harm to the cause of public opinion, education and behavior change than they are helping. This is a clear example of missed cultural connection that results in a negative outcome rather than a positive. Cultural cues aren’t just an important part to communications like these, they are everything. When the cultural connection is missed this badly, the intended message has zero chance of reaching its audience. Viewers are scrolling through hundreds and thousands of posts as part of their personal entertainment. Fake and inauthentic content is ignored at best but more often detested for standing out as something other than coming from a genuine source.

The image shows a screenshot of a Twitter interface. On the left, there are navigation icons for the Twitter logo, a search icon, and a settings icon. The main content is a tweet from HHS.gov (@HHSGov) dated Dec 28, 2022. The tweet text reads: "During the holiday season, you can take steps to keep yourself and your loved ones safe. Find resources on COVID safety, including testing and updated vaccines, at covid.gov. #WeCanDoThis". Below the text is a video player showing a family of seven people sitting around a dining table with a turkey and other dishes. A pink overlay at the bottom of the video says "Show your loved ones that they are in your thoughts." with a duration of 0:08 and 1,901 views. The tweet has 12.7K retweets, 44 replies, 18 retweets, and 28 likes. To the right of the tweet is a sidebar with a search bar, a "CDC_eHealth" profile card, and a "What's happening" section listing trending topics like "Panthers at Buccaneers", "Letterboxd", "But Did He Break the Law", "Jeremy Renner", and "Jumping Jack Flash".

Figure 1 Thanksgiving Family at the Table

Twitter, 27 Dec. 2022, twitter.com/HHSGov.



Figure 2 Thanksgiving Family at the Table Comments

Twitter, 27 Dec. 2022, twitter.com/HHSGov.

Tone: A soft and instructive tone of encouragement is the intended approach.

Sentiment: The sentiment is a bit nostalgic and reminiscent of a very traditional family meal setting and holiday gathering.

Cultural Cues: The image uses traditional American Thanksgiving meal courses with an extended minority family pictured. Everyone has a big generic looking smile on their face with positive but almost awkward body language.

Reactions: All of the responses to this post are negative and some extend into extremely skeptical and combative. The respondents are seeing the post as classic propaganda from

a government agency who is not only out of touch with the realities of today's family but is also motivated by a secret agenda to hurt and not help.

The next post and reactions we'll analyze is also from @HHS.gov and demonstrates the harm a post can generate when good intentions lack the necessary cultural authenticity and execution. The post in question was dated December 26, 2022 at 11am. It depicts a black family dressed in traditional African garb and as they light what appears to be Kwanzaa candles. The image and copy are poorly executed on multiple levels and a series of 80 comments, all with a negative to severely negative tone and sentiment are posted by the public in response.

The authenticity of this post is questionable at best. It looks both highly staged and genetically produced with social cues that immediately say this image is other than real. The decorations in the photo look fake and almost costume or stagecraft like. They look sparse and arranged in a way this is not natural or from a real family's home. The man's hair in the image is not culturally accurate and would be very rare for an American black man to have his hair grown out but a severely receding hairline. These series of small and even subtle cues tell the viewer this scene is almost completely arranged and not real. This is important because it not being real gives the viewer immediate license to be more critical and severely question the authenticity and accuracy of the message being shared.

The comments in response to this post are swift and exceedingly yet appropriately harsh. Responders see the post as a weak and fake attempt to look culturally authentic but one that misses the mark completely. This caused a heavy backlash from commenters of contempt and even anger. The comments speak of intentional manipulation by the poster

to press the behavior of being vaccinated. Authenticity, in a time when so many people are questioning and trying to discern fact from fiction is critical.

In looking at the 80 response comments to this post by HHS, you see a common theme and repeated words like “lie,” “liars,” and “trust.” Comments like “covid is the biggest lie in human history.” “Who the hell celebrates kwanzaa, I bet the people in this picture don’t.” The anger and contempt in the comments is consistent with the disbelief that the communicator’s intentions are even genuine. Both the intention and the execution by HHS is perceived as harmful and completely illegitimate. The fact that the image is also poorly faked only serves to reinforce the idea that the sender is trying to hide the truth. The post only serves to undermine and discredit the legitimacy of HHS and the intentions, message and cause of the campaign.

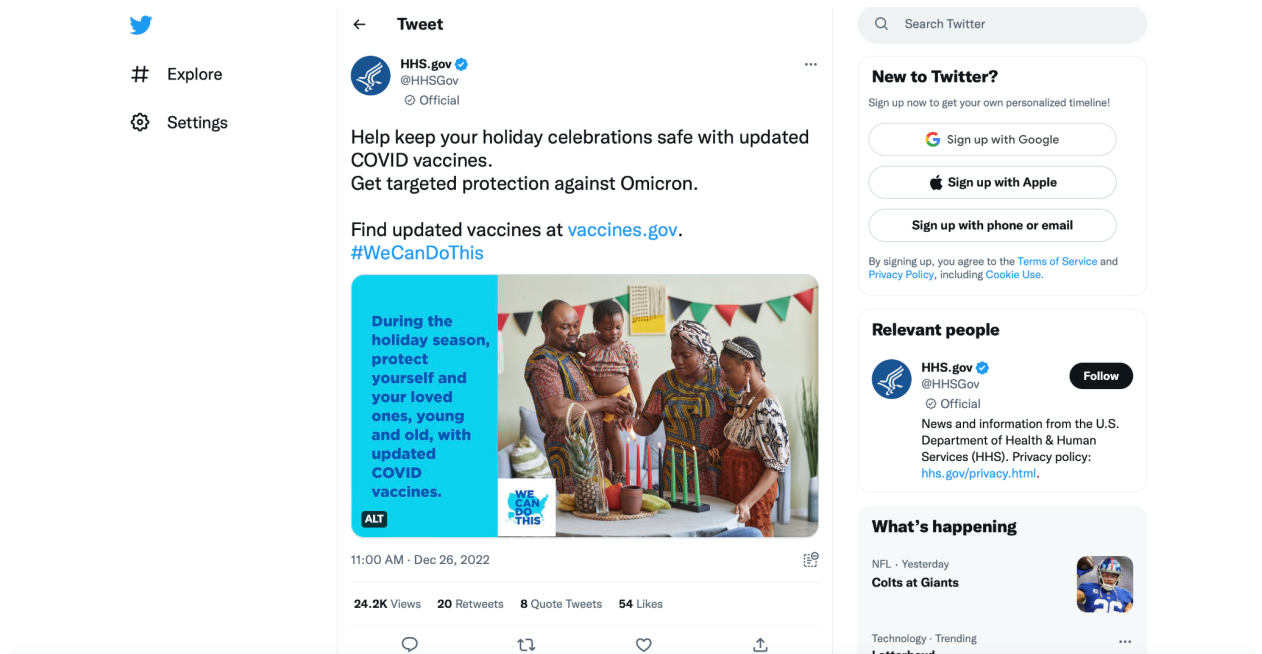


Figure 3 Kwanza family celebration and comment section

Twitter, 27 Dec. 2022, twitter.com/HHSGov.

Tone: The post depicts a soft and private tone as if we are getting a look into a personal family moment.

Sentiment: Serious and celebratory in a solemn religious way, the sentiment of the post is sincere yet contrived in a falsified type of setting. It feels more like the set of a sitcom rather than a real family moment at home.

Cultural Cues: Traditional and very much stereotypical African garb with Kwanzaa decorations feel posed on less than authentic. It is as if we are an outsider viewing in and not as they would see themselves.

Reactions/influence: An inordinate amount of reaction for this small post. Almost all responses are negative, and many are angry. The race and ethnicity likely contributed to the level and quantity of responses. The fact that this is a depiction of African culture was unusual enough to grab the attention of responders.

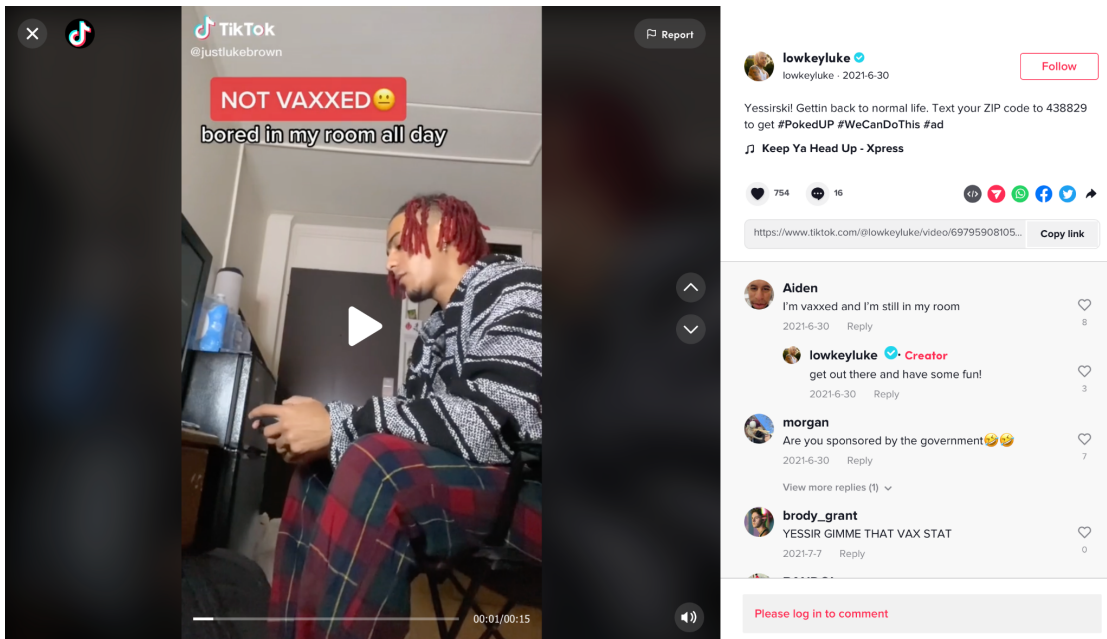


Figure 4 “not vaxxed” teen gamer

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, [TikTok.com/lowkeyluke](https://www.tiktok.com/lowkeyluke).

Tone: The tone is humorous, and a bit snarky to make it feel authentic and like a real glimpse into the life of the poster.

Sentiment: The sentiment is defiant, independent with divergent thinking feel yet promoting COVID-19 vaccination.

Cultural Cues: We see dyed red hair, playing video games with pajama pants on. These are all cues that this individual is part of the current young culture

Reactions/influence: Mixed but mostly positive with a lot of humor injected. People recognized the message is from a peer but they question why he’s encouraging people to get vaccinated.

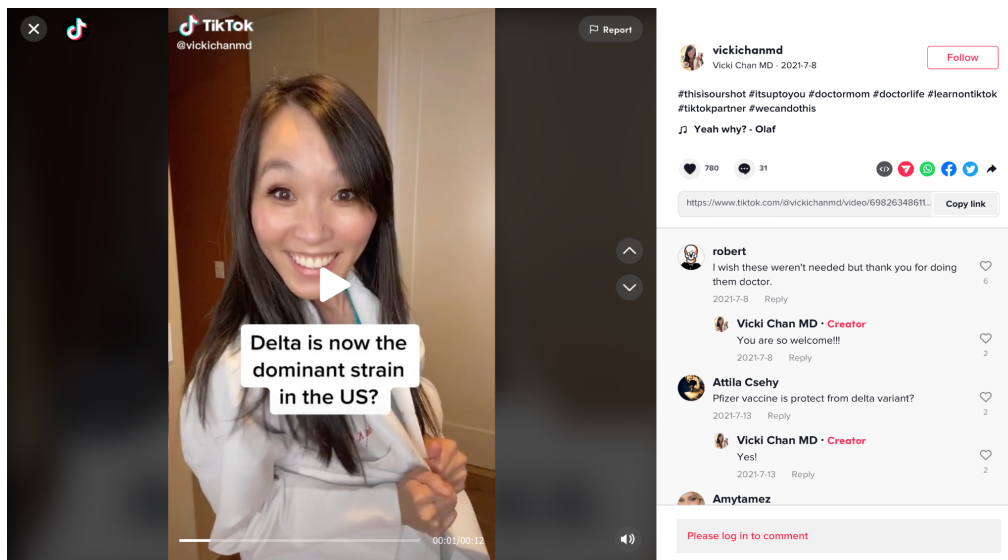


Figure 5 MD promoting vaccination and warning about Delta variant

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@vickichanmd?lang=en>.

Tone: Positive and funny with a touch of sarcasm, the post seeks to both entertain and provide helpful information from an expert.

Sentiment: This is a depiction of a sincere but lighthearted approach to encouraging viewers to get vaccinated.

Cultural Cues: A doctor wearing a white coat with a stethoscope around her neck makes it clear that this is not just another uniformed opinion about the COVID-19 vaccine.

Reactions/influence: Mixed but mostly positive and encouraging comments make up the responses to this post.

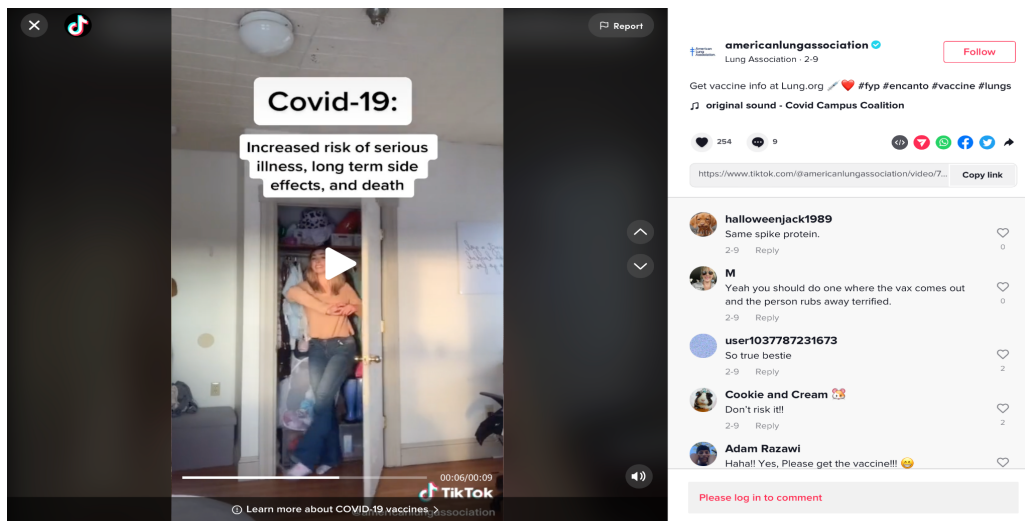


Figure 6 American Lung Association post of dancing young adult

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@americanlungassociation?lang=en>.

Tone: Playful and funning, the post is aimed at young folks and connecting to dancing and music trends.

Sentiment: Important topic but interesting in that it mixes trendy fun with an urgent message.

Cultural Cues: Teenager at home in room vibes with many of the cues that became so typical of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reactions/influence: Many of the reactions we see in the comment section are positive and sarcastic. The reviewers are having trouble taking the person and the message seriously.

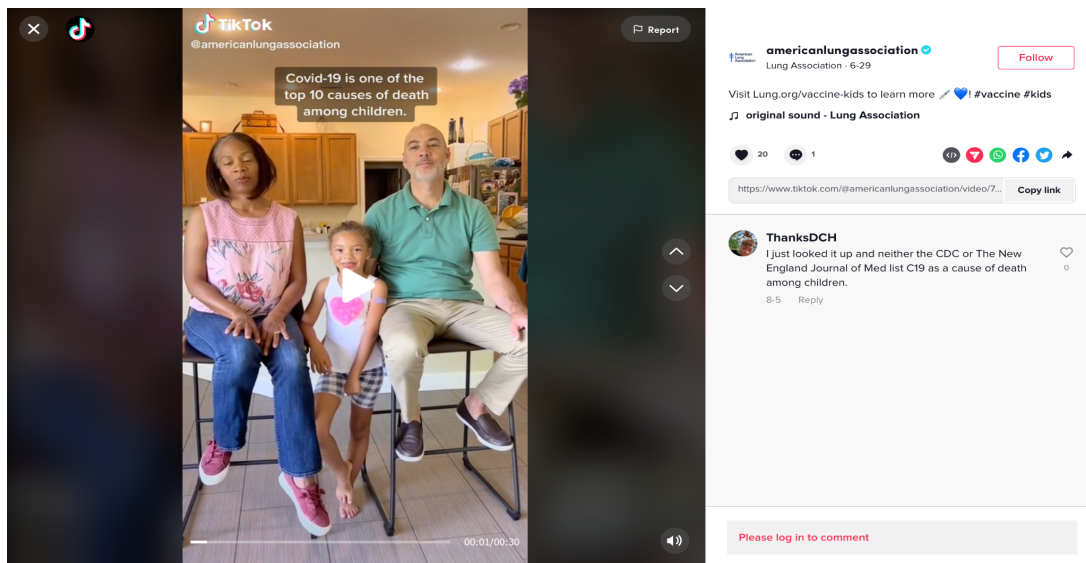


Figure 7 Mom, dad and kid talking about real risk of death from COVID-19

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@americanlungassociation?lang=en>.

Tone: This clip combines both fun and seriousness to get the attention of its audience.

Sentiment: An action-oriented sentiment intended to get people to get vaccinated.

Cultural Cues: A family with young child in their own kitchen is intended to get folks to see themselves.

Reactions/influence: The post did not receive much reaction but did get one skeptical post questioning the claim of COVID-19 being the top cause of death for children.

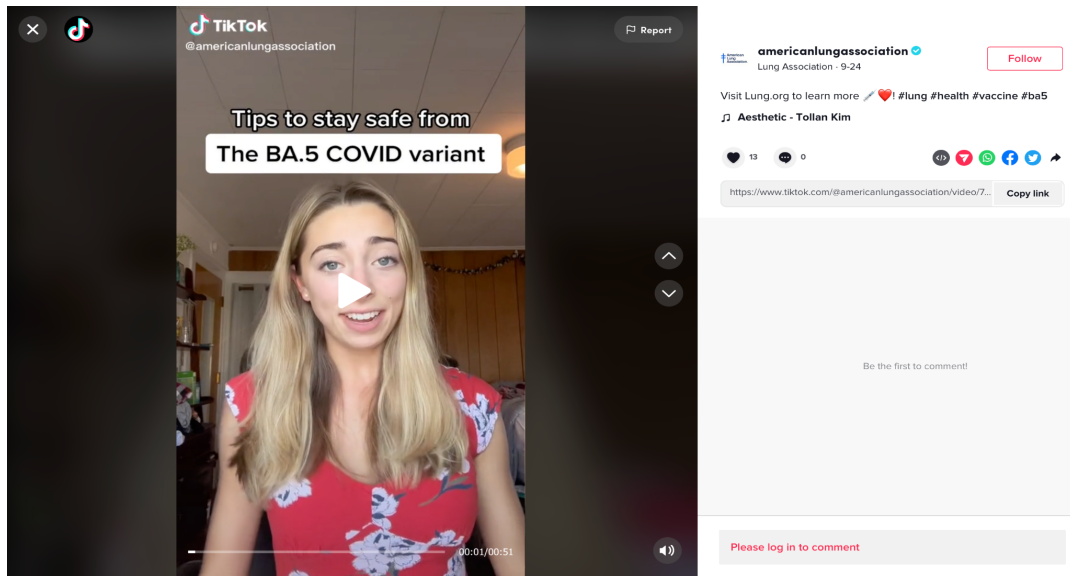


Figure 8 ALA post of young adult talking seriously direct to camera

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@americanlungassociation?lang=en>.

Tone: This is a post filled with youth energy encouraging peers to get vaccinated.

Sentiment: The sentiment is lighthearted but serious in its recommendation to take action.

Cultural Cues: The poster is clearly a young adult posting from her family home. It looks like a middle-class living room in her background.

Reactions/influence: No commented responses but the post did receive a few likes.

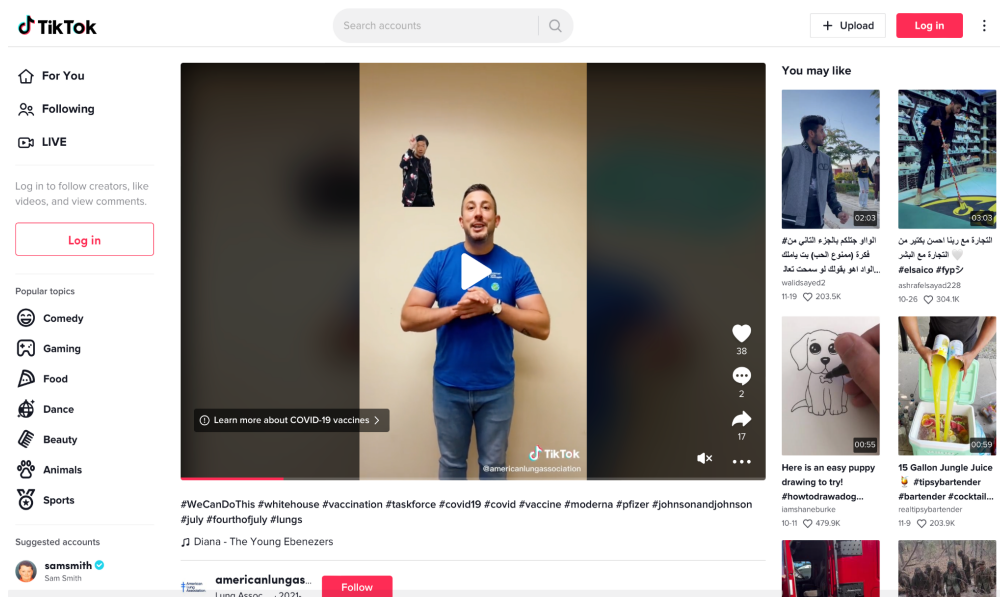


Figure 9 American Lung Association post of young adult male using humor

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@americanlungassociation?lang=en>.

Tone: The post has a youthful feel with multiple folks talking directly to camera on behalf of the American Lung Association.

Sentiment: The sentiment is serious but with a smile and upbeat music in the background.

Cultural Cues: Young faces and popular culture references give this post multiple cultural cues to pull viewers in.

Reactions/influence: Because this post is coming from an organization and not an individual, it likely gets many fewer interactions than it otherwise would.

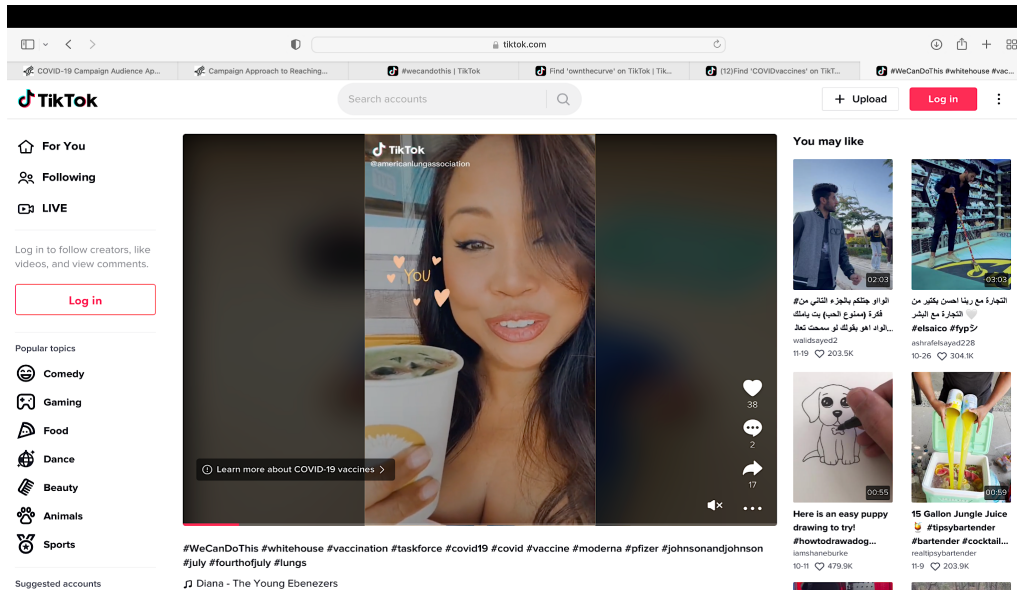


Figure 10 American Lung Association post of young doctor drinking soda

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@americanlungassociation?lang=en>.

Tone: The post conveys a positive tone with a hopeful message that we can all do our part to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Sentiment: The sentiment is sincere and encouraging with big smiles throughout the video.

Cultural Cues: The cues here are largely around trying to leverage beauty and a smiling face. The featured lady in the video is wearing heavy makeup and what looks like a glamor filter is applied.

Reactions/influence: Reactions to this post are limited, as many likely see the posted as sponsored and developed by an organization and not organic from an individual.

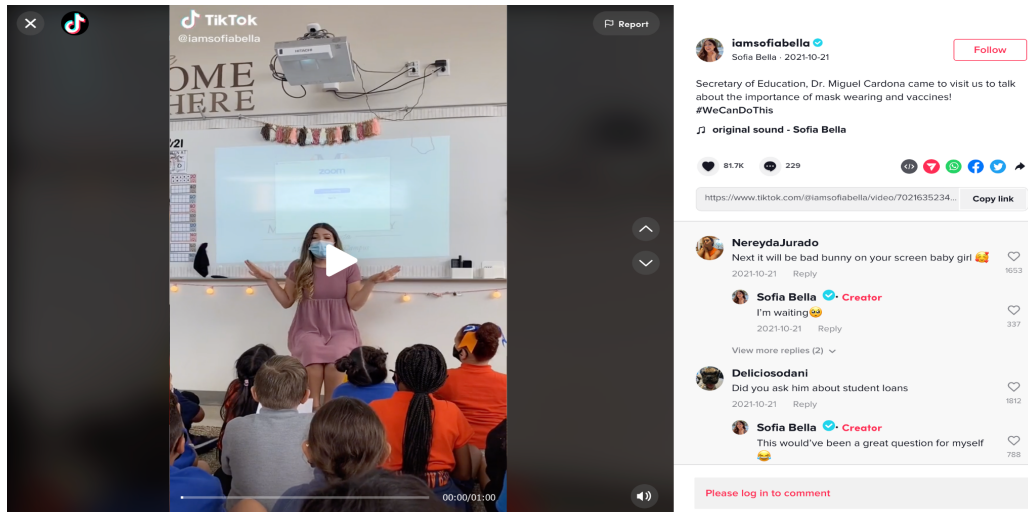


Figure 11 American Lung Association post of young teacher with mask on *TikTok*, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@americanlungassociation?lang=en>.

Tone: This post conveys a supportive and inspirational tone that focuses on all of the adults trying to hold some sense of normalcy during an otherwise very strange period in the lives of children and adults.

Sentiment: Encouraging by example, the teacher is letting her students know we must listen to our leaders during this very confusing time of mixed messages during the pandemic.

Cultural Cues: The school teacher is wearing a mask while back in classroom with kids also in mask.

Reactions/influence: This post received over 81k in likes and more than 200 comments, many of which are positive.

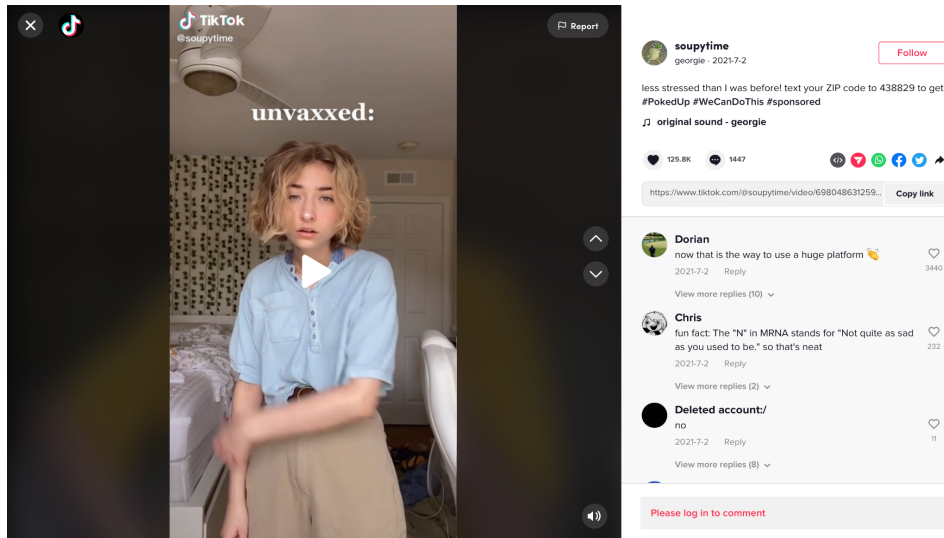


Figure 12 Young emotional poster with positive message about vaccination

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@soupytime?lang=en>.

Tone: The tone is somber and somewhat low energy with a very trendy deadpan type of a message delivery.

Sentiment: The sentiment is genuine yet pushing an agenda to get more people vaccinated.

Cultural Cues: We see an adult teen wearing thrift store style clothes and displaying a very muted “deadpan” facial expression.

Reactions/influence: The post received over 100k+ likes and 1k+ comments. People still had negative reactions, but the commentary was not harsh or mean spirited.

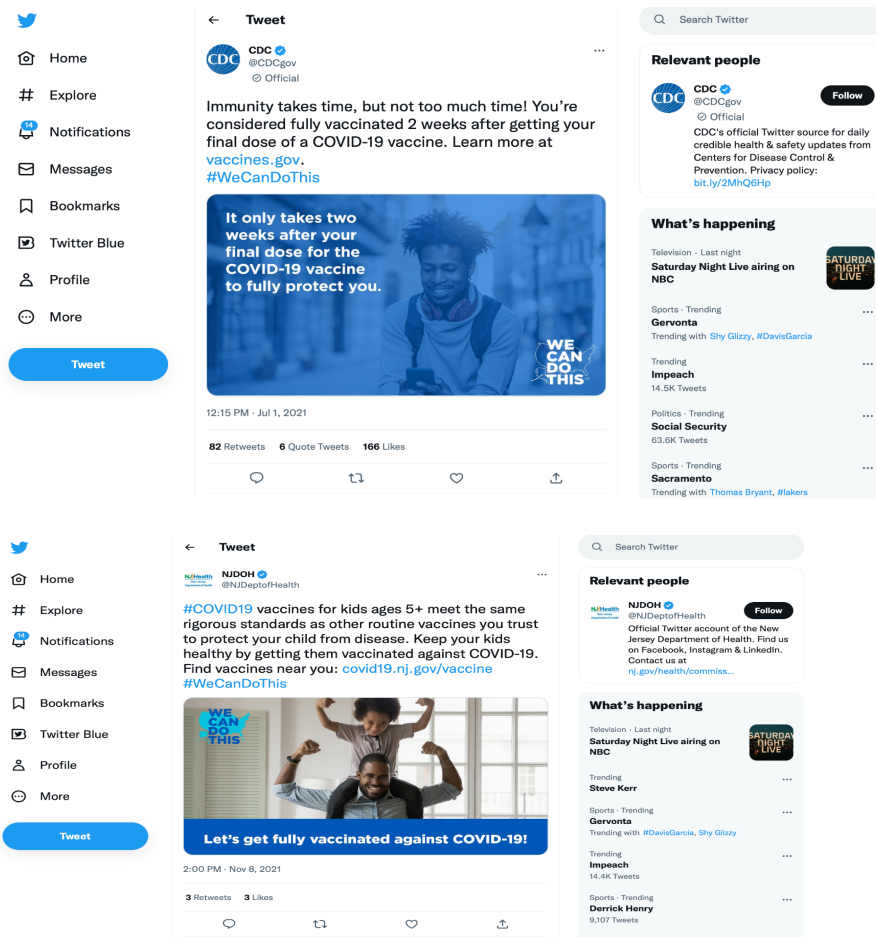


Figure 13 Featuring black men with topic of COVID-19

*Twitter, 2 Dec. 2022,
https://twitter.com/CDCgov?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor.*

Tone: This tweet conveys a fact-based information-sharing tone that is intended to educate more than it is to entertain or grab attention.

Sentiment: The post intended to be encouraging and playful with images but comes across as very dry and boring.

Cultural Cues: The post features black men and a kid. The dad and kid are flexing their arm muscles to show how strong and healthy they are. The post is attempting to reach minorities.

Reactions/influence: The post received little to no reactions in the form of likes or comments. It largely went as ignored noise in the twitter space.

Own the Curve Campaign - Kaiser Permanente

In the early days of the pandemic, Kaiser Permanente recognized the need for social intervention to slow the spread of COVID-19. In April of 2020, the large health care giant launched a public health campaign primarily centered on the TikTok social media platform aimed at reaching 18 to 35 year olds. The goal was to have young people take responsibility and ownership of the COVID-19 pandemic as something they could have great agency in stopping the spread. And rather than just having the pandemic be something that is happening to them, they would see it as something they needed to take control back from.

Even in the early days of the pandemic the idea of peaks and valleys in the infection rate was something that people understood. The campaign was aptly named “Own the Curve” and built around the idea that we all have a part to play in reducing the high spikes of COVID-19 infection rates in our communities.

The second insight Kaiser Permanente had is that this message would fail if it came directly from them. Put another way, a big hospital system has almost none of cultural clout needed to effectively deliver a message to young people on social

behaviors. In fact, if the message came from them it would likely cause the opposite of the intended effect. Young people don't follow, listen to or adhere to the social media accounts of old stogie hospital systems. Young people follow and are influenced by their peers. "It was a no brainer for us to recommend TikTok, as the platform has strong reach and engagement [with the Gen Z community]," C-E group account director Michael Tucker tells Muse. "We wanted to create a crowdsourced PSA that could reach people who typically have a strong feeling of invincibility. Instead of telling them what to do, we wanted them to tell each other." (Muse, 2020)

The third insight that drove the direction of the Own the Curve campaign was to seamlessly integrate with culture. The campaign looked at culture as something that is to be traded in and not faked. They relied on cultural experts, also known as influencers, to produce and disseminate messages as the foundation of the campaign. Kaiser Permanente did not produce or distribute one tweet as part of this campaign.

In fact, the organization did not even create a social media handle for TikTok which is the primary location of where the campaign lived. The organization very lightly used their brand in select places for the campaign in an intentional effort not to cloud the reach of the campaign. If the target audience saw the brand first before hearing or seeing a post, it would likely be disregarded as not relevant by viewers. The campaign knew its younger target audience was looking for content from their peers so the brand intentionally went with a "message first" strategy rather than "brand first".

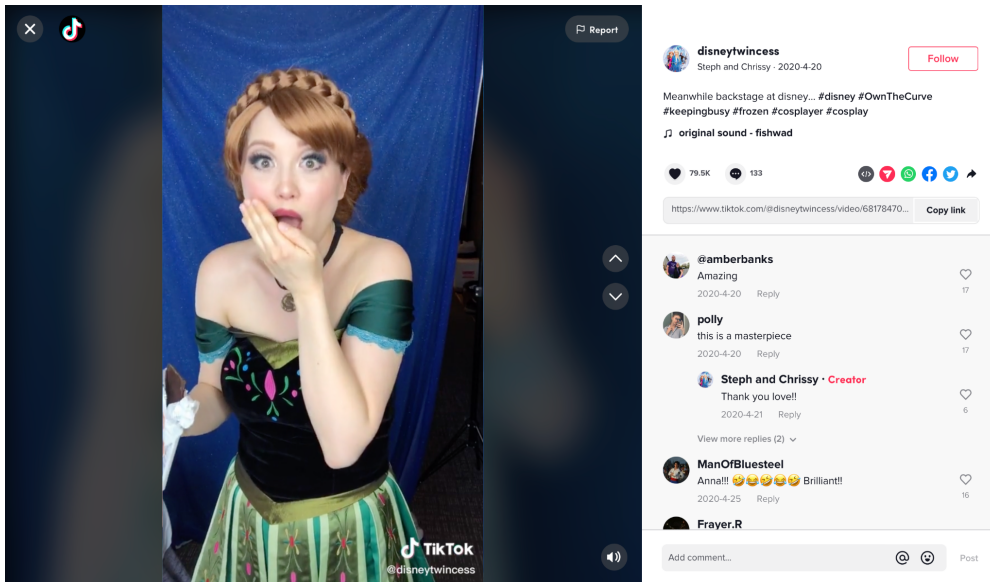


Figure 14 Disney princes backstage COVID-19

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: Funny and entertaining use of costume play serve to grab attention.

Sentiment: Copy and hashtags represent a sincere desire to help spread important information

Cultural Cues: Costume play has become a significant cultural cue and activity for Gen-Z. They enjoy dressing up and it is part of their cultural norms

Reactions/influence: 79k likes and 123 comments, most of which are positive, light and funny says that people really enjoy this kind of post. Even though it is very light on messaging it show support for the public health cause.



Figure 15 Instagram post inquiry COVID-19

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: Funny and playful in tone, the post is playing off of the popularity of TikTok during the pandemic.

Sentiment: Low on information but high on cultural cues and entertainment value with easily recognizable trends and hashtags added to help the message spread.

Cultural Cues: The post uses a number of references to other social media platforms and popular post.

Reactions/influence: Many reactions from folks about the use of Instagram. People reacted mostly positively to the post but very few mentioned Covid-19 related topics.

- For You
- Following
- LIVE
- Popular topics
 - Comedy
 - Gaming
 - Food
 - Dance
 - Beauty
 - Animals
 - Sports
- Suggested accounts
 - mileycyrus** ✓
Miley Cyrus
 - samsmith** ✓
Sam Smith
 - badbunny** ✓
Bad Bunny
 - snoopdogg** ✓

ig: isabella.drawsss
the "hey y'all" 🤔
2020-4-16 679 Reply
View more replies (4) ↓

Jess and Coop
ADDISON I DID UR NEW DANCE 💕🥰
2020-4-16 732 Reply
View more replies (12) ↓

romeo strijd ✓
🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏
2020-4-16 627 Reply
View more replies (2) ↓

N
Too lazy sorry
2020-4-16 228 Reply
View more replies (5) ↓

majestic.
could @montylopez tshirt be addisons merch? 🤔
2020-4-16 281 Reply
View more replies (1) ↓

👉Outfits👈
when is your merch available
2020-4-16 188 Reply
View more replies (13) ↓

Figure 16 Adison Ray COVID-19 direct to camera

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

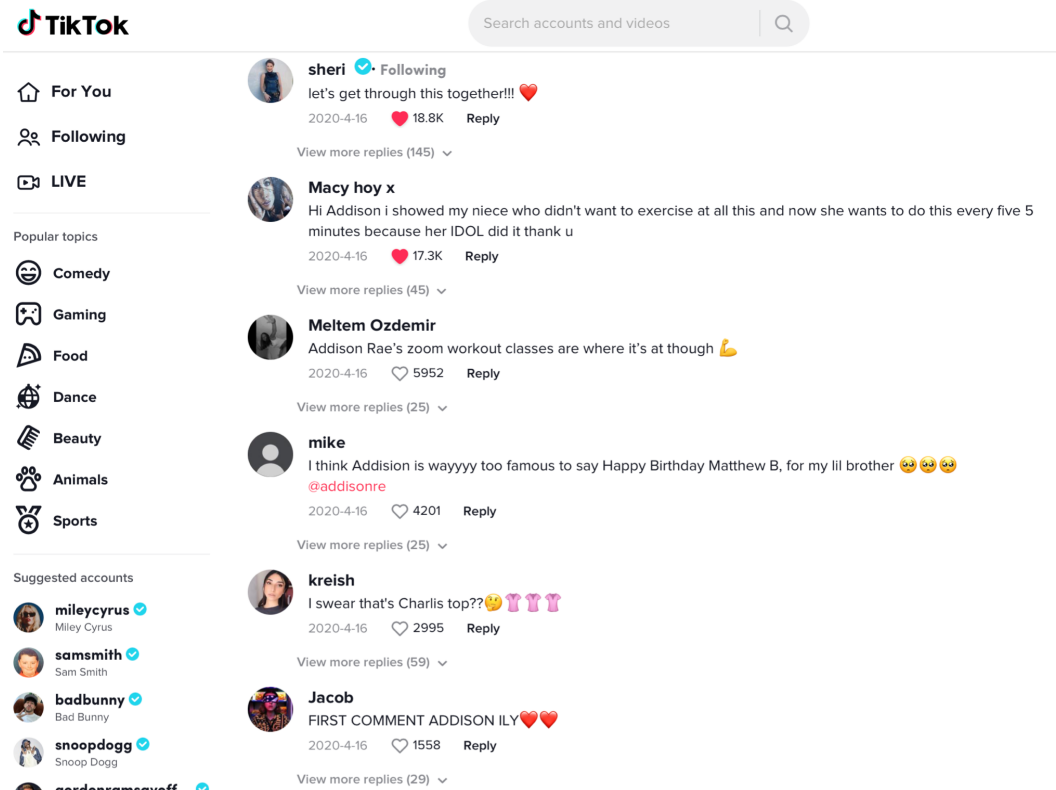


Figure 17 Adison Ray COVID-19 direct to camera comments

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: The post conveys high energy and playfulness with a clear message that is both reflecting what the sponsor has asked to communicate and providing a level of entertainment that her fans pay attention to.

Sentiment: The post provides helpful information with a view that we all need to do our part

Cultural Cues: The post makes use of very popular talent who has the most followers on TikTok platform at the time.

Reactions/influence: This post received many mixed reactions. While the post garnered a lot of attention it also confused viewers on why it was originating from an NBA handle.



Figure 18 Twins dancing for positive COVID message

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: The post conveyed fun, light and entertaining dancing moves intended to draw the viewer in while also attaching to the trend of how to stay busy during the pandemic.

Sentiment: Easy going and excitable with teenage dance move energy, these sisters are jumping on the dance move trends of TikTok.

Cultural Cues: The post shows teenagers with trending music and dance moves. They are wearing stay at home quarantine outfits which gives strong cues of the moment and that they are relatable.

Reactions/influence: A lot of reactions in likes and comments are mostly about the sisters and not the own curve topic.

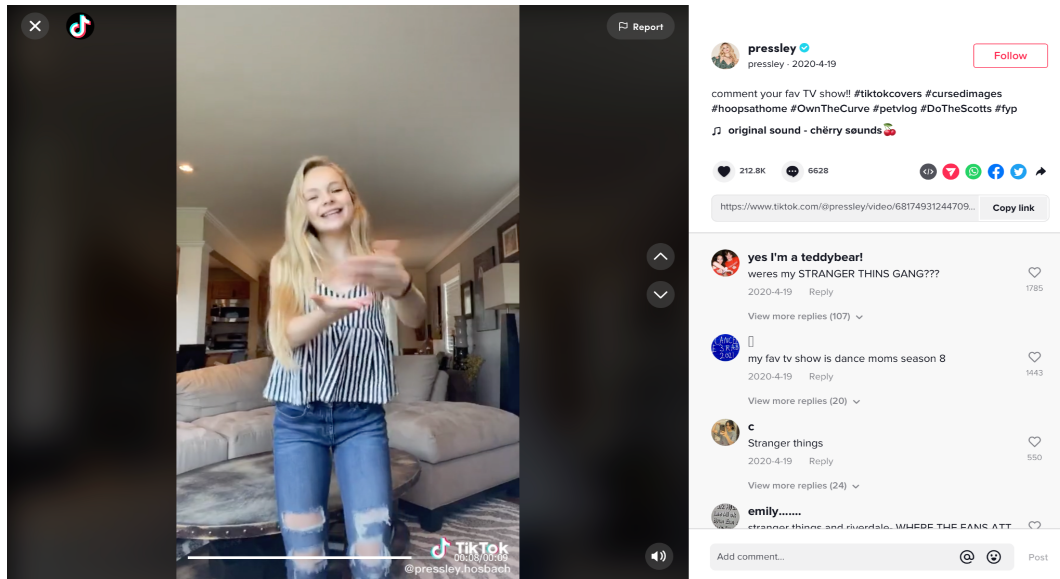


Figure 19 Influencer dancing and talking favorite TV

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: The post conveys upbeat energy with music and dancing with familiar music from *Stranger Things* to pull people in.

Sentiment: Playful and lighthearted the video is showing trends of folks looking to stay busy during the pandemic.

Cultural Cues: Dancing and talking favorite TV series are big cues for real time trend connections being made in this post.

Reactions/influence: Many people take time to comment and like video; the content and topic resonate broadly with the audience.



Figure 20 Popular influencer doing funny skit about lockdown

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: Funning and playful is mixed with very silly vibes and a generic smile that makes viewers laugh outload at the absurdity.

Sentiment: Joking and non-serious, it's hard not to smile while watching this funny video with a straightforward message.

Cultural Cues: The subject is wearing his typical bright colors which signify the silliness of his videos.

Reactions/influence: There are lots of positive and laughing reactions from viewers who find the content funny.

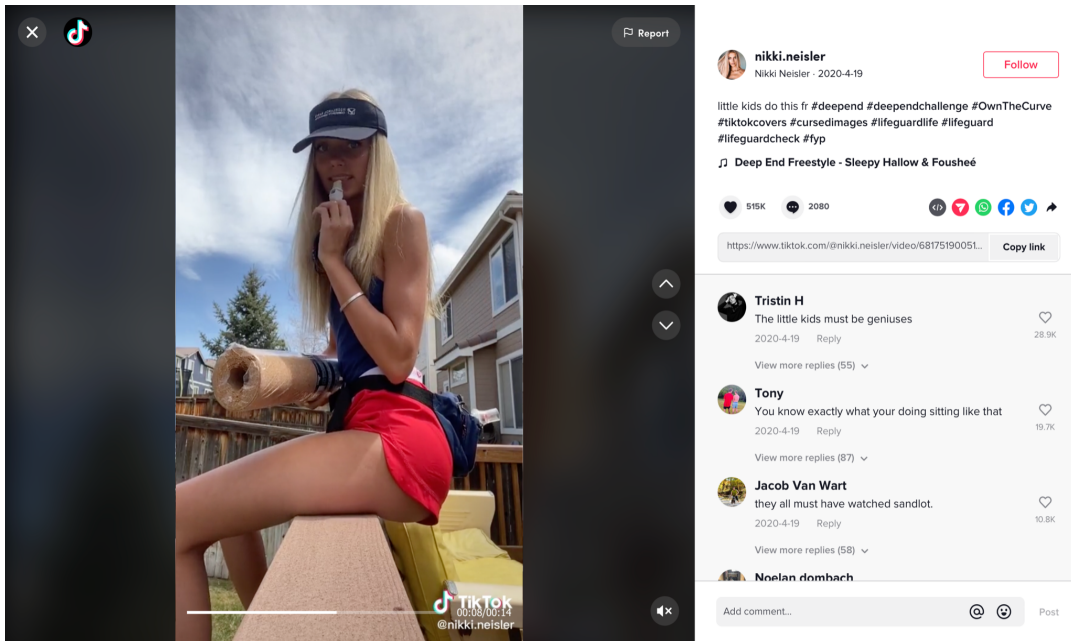


Figure 21 Popular influencer doing funny skit about lockdown

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: The tone is not serious at all. Video feels a bit all over the place and incoherent at times.

Sentiment: The post conveys fun and going a little stir crazy during quarantine.

Cultural Cues: Clearly, the image is set at home and in the backyard; the video shows classic clues of home during COVID-19 quarantine behavior.

Reactions/influence: The videos show a bit of skin with clear attempt at sex appeal which gets attention and helps to account for the 2k plus comments on the video. One comment mentions “you know exactly what you’re doing sitting like that”.

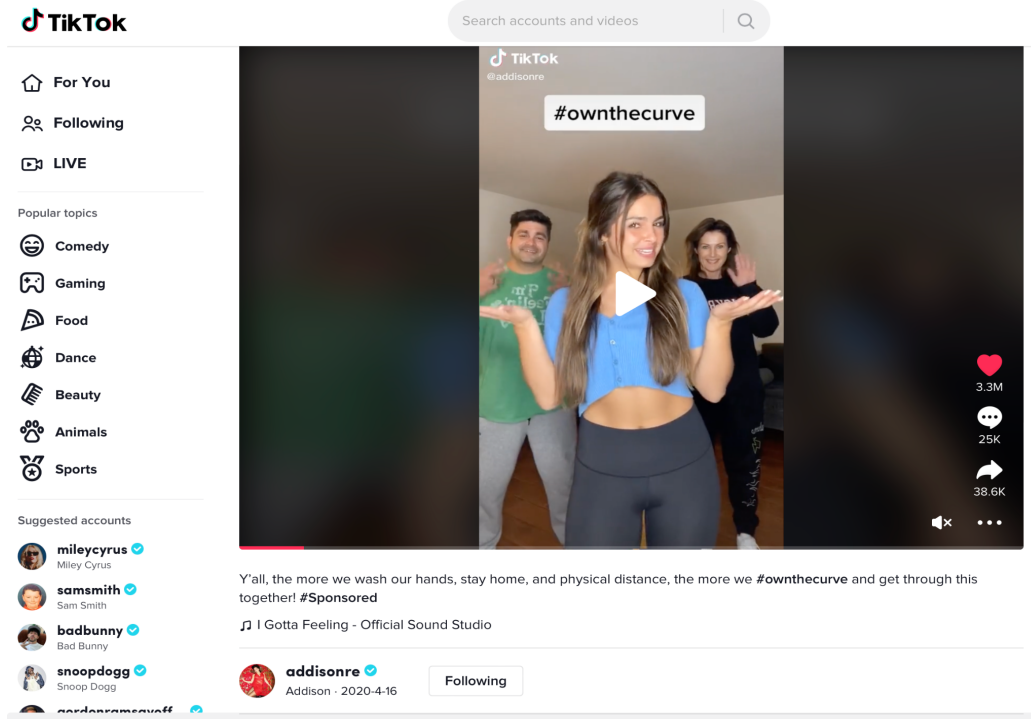


Figure 22 Skit with parents about things to do during lockdown

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: Positive and well-intentioned motivational video encourage viewers to be empowered and own the curve on the COVID-19 spread.

Sentiment: The sentiment is fun but clearly relaying a message promoting healthy behavior for the whole family.

Cultural Cues: Video features family with a young adult as main character and a mother and father as supporting figures encouraging action.

Reactions/influence: There was a huge volume of viewers and reactions to the video.

More than 3MM likes, 25K comments and 38k shares and downloads. Viewers had an overwhelming response to the content—largely positive and enthusiastic.

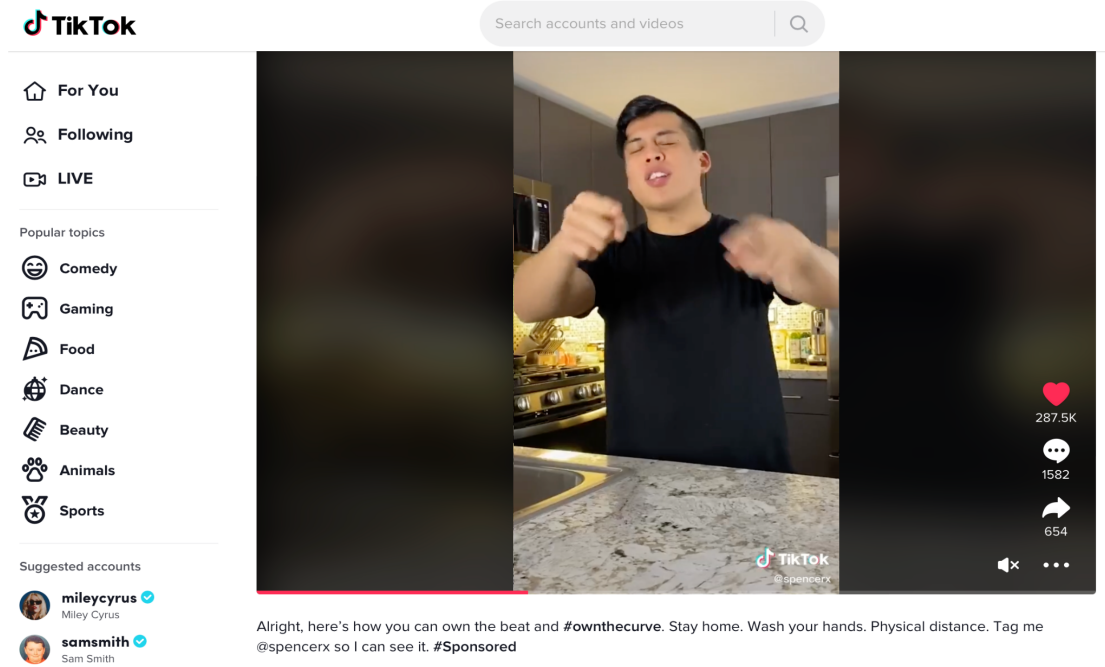


Figure 23 Popular influencer doing beatboxing

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: Funny with entertaining rhythm and a classic beat box style, the post has a bunch of easy-to-follow messages about preventing COVID-19.

Sentiment: Serious and lighthearted at the same time, the video feels very scripted and planned with a clear message from a sponsor.

Cultural Cues: Younger adult audience focused, the video is heavy on message through a plethora of cultural cues.

Reactions/influence: Tapping into a genre of hip-hop made famous in rap music, the reactions seem to be mostly receptive to this style of delivery.

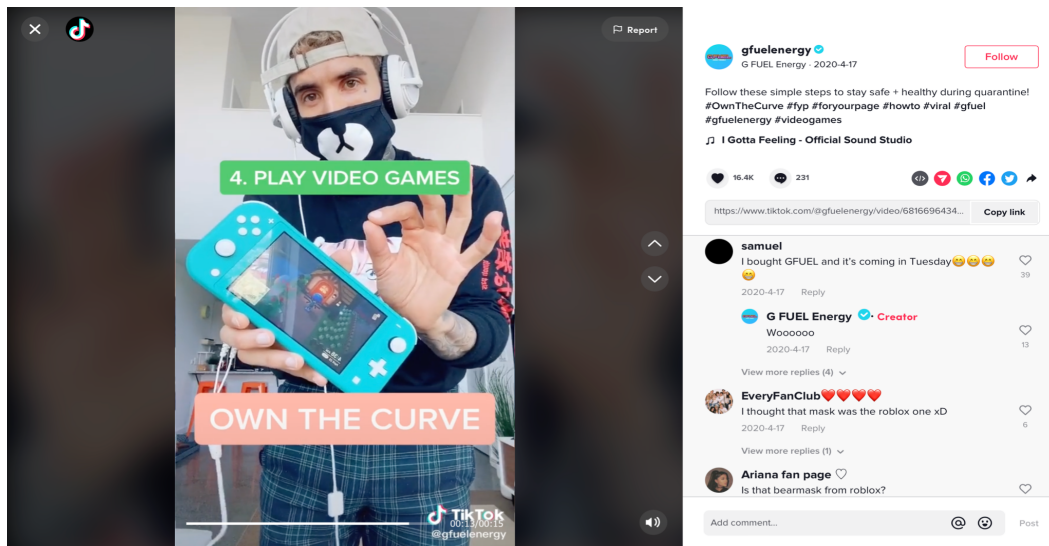


Figure 24 Popular influencer talking about gaming

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

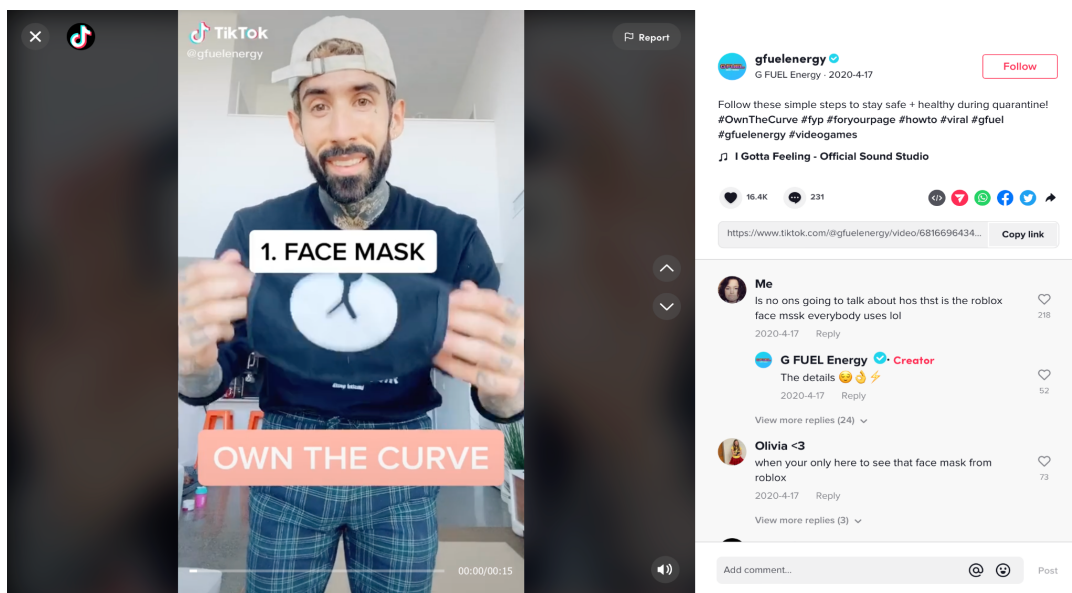


Figure 25 Popular influencer talking about gaming

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: The tone is positive and encouraging with an almost elementary teacher like delivery of the message.

Sentiment: The sentiment is helpful and educational with step-by-step instructions on how viewers can do better at avoiding covid.

Cultural Cues: Many props like video games, headphones and backwards hat are used to maybe reach a young adult audience. The tattoos on hands and neck also speak to an attempt to resonate with popular culture.

Reactions/influence: The post received quite a number of reactions including 16k likes and over 230 comments. The comments mention cues like a “roblox face mask”, which is like an ester egg planted in the video for viewers to find.

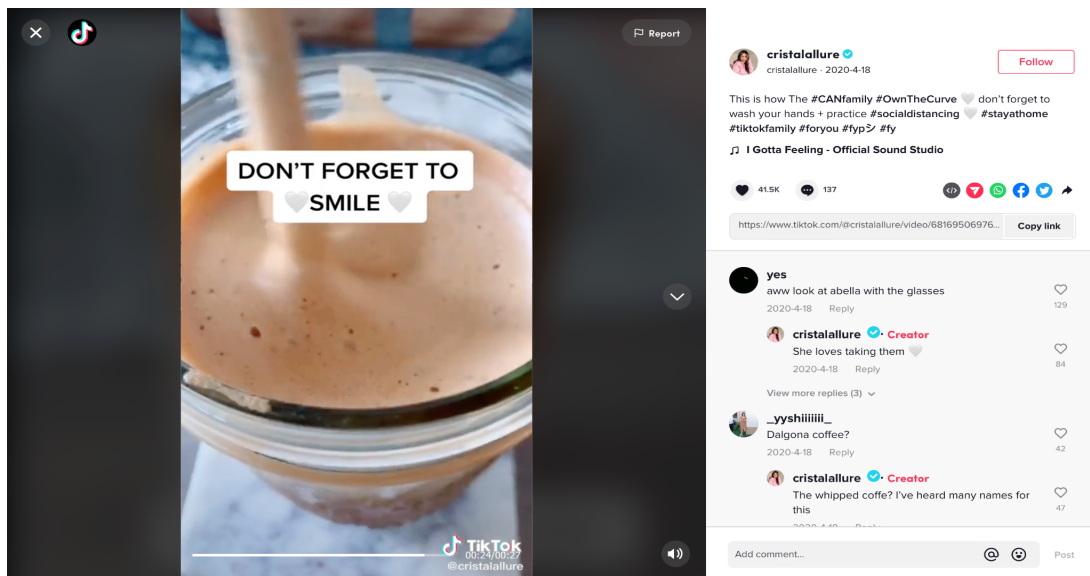


Figure 26 Influencer discovering new drinks while coffee shops are closed

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: The tone is joyful with promotion of very decadent coffee drink and excitement about discovering something new.

Sentiment: The sentiment is sincere and eager to share a tip or knowledge about a life hack with others.

Cultural Cues: The subject is clearly bored and staying at home during the pandemic and learning new tricks and recipes rather than going out in public.

Reactions/influence: The response was very positive response with 41k likes and 137 comments.

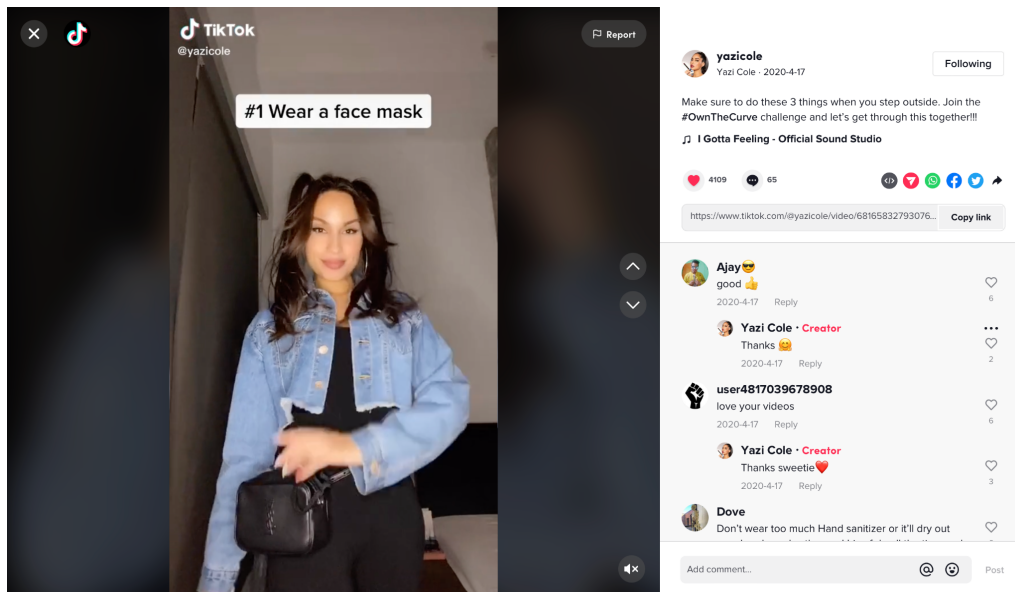


Figure 27 Influencer discovering ways to promote mask wearing

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/own-the-curve?lang=en>.

Tone: Simple and carefree in tone, the video is giving serious advise about what to do before going outside during the pandemic.

Sentiment: Sincere and helpful the video also reflects trendy hair and clothes to attract the viewer to keep watching and otherwise boring message.

Cultural Cues: Young woman with modern trendy attire, the video had a heavier focus on fashion.

Reactions/influence: All positive reactions with 4k likes and 65 comments in reaction to posts, reflects a very receptive audience to this type of message delivery.

British Red Cross Covid-19 Campaign

The British Red Cross produced a long running Covid-19 public health campaign largely based off of their already existing social media strategy and tactics. Their approach is to use wit and humor to positively influence a mostly younger audience to adopt behaviors like handwashing, mask wearing and vaccine adoption. They promote vaccine adherence, staying healthy or prevention of the vaccine, emotional and mental health support, help with lonely or isolated individuals.

The Campaign's posts on TikTok span all of these topics and while aimed at individuals in the geographic area of the United Kingdom, also reach people all over the world. They have attempted to educate and separate fact from fiction in the content they release. Below we review a sampling of post from the campaign which originate from multiple different creators.

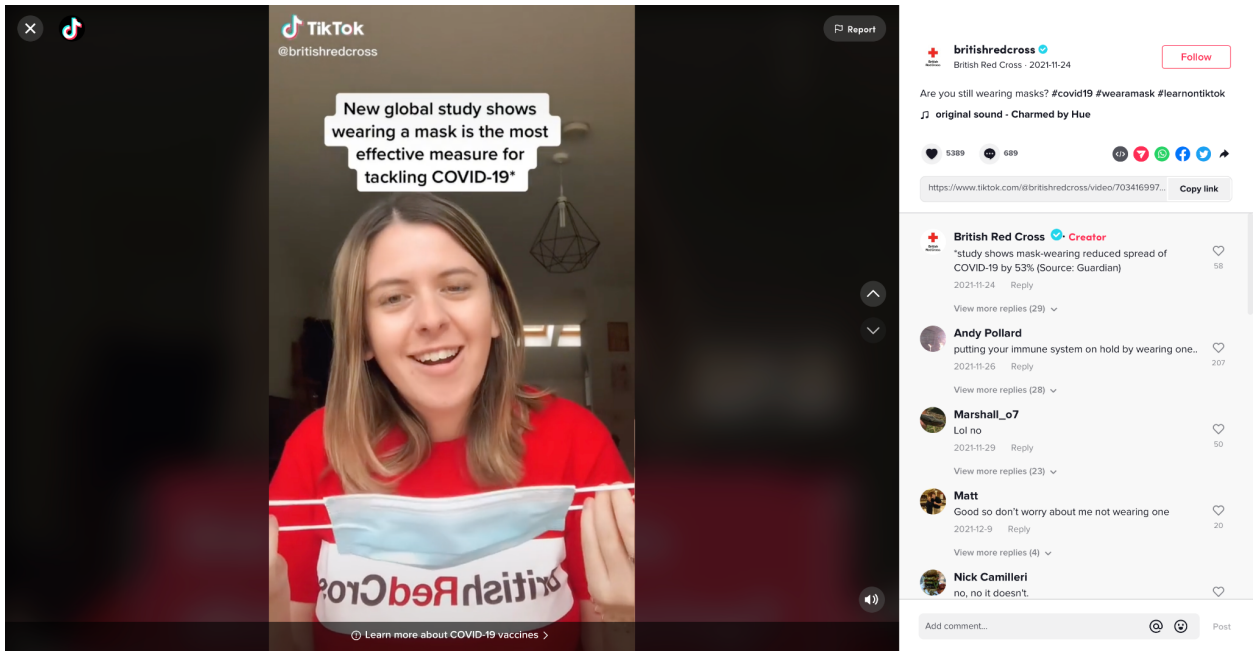


Figure 28 Influencer promoting mask wearing

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: Matter of fact in tone, the post is focused on conveying a message from a regular everyday type of person.

Sentiment: Sincere while also both serious and fun, the message appears to be directly commissioned by the Red Cross and not necessarily uncoerced.

Cultural Cues: The post is a younger person wearing the red shirt brand of the Red Cross trying to connect with the audience who respects the organization's values.

Reactions/influence: There were very mixed reactions with positive and skeptical responses. Many folks questioned the accuracy of the information being shared.

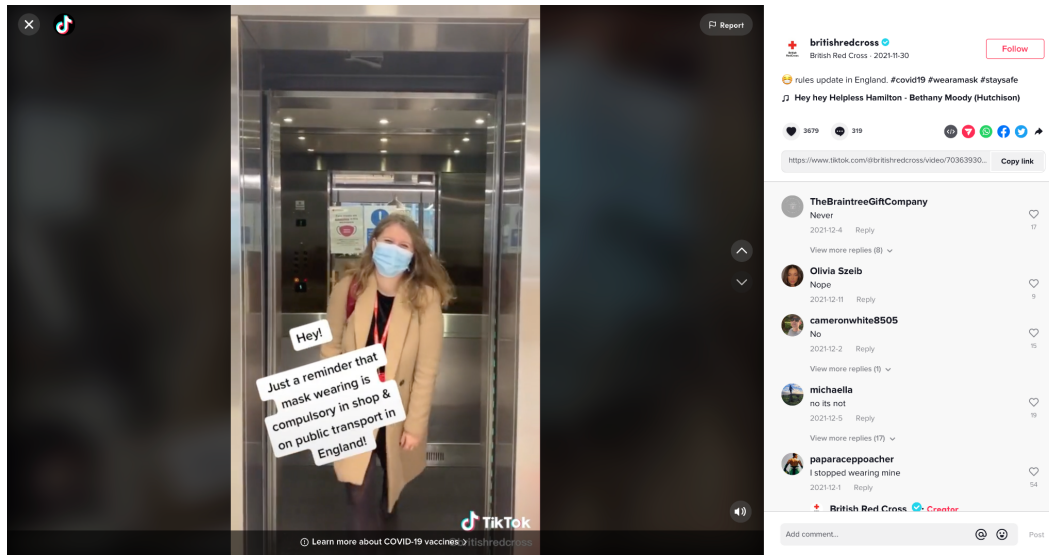


Figure 29 Influencer promoting mask wearing while in public

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: The tone was helpful.

Sentiment: The sentiment was sincere and rules oriented focus on what we need to do to get back to business.

Cultural Cues: We see business attire and a middle aged worker in an office setting. The post is a younger person donning a work badge as if she's trying to connect with the audience that's going back to work.

Reactions/influence: There were very mixed reactions with positive and skeptical responses. Many folks questioned the accuracy of the information being shared.

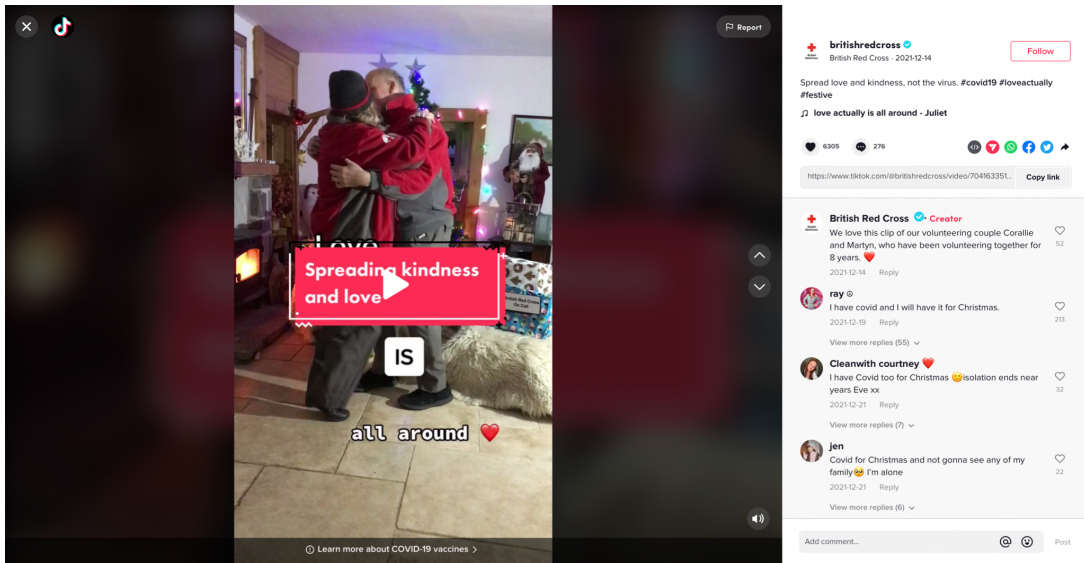


Figure 30 Family at home getting ready for Christmas

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: Festive over the holiday season, the tone is about still celebrating even during a pandemic but doing it safely.

Sentiment: Kind and helpful, the sentiment is coming from a place of authenticity in encouraging folks not to spread the virus.

Cultural Cues: There is a Christmas tree in the background with a statue of Santa Claus and two older people embracing are strong cues we recognize for the holiday season.

Reactions/influence: There were very snarky and dismissive comments skeptical about the post's validity.

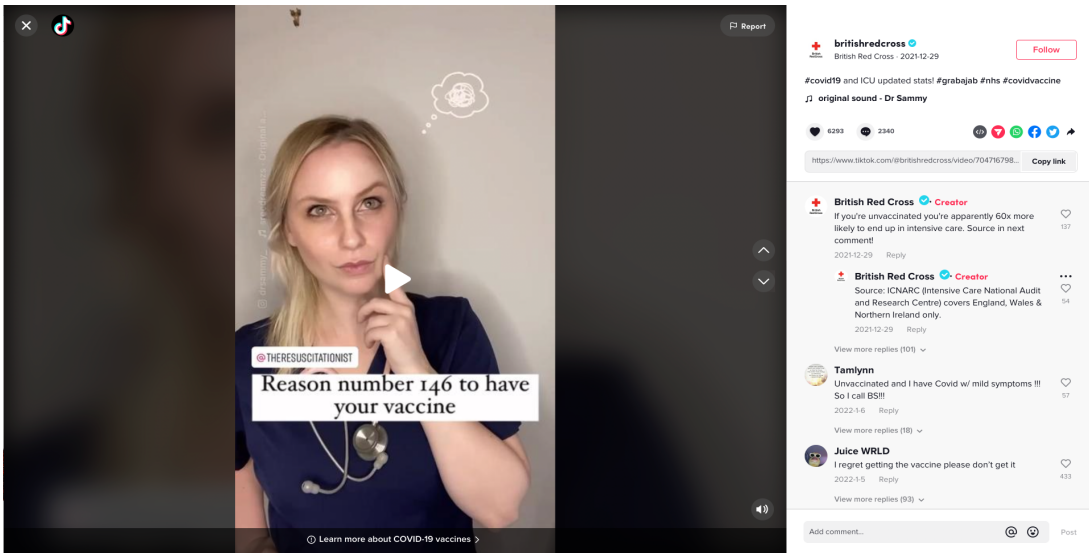


Figure 31 Nurse at work promoting vaccine

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: Matter of fact in tone, the post gives the overwhelming sense that there are many good reasons for getting vaccinated.

Sentiment: A straight faced attitude intended to be humorous and yet give a strong encouragement to get vaccinated.

Cultural Cues: Wearing scrubs and a stethoscope to indicate the message is coming from a medical professional. A common tactic of listing reasons why and starting off at a high number—in this case number 146.

Reactions/influence: There were over 6k in likes and 2340 in comments, of which most are natural or negative. Very few are incentivized to post something positive in agreement with post.

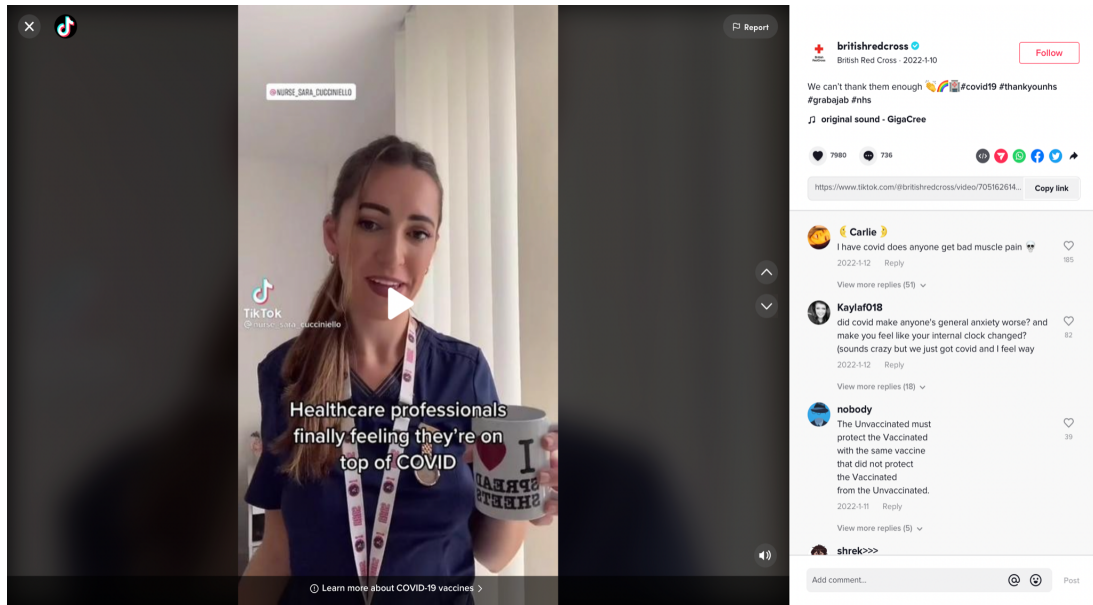


Figure 32 Healthcare profession with COVID-19 message

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: Positive and pleasant tone, the post is intended to feel like she is helping the viewer.

Sentiment: Sincere and helpful, the sentiment feels genuine and inspirational.

Cultural Cues: Wearing scrubs and a badge to indicate the message is coming from a medical professional on her way to work is a very clear cue.

Reactions/influence: Almost 8k in likes but the comments are mixed at best to mostly negative are driven mostly by the social media handle to message is coming from. Had the message actually come from the individual in the video and not the Red Cross, the reactions would undoubtedly be less negative.

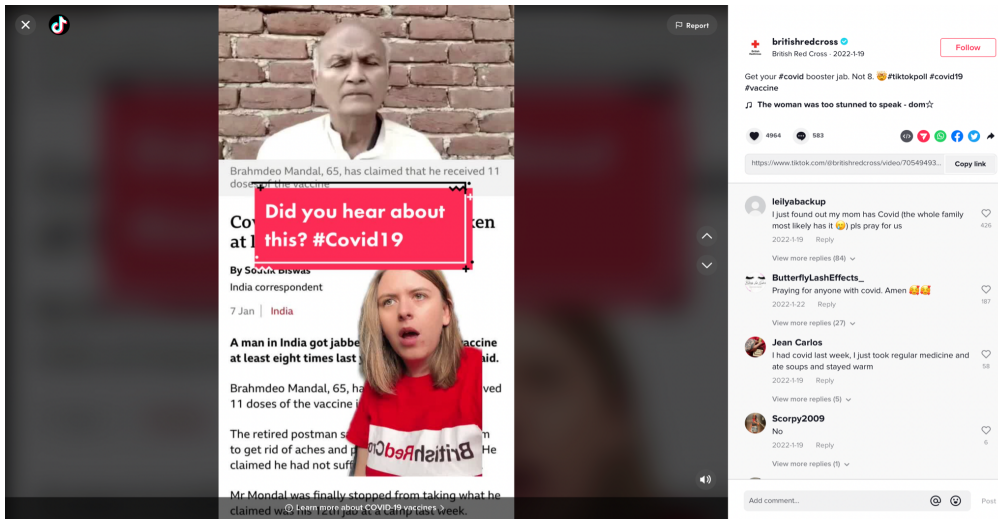


Figure 33 reaction to news that man had 11 COVID shots

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: The tone was sarcastic and a bit condescending with a strange topic to be promoting.

Sentiment: Newsworthy information was being shared but not exactly on message for encouraging folks to get vaccinated.

Cultural Cues: A Red Cross shirt is being displayed and the use of strong facial expressions is following a recent trend on social media. The video is stitched with another social media post to appear as if she is watching and reacting to the video for the first time.

Reactions/influence: There were almost 5k in likes and 583 comments. Mixed and negative reactions are prevalent because the facial reaction is staged, which limits the credibility of the message.

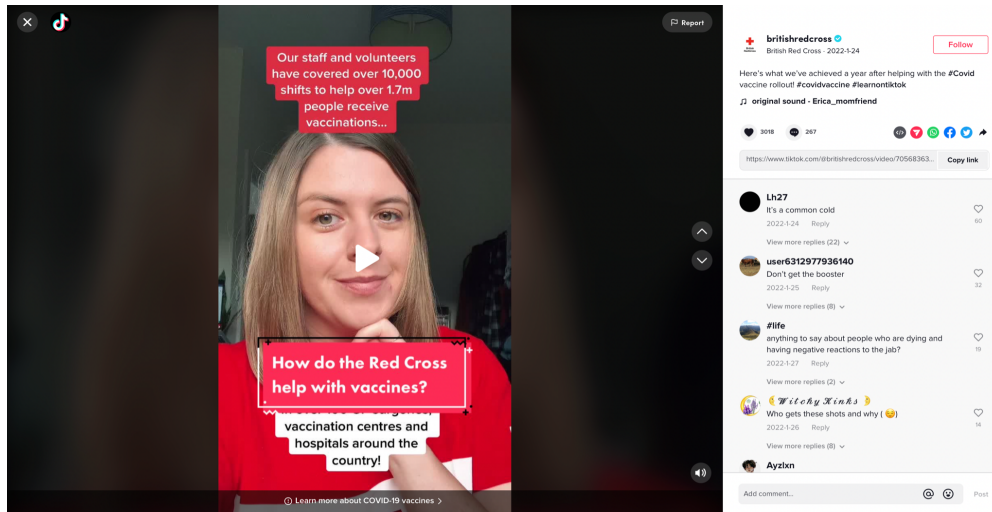


Figure 34 Healthcare volunteer with COVID-19 message

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: Sarcastic and a bit condescending, the tone is intended to be a bit arrogant in delivery and message.

Sentiment: Newsworthy information was shared about the amount of work the Red Cross is doing to help the broader good during the pandemic.

Cultural Cues: A red Cross shirt is being displayed and the use of strong facial expressions is following a recent trend on social media of looking to camera with a smirk on face while a message is being shared via words on the screen.

Reactions/influence: There were over 3k in likes and 267 comments. There were mixed and negative reactions.

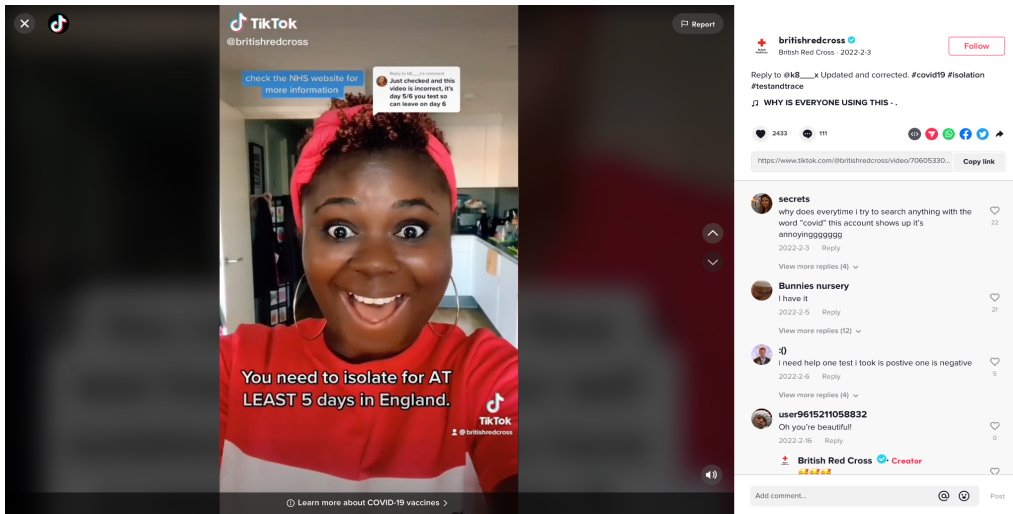


Figure 35 A COVID-19 message to isolate at least 5 days

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: Happy and positive in tone, the message is clearly sponsored by the Red Cross.

Sentiment: Sharing new information that is need to know for all of us trying to get over COVID and back to work. The emotional cues are a bit over the top which makes the sentiment feel less authentic.

Cultural Cues: Wearing the same red shirt and big facial expressions with younger trending look we see across social media, the target is going after those with young energy scrolling through social media.

Reactions/influence: There were mixed positive and negative comments 2.5k likes and 111 comments; viewers are skeptical of the message because of the source.

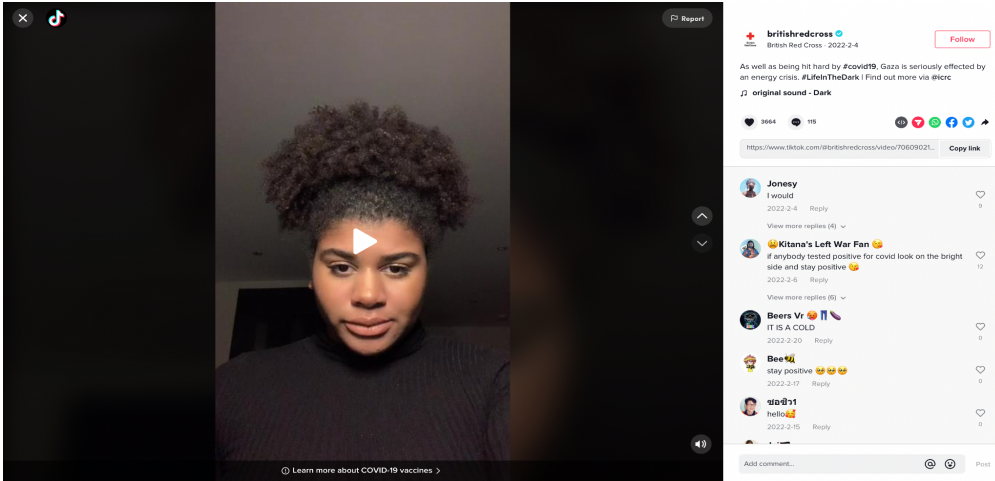


Figure 36 A COVID-19 awareness update

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: Somber in tone, the video talks about issues for Gaza and the compounding effect of COVID-19 on a city.

Sentiment: Very serious with a strong urgency, the sentiment is encouraging folks to donate to the Red Cross to help communities around the world.

Cultural Cues: Looking right at camera and telling an interesting story to grab the attention of the audience is a method made popular on TikTok and something viewers are comfortable with.

Reactions/influence: There were silly and off-topic reactions 3.5k likes and 115 comments which are mixed but mostly positive.

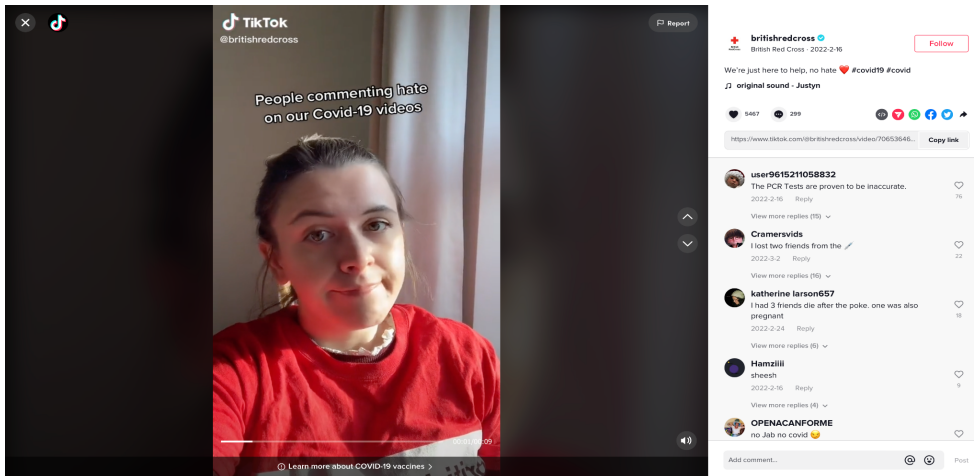


Figure 37 A COVID-19 response to negative backlash.

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: The tone was sarcastic and a bit condescending; the video addresses all of the negative comments the Red Cross is receiving for their posts.

Sentiment: The post conveys that newsworthy information is being shared.

Cultural Cues: A Red Cross shirt is being displayed and the use of strong facial expressions is following a recent trend on social media.

Reactions/influence: There were almost 5.5k in likes and 299 comments, including mixed and negative reactions.

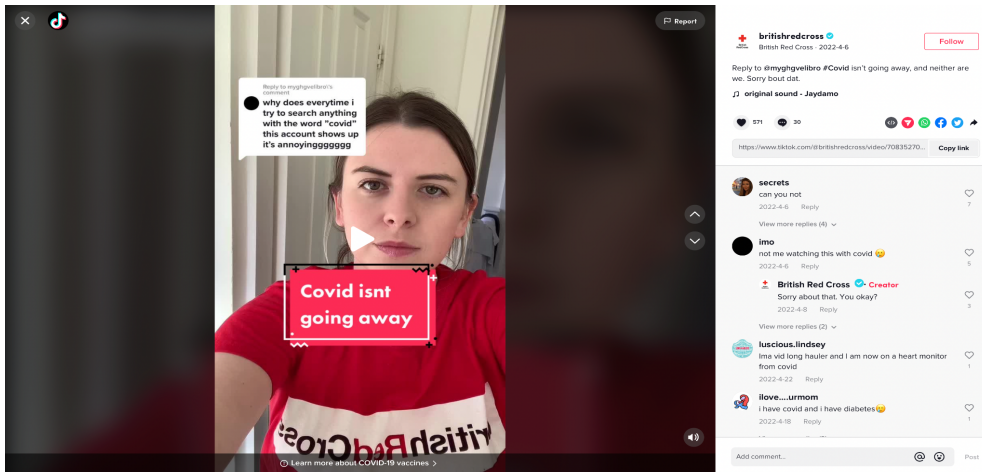


Figure 38 A COVID-19 reminder from RedCross.

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: The tone is serious and angry about a response to a previous post. This post borders on being downright nasty in a backlash at someone who questioned their legitimacy.

Sentiment: We see a childish response to information being shared with reactions to previous content. They are not happy that someone would question them just trying to share COVID-19 information.

Cultural Cues: A red Cross shirt is being displayed and the use of strong facial expressions is following a recent trend on social media. Anger and contempt are clearly at high levels on her face and in her voice.

Reactions/influence: With 571 likes and 30 comments this post is equivalent to an online tongue lashing and it received mixed and many negative reactions.

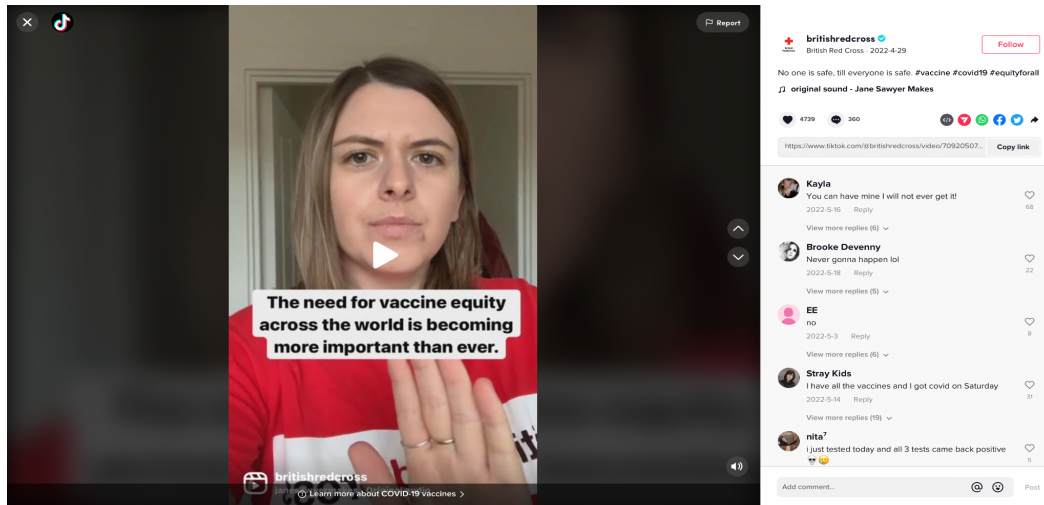


Figure 39 COVID-19 vaccine equity

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: Sarcastic and a bit condescending, this post is an example of the escalating tensions between the people of this Red Cross program and the viewers of their post.

Sentiment: Newsworthy information is being shared to combat the many antivaccine advocates who are trolling and disputing the information they post online.

Cultural Cues: A red Cross shirt is being displayed and the use of strong facial expressions is following a recent trend on social media to show strong emotions about the topic of vaccine equity.

Reactions/influence: There were almost 5k in likes and 360 comments the mixed and negative reactions came in strong on a topic that got people to react.

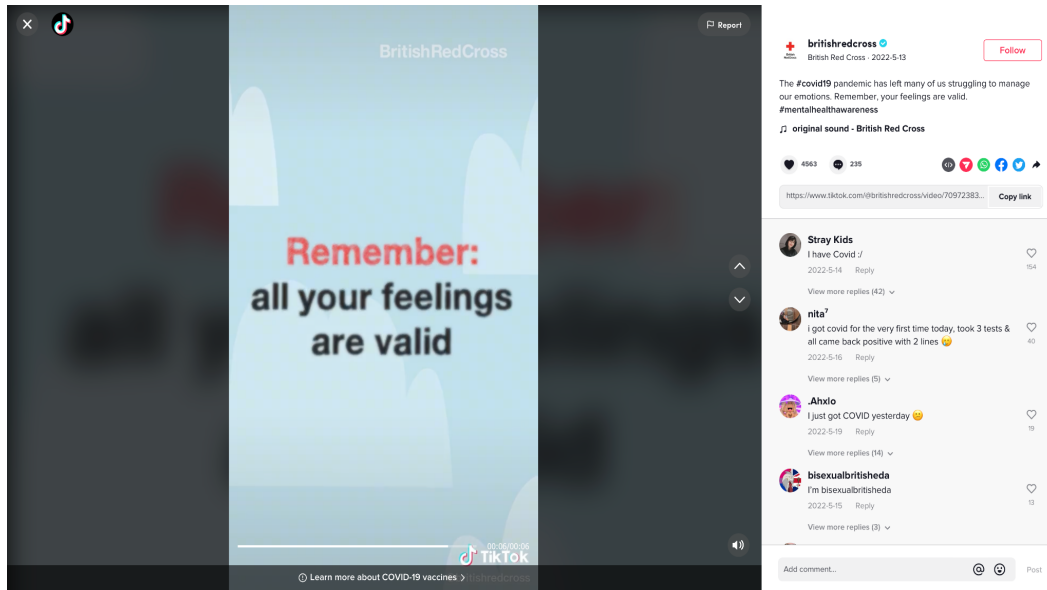


Figure 40 COVID-19 mental health reminder

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: There was a flat tone with use of animation as more of a billboard than the personable social media posts that we're accustomed to seeing from this campaign.

Sentiment: Newsworthy information being shared in plain way.

Cultural Cues: The media card style used to relay information in this post has also been used in other public health campaigns about hot topics like mental health.

Reactions/influence: There were almost 5k in likes and 235 comments. Many positive or natural reactions are lost with the amount of negative skepticism coming from others..

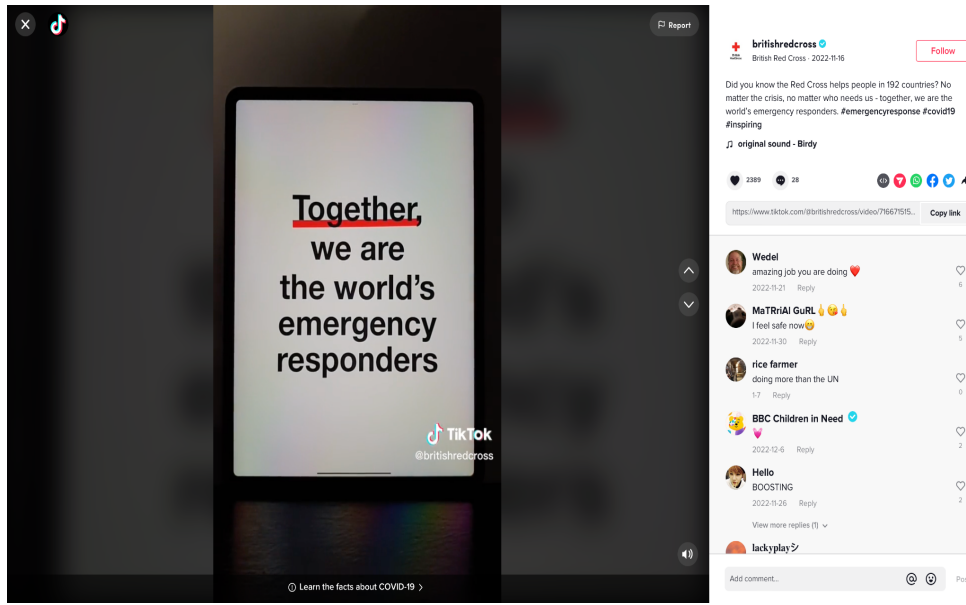


Figure 41 COVID-19 emergency responders support

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Tone: We see an ad-like message delivery of a straightforward no nonsense approach to getting important information to the audience that needs it.

Sentiment: The positive and encouraging sentiment appears to be coming from an authentic and sincere space.

Cultural Cues: No people are used in the imagery. Rather, they deploy a tactic of using just a plain message with black font on white background, intended to grab attention.

Reactions/influence: The post receives more positive reactions than their post using people but with many negative comments still appearing as reactions. The post received 2389 likes and 28 comments.

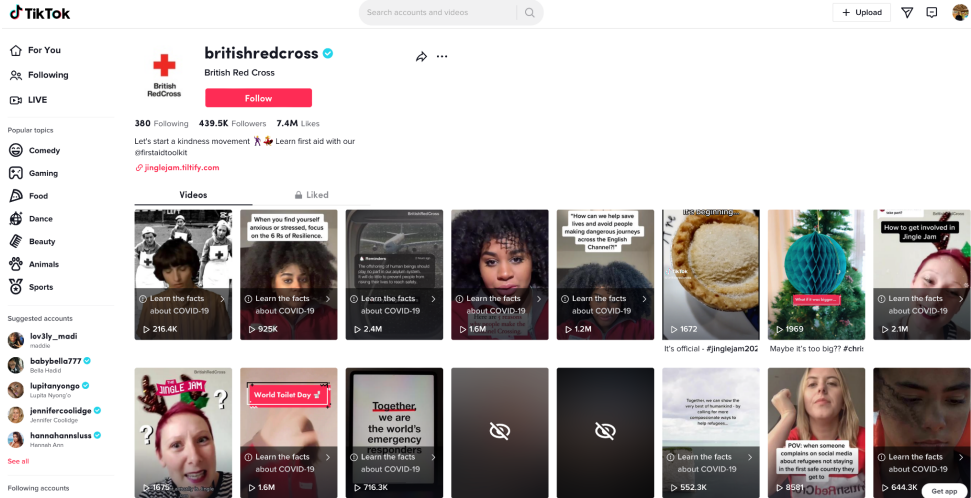


Figure 42 Sample of COVID-19 campaign page.

TikTok, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@britishredcross?lang=en>.

Data Analysis of All Three Campaigns

We see these three COVID-19 campaigns that are each established to achieve similar goals of educating and informing viewers but are approached and executed in very different ways. We also see that the responses from viewers can vary widely across and between campaigns. Viewers are savvy when it comes to recognizing authentic cultural cues in social media posts. What can feel like very random and arbitrary responses to these campaigns can actually reflect patterns we see when viewed through the lens of culture. In all three campaigns we can see that viewers see culture first and the culture must resonate before they can receive any message as legitimate.

We see the CDC campaign reflect positive responses and receptiveness to message when the cultural cues were perceived as authentic versus contrived. In the Thanksgiving post referenced earlier, the CDC saw significant negative response because the photo was a staged dinner that looked like stock photography. Social media viewers of this post recognized it as less than authentic and subsequently began to attack it and the sender. Contrast this with the post we saw from the 'Own the Curve' campaign. When the message was delivered from one of the many influencers used in the campaign, who had social media credibility, it was much more positively received. The influencer posts not only received much more interaction with their post, they also received much more positive feedback. Even though the viewer could see that the message in the post was part of a larger campaign, when it came from an individual that reflected their culture, they responded more positively.

These influencers are trusted keepers and arbitrators of the culture. To many of these viewers we see that a message has no chance of being received if not wrapped in the correct cultural cues. In many ways the influencers serve as shorthand for culture. They are literal stand-ins for culture and what's heard or not. Even like we see in many of the Red Cross posts with care providers. We see both doctors and nurses posting as part of the Red Cross campaign. Their credentials and medical expertise has very little social media credibility if not wrapped in the right cultural cues. The Red Cross started to directly respond to the overwhelming number of negative comments they received to their post.

As an outside viewer looking at the Red Cross campaign, one could see the frustration rising in the organization's escalating responses. While they were absolutely correct in their message and intentions, they lacked the cultural credibility which ultimately resulted in much more negative responses than they were prepared for. Without the right cultural cues being presented by credible cultural representatives, the messages never achieved their intended goal. In the online social media space, cultural credibility is even more relevant than a medical degree. Doctors and other medical practitioners who want to influence in the social media space must bring both culture and credentials if they want to be heard.

Chapter VI.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Here's what's next for culture in the social space and how it applies to public health campaign efforts.

Culture in Social Media

Culture is no longer just the distinguished arts, costumes, celebrations, food and history of a given group of people. Social media has made culture much more dynamic and fluid than ever before. It often represents an amalgamation of the intersection of a plurality of cultures and social interactions happening constantly in the virtual spaces we create online.

What is still true about culture is that it is greatly influential on individual identities and worldviews. People still look to culture to process and understand the world around them. As we've seen in the social interaction in this study, communicators that get culture wrong, often do so at the peril of their own work. When the cultural cues miss the mark in a social post, the responses can range from being ignored to outright hostile and agitated responses from viewers. While culture can be faked, it is still difficult to accomplish and reflect culture at a deep meaningful level.

We saw many examples of cultural cues being used in a contrived inauthentic way and we also saw the immediate rebuke from the very audiences they were intended to reach. Humans are innately programmed to have a bias toward cultural cues. We often can't define or articulate how culture influences our interpretation of a situation or social media post but we are very in tune with how it makes us feel. When we get culture right,

it feels good. It feels authentic and we have a bias toward liking the individuals and messages associated with the correct culture. As humans, we can't get enough of "feel good" culture. The algorithms in our social media feeds are tuned to feed us culture we perceive as good and our brains literally feel pleasure signals from it.

As is the quintessential cliché of a high school experience—the "cool kids" have the most influence in a school community. Even more than teachers or others in the community, the "cool kids" found a way to package cultural cues and the rest of us are attuned to when the cues resonate with us. Social media puts this phenomenon in overdrive and on full display for the world to see. The communicators who get the cultural cues right, rule both the day and the platforms and they are rewarded with outsized influence.

This of course is also a cautionary tale. Because these same cultural cues can be exploited by technology to manipulate human behavior. We need more research on how culture can and is exploited and misused in the social media space. Social media algorithms can constantly feed us more of what feels good with very little questions of the origins or authenticity. Artificial intelligence (AI) can now produce human-like characters with human-like cultural cues that are all but indistinguishable to the average viewer. This is especially critical for the influences on younger more impressionable minds and as it relates to the influence on real world decision making like voting.

The technology of AI images, art, characters, copy and so much more is virtually unlimited and improving faster than we can think about it. Culture is what has set humans apart from other creatures for millennia and now it is changing, intersecting and evolving at breakneck speeds in the digital space. This study is a small example of the mighty

power culture has in social media and how we need to focus significant efforts to understand its impacts better.

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