

Research sheds light on the 'sounds of the pandemic'

May 20 2021, by Sharon Oosthoek



Credit: Engin Akyurt from Pexels

Last spring, Western anthropologist Karen Pennesi was about to embark on a research trip to Brazil just as COVID-19 started slamming borders shut.

Stuck at home working online, she found herself looking for evening distractions on YouTube and TikTok and discovered a wealth of pandemic songs and poems—often funny commentaries on our newly

confined lives.

Her first discovery was [Chris Mann's parody](#) of the Adele song Hello (From the Inside). His face pressed up against a window, Mann crooned: "Hello, it's me. I'm in California dreaming about going out to eat."

It made her laugh. Her 10-year-old son, too. He'd happened to be peering over her shoulder.

"He started to ask for more," said Pennesi, whose specialty is linguistic anthropology. Together, they began exploring a genre of online performances that Pennesi calls COVID verbal art.

It didn't take long for her to realize that millions of people around the world were doing the same thing. They were watching, posting and sharing not just songs, but other kinds of verbal art such as spoken-word poetry and comedy skits. Some were produced by professionals who were stuck at home just like their audience.

Pennesi began collecting examples for a course she teaches on verbal art and speech play.

"I thought if I'm going to sit around and watch these videos, I might as well do something with it," Pennesi said.

And then Western put out a call for professors to propose research projects for undergrads whose summer jobs had fallen apart due to the worsening pandemic.

She recruited second-year anthropology student Sydney Dawson to help her sift through online performances. The pair decided to focus on pieces referring to social and physical distancing, quarantine and isolation, hygiene and cleaning practices—everyday experiences during

the pandemic—as well as social and political critiques that explicitly mentioned COVID-19. They also deliberately sought out underrepresented voices to counterbalance trending videos that YouTube or TikTok suggested.

The result is an examination of 227 verbal art performances that offers an ethnographic record of how everyday life has changed over time during the pandemic, and how the focus shifted from initial confusion to political critique. Pennesi's article, "What Does a Pandemic Sound Like?," was published in the journal *Anthropologica* this spring.

She and Dawson discovered that in March, 2020, as health-care systems in Europe were overwhelmed and cases were on the rise in North America, COVID verbal art conveyed the essential messages from public health officials and governments: stay home, wash your hands, don't touch your face, keep your distance.

"Often amusing, these pieces helped normalize the idea that such actions were necessary and beneficial to everyone, while also acknowledging the inconvenience and [negative feelings](#) around the requirements and prohibitions," Pennesi said.

The verbal art in March, 2020 tackled feelings of loneliness, boredom, Netflix overindulgence, toilet paper hoarding, and excessive sleeping, drinking and eating.

By April, 2020 as cases spread, deaths rose, schools remained closed and people lost jobs or struggled to work from home with the kids underfoot, the verbal art took a turn toward the serious. More posts were about tributes to essential workers, taking stock of what matters in life, staying virtually connected, or frustration over being confined with family.

While some might be inclined to dismiss online verbal art as

entertainment of little weight, Pennesi argues it has been a good representation of what people around the world are thinking and feeling at particular times. It's not just a reflection, she said: it also helps shape people's perceptions and sharpens understanding of the pandemic's emotional toll.

"It lets us acknowledge each other's frustrations and depression, but without the hard work of having to express it ourselves. Expressing is emotional work. Instead, we can just point to something and say, "This is how I feel." The artist gives us something we may not be able to articulate ourselves."

More information: Karen Pennesi, What Does a Pandemic Sound Like? The Emergence of COVID Verbal Art, *Anthropologica* (2021). [DOI: 10.18357/anthropologica6312021229](https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021229)

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