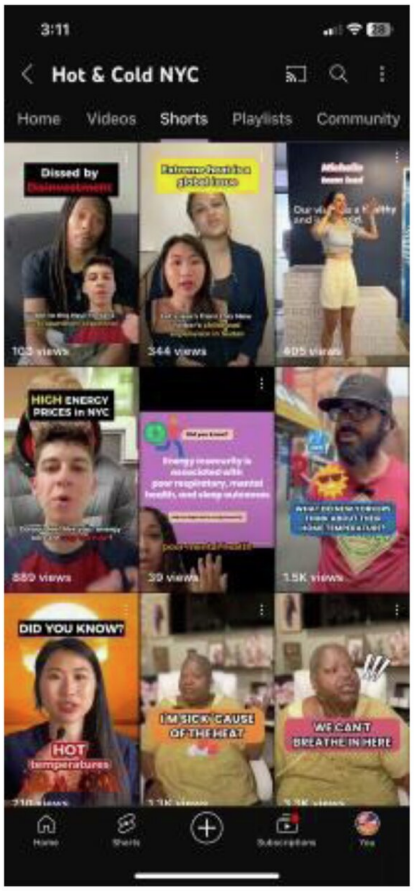
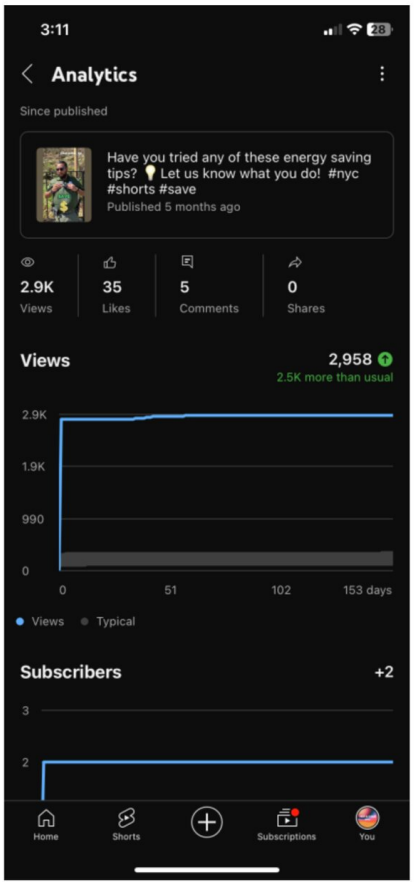
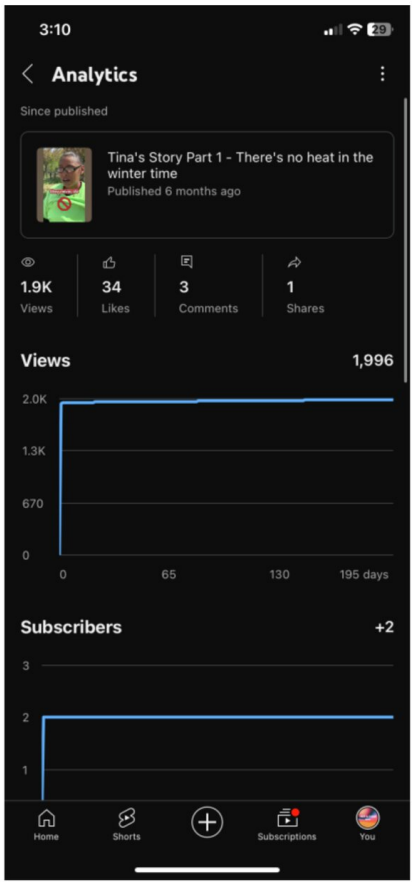
Social media interviews uncover New Yorkers' frustrations with high energy costs and reliability

September 9 2024


3:11
Hot & Cold NYC
Home
Videos
Shorts
Playlists
Community
Dissed by
HIGH ENERGY PRICES in NYC
DID YOU KNOW?
HOT temperatures
I'M SICK CAUSE OF THE HEAT
WE CAN'T BREATHE IN HERE


3:09
Hot & Cold NYC
Home
Videos
Shorts
Playlists
Community
WE NEED GENERATORS
I NEED ELECTRICITY!
5.1 MILLION
I GIVE EVERYTHING FOR MY KIDS
I'VE STRUGGLED FOR MANY YEARS
they never do
$200+ a month


3:11
Analytics
Since published
Have you tried any of these energy saving tips? 💡 Let us know what you do! #nyc #shorts #save
Published 5 months ago
2.9K Views
35 Likes
5 Comments
0 Shares
Views
2,958
2.5K more than usual
2.9K
1.9K
990
0
0
51
102
153 days
Views
Typical
Subscribers
+2
3
2
Home
Shorts
Subscriptions
You


3:10
Analytics
Since published
Tina's Story Part 1 - There's no heat in the winter time
Published 6 months ago
1.9K Views
34 Likes
3 Comments
1 Shares
Views
1,996
2.0K
1.3K
670
0
0
65
130
195 days
Subscribers
+2
3
2
1
Home
Shorts
Subscriptions
You

YouTube. Sample screenshots of Hot & Cold NYC's YouTube channel and engagement analytics. Credit: *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (2024). DOI: 10.1057/s41599-024-03477-5

Researchers at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health are using a novel interview method to assess New Yorkers' perceptions and feelings related to their difficulties paying for and controlling heating and cooling in their homes. Inspired by social media influencers, the resulting short videos are quickly posted on social media, where they have found a receptive following.

The street interview approach, dubbed StreetTalk, was used for the first time to engage the public on the topic of energy insecurity—a public health and environmental justice issue. The findings are published in *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*.

In 2023, researchers conducted 31 short interviews in English and Spanish with individuals on sidewalks, at bus stops, parks, and other public outdoor locations, in all five boroughs with individuals from varied racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Video content was evaluated for thematic commonalities, then edited and published on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube under the handle @hotandcold_nyc.

Typically, scientific findings are published and disseminated in peer-reviewed academic journal articles, which--even if they aren't paywalled--are written in academic jargon that can be difficult for the general public to understand. Furthermore, academic research often takes many months to publish. By contrast, StreetTalk allows for rapid

data collection and timely, accessible dissemination of findings. Videos are accessible and relatable, humanizing the issue of energy insecurity through personal experiences, emotional responses, and connections made by users. Interviews were posted within a month; in under a year, they reached 200,000 views and likes.

"StreetTalk has the potential to create a paradigm shift in how research is conducted and disseminated by engaging with larger, more diverse audiences in a timely manner. This method has the potential to alter scientific research accessibility and communication to the public, while maintaining rigorous standards in data analysis and reporting of findings," says study senior author Diana Hernández, Ph.D., associate professor in Sociomedical Sciences and a leading authority on energy insecurity.

"The active engagement we have received, including likes and comments discussing energy insecurity issues, highlights the importance of social media in fostering meaningful dialogue and community involvement," adds Nadav Sprague, a doctoral student in the Columbia Mailman Department of Epidemiology, and first author of the paper.

Among the themes researchers uncovered in the interviews:

1. Energy conservation. Interviewees said they were mindful of their energy consumption and did as much as possible to restrict use, primarily to manage costs. "Don't mess with the AC unless you really feel hot," one Staten Island participant advised.
2. Loss of agency. Interviewees said they felt helpless vis-à-vis landlords, utility providers, governmental agencies, and the rising cost of living. "Wintertime [is] very cold, (I) complain about fixing heat, and they never do," explained one Queens resident.
3. Frustration. Unexpected energy bill spikes and perceived lack of transparency in pricing were upsetting. "It's getting more

expensive, and the bill isn't always the same," one participant clarified.

4. Clean energy. Interviewees expressed an interest in solar power but lacked understanding of the economics and other practical matters related to solar power. "If the city of New York will allow us to have solar panels, maybe life will be a little bit easier," said one Bronx-based participant. (A related paper just out in the journal *Energy Policy* finds additional evidence for New Yorkers' interest in solar energy.)

Energy insecurity—often referred to as "America's hidden hardship"—is an umbrella term encompassing all the challenges related to energy access, affordability, and quality, which prevent people from meeting their basic household energy needs. Energy insecurity is associated with health vulnerabilities, including mental health conditions, respiratory issues, and cardiovascular diseases, particularly among disadvantaged populations. An estimated one-third of households in the United States are impacted by energy insecurity. A recent study by researchers at Columbia Mailman and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene found that nearly 30% of New York City residents are impacted.

Other than Hernández, all the other co-authors and researchers on this project are students, including undergraduates, master's and doctoral students, and post-doctoral trainees. They include Isabel B. Fan, Michelle Dandeneau, Jorge Fabian Hernandez Perez, Milan I. Riddick, Gabriella Y. Meltzer, and Eva L. Siegel at Columbia University; Jordyn Birmingham, Bowdoin College; and Daritza De Los Santos, University of Wisconsin.

More information: Nadav L. Sprague et al, StreetTalk: exploring energy insecurity in New York City using a novel street intercept interview and social media dissemination method, *Humanities and Social*

Sciences Communications (2024). DOI: 10.1057/s41599-024-03477-5

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health