Chapter 19
Green Generation and the Global South: TikTokers, Creators and Climate Change*

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Abstract

Climate change and the Green New Deal are among the most discussed topics on social media, which acts as a sounding board for ecological questions and offers visibility to geographical areas not considered by the mainstream media. In recent years, TikTok, in particular, has become the site of a collective narrative aimed at building widespread ecological awareness; for example, a global movement of activists who make climate change awareness videos has sprung up around the hashtag "#ecotok". Starting from these considerations, the contribution proposes an analysis of some profiles that exploit the potential of TikTok to communicate the climate emergency of southern areas, such as Africa, India, and territories with complex management of environmental policies. Thus, the aim is to reflect on the ecological consciousness of Generation Z, the primary spokesperson, and the practices of production, imitation, and storytelling promoted by TikTok.

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Keywords

TikTok; activism; social media; #ecotok; gen Z.

Introduction

The intention of this chapter is twofold: on the one hand, to reflect on the growing interest, especially among Generation Z, in environmental issues, an interest that has seen the emergence of new forms of global activism in recent years, born and supported by the internet; and on the other hand, on the critical role of social platforms in disseminating the climate crisis and in building community sentiments regarding this issue (Papacharissi 2016).

We focused on the TikTok platform, widely used by young generations, analyzing some profiles that exploit this social media to create engagement and activism mechanisms and narrate the climate emergency of certain areas considered metaphorically, for various reasons, "South of the World". In particular, we considered profiles that address climate change, especially in some areas of Africa, India, and South America, territories characterized by substantial socio-economic disparities and complex environmental management. In this way, we will reflect on the intersection between the political and ecological consciousness increasingly advocated by Generation Z today and the production, imitation, and audiovisual storytelling practices promoted by a social media platform like TikTok.

The theoretical and methodological framework adopted refers to Media Studies and Platform Studies, primarily because they acknowledge platforms' weight and "affective" aspect and pay attention to the deep connections between technologies and consumption practices. The intention is to conduct an exploratory analysis to identify and highlight the main communicative trends adopted on TikTok regarding climate change in some areas south of the world. Through an initial qualitative analysis that enables us to formulate a research hypothesis, we can distinguish, as will be seen, at least two overarching trends: on the one hand, the emergence of the green influencer who chooses to put their image at the service of the ecological message, and on the other hand, a different trend characterized by a more documentary-style expressive and communicative approach, detached from the figure of the individual disseminator.

In the first case, beyond the influencer's fame, the construction of the videos relies on the communicator's presence (discursively and aesthetically studied). Therefore, the green influencer acts by consciously exploiting dynamics of empathic and emotional engagement, and in some cases, with elements of comedy or entertainment that can strongly contrast the conveyed message.

In the second case, however, communication does not rely on self-representation practices. The main objective is to document in real-time the effects of climate change, effectively operating akin to participatory citizen journalism bolstered by the advent of social media platforms. In this case, the narrative register seems less theatrically and aesthetically curated and responds to the desire to primarily use social media as a vehicle for information and dissemination rather than personal expression.

As will be seen from the analysis of the case studies, these trends seem emblematically to correspond to two distinct geographical macro-areas: the predominantly US and Anglo-Saxon area, where users and green influencers make greater use of TikTok's expressive potential and the trends launched by the platform, and the areas of countries south of the world (predominantly Africa and South America), where the absence of visual and narrative schematism in video production suggests a lesser interest in exploiting the affordances offered by social media.

Participation and Media Affectivity in the Platform Society

Undoubtedly, climate change, sustainability, and the importance of a Green New Deal are among the most discussed topics in contemporary public debate and, particularly prominently in recent years, also in the digital environment, especially on social media. In this regard, various researchers have long been demonstrating how social platforms, thanks to their "affective mediation" (Grusin 2017; Papacharissi 2016), that is, their power to regulate individual and collective affectivity and to facilitate feelings of commitment and emotional involvement (Dean 2010), are now more effective than traditional advertising campaigns in encouraging users to be attentive and sensitive to ecological issues (Bedard and Reisdorf Tolmie 2018).

Above all, TikTok is a social platform capable of creating a particularly appreciated and shared cultural framework utilized by the youngest to define themselves and their experiences precisely about the state of the world around them, thus giving further meaning to the social, political, and economic phenomena that surround them (Burton 2019).

Regarding the ecological issue, in particular, the Chinese platform serves as an influential sounding board for various forms of communication and representation of climate change. The platform makes disseminating information on these topics more immediate and widespread. It offers visibility not only to individual network activists but also, more broadly, to geographical realities that are only sometimes taken seriously by mainstream media.

Today's forms of youth activism on the internet are nevertheless the expression of the intersection between the participatory culture typical of digital media and political and civic participation; an intersection that expresses and brings out, on the one hand, the distrust, especially from Generation Z, in politics and institutions, and on the other hand, the profound expansion of communicative and organizational resources available today. Online activism gives rise to what has been emblematically defined as "connective" action (Papacharissi 2014), in which diverse opinions, perspectives, and viewpoints are connected by a strong "structure of feeling" made possible by social platforms. Compared to traditional collective action, connective action is a strongly self-motivated action that involves the integration of personal framing and forms of self-narration, crucial for the success (in terms of dissemination) of the action (Bennett and Segerberg 2011).

Within this affective public (Papacharissi 2014) mobilizing for the environmental cause, the figure of the so-called "green influencers" has emerged in recent years from various parts of the world. Green influencers, individuals with a large following on social media who raise public awareness about the environmental crisis and sustainability issues adopted as a lifestyle, utilize the audiovisual language and communicative style specific to digital platforms to disseminate these themes and integrate them into practices of self-representation (Highfield 2016), through which they construct a storytelling often intertwining the private and the public, the personal and the political. Several crucial elements generally exist to increase or decrease trust in this figure, including similarity (of ideas and viewpoints), perception of authenticity, and identification (Pittman and Abell 2021). The latter can be strengthened through the ability to exploit the expressive and communicative potential of social platforms. For these reasons, observing how influencers choose to narrate the theme of sustainability helps to reflect on the dynamics and relationships between storytelling and platform characteristics and between audiovisual language and social media design.

Based on these theoretical premises and intending to explore the vast landscape of digital creators engaged in disseminating ecological themes, we chose to analyze the visual and communicative style of some profiles of green influencers and others operating on TikTok and their different ways of utilizing the platform. Through case analysis, we aimed to focus on the different aesthetic-pragmatic dynamics of visual and audiovisual productions but also highlight a trend that seems to emerge, especially at the international level, namely the preference for using TikTok as a privileged environment for social engagement actions and the construction of ecological awareness.

In recent years, this platform has become a privileged place for meeting, discussing, and sharing concerns about the fate of the Planet and the setting for a collective narrative — for example, starting from the hashtag *#ecotok*

— essentially based on the presence of video streams, which aims to spread greater awareness about the ecological issue.

TikTok, Engagement Dynamics and Collective Narratives

Before delving into the analysis of some cases of international green influencers and user-generated video content, we briefly mention the pragmatic dynamics and engagement typical of TikTok. The platform enables the construction of audiovisual material based on relatively simple procedures: from the fixed first-person shooting, in *selfie* style, to a more elaborate work that also involves editing, in any case with a technological tool provided by the platform itself (as do all other social media platforms). Using green screens and numerous graphic effects — both for image and framing overlay and optimization and for modification and enhancement — is very common. Generally, many influencers — including green ones — resort to a multicode compositional organization (Denicolai 2023) to favor a multimodal semiotic process (i.e., through sense-making construction according to the principles of multimodality inspired by Gunther Kress' theory, 2009) and a synesthetic and syncretic communication (as described, among others, by Pietro Montani 2020), thus making the products a sort of audiovisual meme (Marino and Surace 2023; Zulli and Zulli 2022). Since its launch, the platform has proposed some user engagement formats. Among all, the challenges, duets, stitches, and trends stand out. Almost all of these production forms are essentially mash-up operations typical of Remix Culture (Kaye, Zeng, and Wikstrom 2022; Zhang 2021): stitches, for example, allow the user to enrich their recording with part of another user's video that is directly edited into their video by the app at the beginning. Similarly, duets enable users to dialogue with another video through editing that typically organizes content with a split-screen.

The vast array of graphic and facial effects makes TikTok an environment of solid experimentation and sharing of audiovisual objects, as well as a revival of some so-called "traditional techniques" with clear cinematic and audiovisual derivation (such as the possibility of using green screen or stop-motion filming). Hypothetically, given the high quantity of graphic elements and special effects, each user could narrate endless moments of their daily life with different styles and effects without risking reproducing the same object. The trend is interesting for at least two interconnected reasons in the logic of social media and digital activism (Gerbaudo 2012; Hautea et al. 2021). First, it fully exploits the generative-imitative mechanism of the platform; second, and consequently, the trend contributes to fueling the gradual transformation of individual affectivity and sensitivity into a flow that shapes and recognizes itself in a collective identity, which is constantly changing and dynamic, because it is continually fueled by user participation (Gerbaudo 2022). According to Corey H. Basch,

Bhavya Yalamanchili, and Joseph Fera (2022), social media platforms, including TikTok, play a central role in population engagement dynamics, with the younger part being the most active. For research, social media are helpful as a source of information, as a place for disseminating awareness of social issues, and for active involvement in actions of social and cultural mobilization. TikTok, specifically, seems to be one of the preferred environments for young people to discuss various issues, as was the case, for example, during the pandemic period for COVID-19, during which the platform became one of the most functional places for the transmission of information and, above all, awareness among peers of the risks of virus transmission and contagion.

As mentioned above, the functionality of the trend is based on the imitative and re-propositional logic of a model (stylistic, narrative, discursive, etc.), which is replicated in almost all of its structural parts, while leaving some freedom and formal variability to individual products: with the same framework — for example, the presence of a musical line; the choice of a narrative situation; the choice of a linguistic style; etc. — every TikToker can participate in the trend, telling and explaining their version. In this way, a series of variables are constituted that give rise to an entire semiological production, contributing to the constitution of an almost infinite narrative, capable of being more recognizable and immediately familiar. In this sense, beyond the individual conveyed content, the trend functions as a mechanism for dissemination and recognition of an experience that goes from being individual to collective, not only because it is shared in a social environment but because it is an active part of a semiological process in progress that reacts, like an actual narrative and media ecosystem, to the solicitations brought by the community (Denicolai 2023). For these peculiarities, the trend also seems effective in green communication (Denicolai and Domenici 2023), as can be noted in some international posts that we mention here only as an example to introduce the comparative analysis of cases. For example, the song "Fire on Fire" by Sam Smith (2018) is the musical line on which a considerable number of videos on climate change have developed (we are talking about billions of views) (Denicolai and Domenici 2023). In addition to the musical line, visual and narrative schematisms are present and add to the reference musical formula; for example:

- The TikToker who, with each frame — which marks, also graphically, the passing of time — undergoes a deterioration of their appearance (e.g., with increasingly purplish makeup, with plastic material protruding from the mouth, etc.);
- Alternatively, the image of an ice cream gradually — with the same flowing manner of time — melting;
- Or, yet, multiple images of the Earth in parallel montage (places in optimal conditions and the same ones deteriorated).

The combination of Smith's musical line and these patterns (which are among the most common) form the basis on which the trend extends, along with its related variations through which TikTok constructs its narratives. In this way, for example, the schema of the TikToker undergoing the deterioration of their face is replicated each time as minimal nuances compared to the baseline (which, of course, remains indistinguishable due to the vast number of nearly identical objects present). The individual narrative units — such as the green one, specifically in our study — thus seem to be variables of a single narrative nucleus that, like the versions of ancient myths, constitute that sort of fusion into the collective we mentioned earlier, allowing TikTok to be so effective in terms of storytelling and its related "storylistening" (Sturm 2000).

One more point has to be considered before moving on to case analysis. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2019), among others, has studied the importance of the emotional sphere in communication and political journalism, focusing on analyzing the central dynamics related to journalistic writing and language that enables an emotional grip on the reader. In particular, the scholar, introducing the concept of "emotional storytelling" and reinterpreting it in the context of social media communication, emphasizes the use of «personalized storytelling», i.e., «a narrative form which draws on the experience of a particular individual caught up in a story to dramatize a broader social issue» (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019: 47) as a hybrid mode of information, where there is a continuous balance between the rational and objective part of an event and its emotional part. According to Wahl-Jorgensen, moreover, the emotional dynamics encountered in social environments are constructed by the discursiveness of the media itself, as it is the media that — we could say Foucauldian-ly and from a media-archaeological perspective — originate the conditions of existence. Based on these premises, emotional storytelling (and personalized storytelling in particular) would play an essential role in the presumed authenticity value of this type of communication — due to the immediacy of the medium, the empathic-emotional strength of the image, the "emotional contagion" (Plantinga 2009) that can derive from viewing a post, etc. — and in fueling «compassion oriented towards the creation of communities that seek social and political change» (Plantinga 2009: 88). According to our hypothesis, these aspects are part of TikTok's daily practice, even regarding climate change topics. Similarly, Montani (2020) argues that short audiovisual forms (including TikTok videos), by nature endowed with a solid syncretic structure, are semiotic materials with which the user can establish forms of material engagement[2], that is, engagement with the object that presupposes cognitive as well as emotional work on oneself. In this way, processes would be activated, resulting in the user re-evaluating what they have just seen (or read), i.e., better understanding — perhaps paradoxically

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2   The author directly refers to Lambros Malafouris' Material Engagement Theory (2013).

even pre-rational? — of the message they have consumed, thus also promoting reflective action on the conveyed message (as well as reversibility that Montani attributes to the very nature of web communicative forms).

Between Green Influencers and Citizen Influencers: An Analysis of Case Studies

As mentioned in the introduction, green communication on TikTok can be roughly divided into two main blocks corresponding to different geographical areas. Our exploratory investigation of audiovisual products related to climate change in the Global South stands out compared to other areas of the Earth, just as it is possible to distinguish between communication managed by green influencers and that organized by ordinary users, which we define as citizen influencers, borrowing and slightly adapting the concept of the citizen journalist that emerged on social media around the turn of the 2010s following the social and political upheavals of the so-called Arab Spring.

Unlike the audiovisual products of influencers and green TikTokers from Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, or American regions (which are among the main vectors of the theme), materials from certain areas in the Global South (particularly Africa, India, and South America) seem not to replicate the identified schematics and, in any case, do not employ the same level of compositional, narrative, and discursive complexity as the mentioned green influencers. Upon initial consideration, it appears that videos depicting climate change in some regions of the South are more straightforward and basic, both narratively and discursively; they hardly ever use graphic effects, and at most, they include picture-in-picture editing, descriptive captions, and a few other elements.

Following Helle Kannik Haastrup (2023), the green influencer acts as a spokesperson for content/product (thus transforming the issue of climate change into a tangible object to be disseminated and advertised, into a sort of social advertising), using both the discursive baggage of audiovisual production and elements of linguistic and paralinguistic items that are appropriate for communication professionals (what ancient rhetoric summarizes in the concept of *actio*). It is the person/character as such that acts as a catalyst for action and message; it is the user who transforms themselves into a communicative object, into a performative act that inserts them into a studied and perfectly oiled media discourse so that they can — theoretically — achieve a specific goal in terms of contacts and followers. Italian profiles such as Cristina Coto (@cristinacotom), Sofia Pasotto (@telospiegasofia), and comedian Giovanni Storti (@giovannistortiuff); Belgian Eve The Econista (@eve.the.econista); American Izzy Lause (@izzylause); various associational groups of green influencers working on environmental issues on TikTok (such as Action 4 Climate,

@action4climate); Argentine green influencer Tinjones (@tinjones); and many others (including Greta Thunberg[3] herself, who in some way represented the initiatory model of the green influencer), all have, despite each one's creative variation, a recognizable style that can be attributed to the underlying pattern: the face and the person are central in the narrative line they propose. In this way, the human figure is the actual medium — in the anthropological and mediatic sense of the term — meaning the communicative channel, the means through which awareness of climate change can reach the audience. On the other hand, the citizen green influencer — who, in our investigation, is more active in areas further South and generally characterized by socio-economic conditions traditionally less favorable than those in the previously considered areas — seems to embody a typical attitude of participatory culture: they are inside the event, an observer who acts in the field, adopting a hypothetical yet paradoxical participatory stance (following Malinowski 1922). The user narrates what they see and experience, using cinematic and audiovisual language as an ideal representation of a "written language of reality" (Pasolini 1972), thus contributing to the message's increasingly authentic value and emotional impact.

Let us briefly examine some cases that we consider illustrative of this second mode of green storytelling, specifying that our investigation focused on videos from areas in the Southern regions of the Planet (or not belonging to the wealthiest areas):

– @mma_mablomo (2022): This influencer, in what appears to be a domestic setting (or, in any case, a typical indoor environment), speaks to the webcam (a fixed frame, selfie-style/long take) and narrates the situation of climate change in South Africa, supporting the narration with nearly continuous subtitles. The only creative touches (if one may call them that) are the variation in font size for terms she deems most significant and the overlay of some images depicting the consequences of climate change.

– @afrikanblackmedia (2023): Similarly to the previous case, the creator speaks to the webcam using a rather basic, unpolished green screen and simultaneously offers images — including videos — of issues related to climate change (#cc) in Sudan. In this case, too, the creator accompanies their narration with subtitles.

– @africanstream (2022): Following the same line as the previous ones, with some extra attention to the product's composition, especially regarding

the use of transition effects and some picture-in-picture for the presentation of images.

– @grande5721: This is a citizen green influencer (although there is no profile description) who presents a collection of videos related to environmental disasters due to climate change in various parts of the world, with particular attention to the most disadvantaged areas. All the videos are a mix of materials presumably filmed by other users and likely sourced from the internet or other media; thus, they are mash-up operations, remixes of materials (perhaps even found footage) that directly and extremely dramatically depict the daily situations arising from climate change. Unlike the previous examples, the profile is a collection of brief e-news providing updated news on climate-related incidents. Like the previous cases, these products do not feature internal (channel-specific) or external (derived from an identifiable trend) modeling but maintain the impromptu nature of video collage, discursively unpolished.

In general, these products seem to be emotionally less immediate compared to the schematics we described earlier, i.e., those of the more sought-after green influencers (such as those based on Smith's song "Fire on Fire"), if we consider them from the perspective of traditional cinematic and communicative rhetoric (based on the traditional categories of audiovisual language). On the contrary, if we consider them as testimony from those experiencing such an event (the citizen influencer, precisely), they take on a significantly more meaningful value from a documentary standpoint and, above all, from an existential and emotional participation perspective. Among many, a video by @smvarela971 (2021) also struck us as impactful. This product builds emotional engagement more with the simple and surreal climate situation it depicts (which can be communicated exclusively through almost documentary-like images) than with the mechanisms typical of the platform. In this case, the narration is in voice-over, and a single caption remains constantly present, following a memetic logic. The contrast is generated by the estrangement achieved between the cheerful amazement of the children and the excessive snow, albeit in the African winter period.

Among the cases mentioned, only @africanstream (2022) seems to be oriented towards a more significant visual construction aimed at generating a specific emotional impact: the TikToker, when framed, does not have direct eye contact with the camera, and gradually, he is seen sitting in a chair, with a thin layer of water lapping at his feet (most probably simulating sea level rise?).

A similar communication approach emerges in TikToks from the Indian region (or those depicting that territory). For example, @climatevanguard (2023) follows the pattern mentioned above: the TikToker is framed, and with a primary green screen, it shows images related to the climate situation.

In Argentina, in addition to videos quite similar to those just described, there is the already mentioned figure of the green influencer Tinjones (@Tinjones), whose communicative style is based on a series of short stories highlighting human actions toward the climate. Tinjones acts similarly to other international green influencers, including the Italian Cristina Coto. They do not just recount a climate-related event but seek accountability, presenting short videos that resemble more an investigation than the emotional engagement typical of the platform. Compared to all the products described earlier, one can see a schematic, a discursive formula based on a specific choice of graphic captions accompanying the TikToker's voice. With direct eye contact with the camera, the influencer explains each video's content, aiming to promote collective awareness of the climate condition in the Argentine territory.

Discussion and Concluding Reflections

Based on the observation of a significant number of profiles, this general overview first reveals how TikTok mobilizes a vast audience. Many of the cases analyzed easily surpass one million views. This confirms that TikTok has emerged as a significant platform for activism, supported both by the use of hashtags and by the platform's nature. The engaging dynamics of TikTok encourage imitation and repetition of easily recognizable patterns. This mechanism efficiently disseminates replicable content, which can contribute to continuous and collective engagement on sustainability and protecting the Planet.

Thus, TikTok is a fertile ground for spreading messages related to the environment and sustainability, facilitating the creation of collective awareness on these crucial issues. Its visual and immediate nature effectively engages the audience and promotes positive actions for the environment. At the same time, it has emerged that audiovisual materials, specifically from certain areas in the Global South (particularly Africa and South America), tend not to replicate the typical patterns of TikTok and, in general, do not fully utilize the platform's expressive potential, foregoing a certain level of compositional and narrative complexity that is common in videos produced in Anglo-Saxon regions.

Upon initial consideration, the videos from profiles depicting climate change in some regions of the Global South appear more basic overall in narrative and audiovisual language. This aspect is significant as it manifests and testifies primarily to the urgency of communicating specific issues and denouncing the status quo. As observed from the analysis of selected cases, most profiles depicting climate change in the Global South address political leaders and representatives directly through a dry and journalistic style rather than engaging with their community members. The primary objective is denunciation, directed towards governmental bodies and those responsible for public administration. Conversely, the communicative register is notably different in other regions

where green influencers also raise awareness about climate change. There is a greater emphasis on the construction and aesthetic coherence of the profile and the audiovisual content offered, as evidenced by the more calculated use of TikTok's affordances (for example, adherence to the platform's significant trends). Here, the image of the individual influencer and self-narration play a central role within the communicative project, primarily directed towards their followers.

These two different communicative styles respond to different needs related to a greater or lesser perception of risk and urgency and, therefore, to a consequent greater or lesser concrete call to action. In both cases, however, the focus on the effects of climate change and the rich audiovisual production on this topic testify to the growing "TikTok activism" for climate change. This form of expression is typical of post-media generations, aiming to build global engagement actions on the issue of climate change and utilizing more or less refined expressive formulas that all leverage the platform's active and activating nature.

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