# TikTok may help farmers cultivate empathy around climate change

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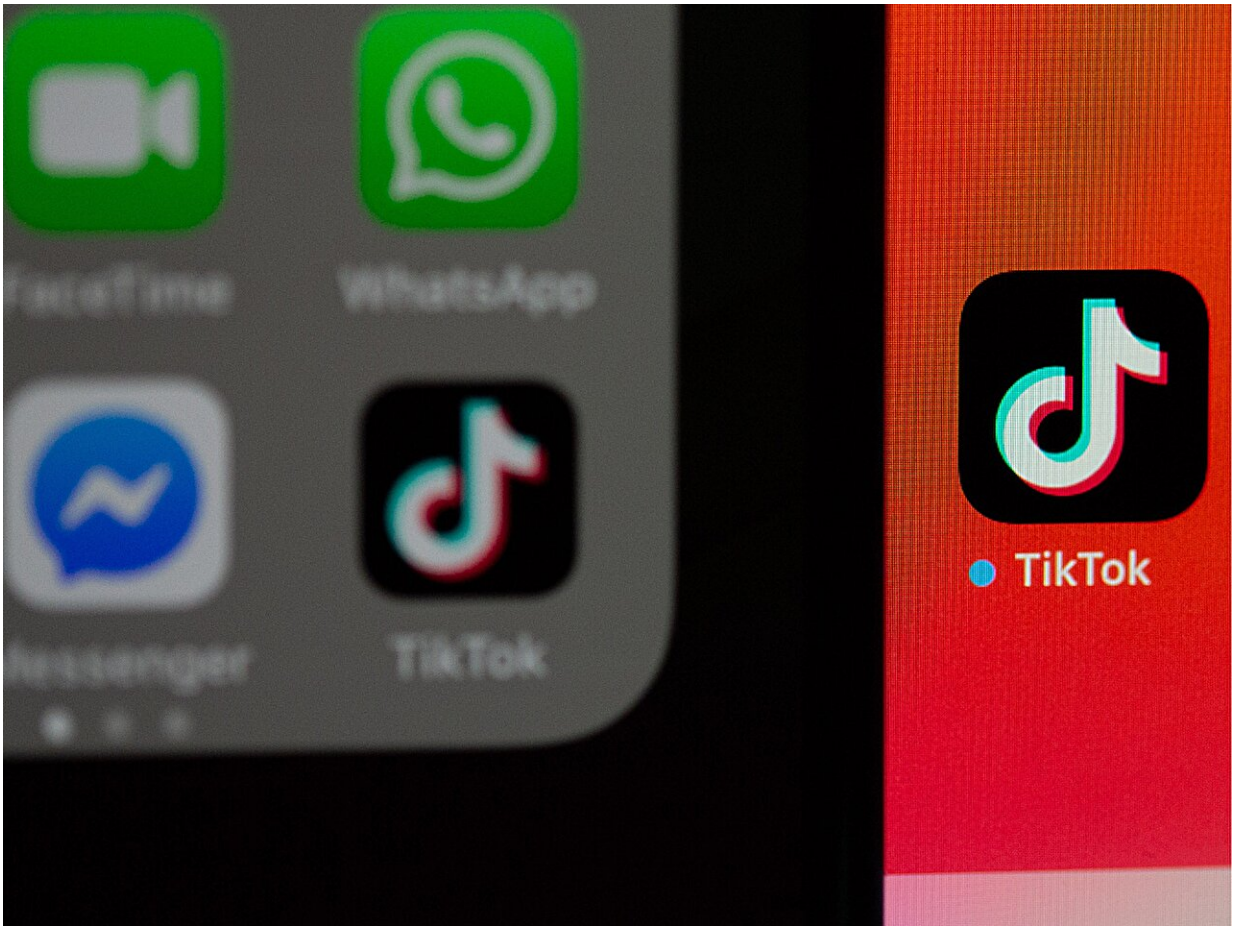


A study led by Penn State researchers found that many people responded to climate change TikTok videos with warmth and compassion, signaling emotional empathy. Credit: Solen Feyissa/Unsplash

Farmers are used to growing crops and producing other goods, but a new study led by Penn State researchers suggests the social media platform TikTok may help them cultivate something new: empathy around the issue of climate change.

The researchers published their work in the *Journal of Rural Studies*.

The team, who analyzed responses to climate change TikToks posted by farmers, found that many people responded to the videos with warmth and compassion, signaling emotional empathy.

However, the researchers also found that the videos were not as successful at triggering cognitive empathy in viewers. In this case, the cognitive empathy manifested as comments in which viewers go beyond compassion and engage in thinking critically about the content by adding their own thoughts or asking further questions.

The study suggests that platforms such as TikTok offer new ways for farmers to communicate with consumers, according to Ilkay Unay-Gailhard, a researcher at the Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies in Germany who led the study while completing her European Union Marie Sklodowska-Curie Global Fellowship at Penn State.

"Today's consumers are increasingly looking for transparency in agri-food systems and want to know who their farmer is and how their food is produced," she said. "They're also increasingly willing to ensure a sustainable agri-food sector by supporting farmers involved in decisions to mitigate and adapt to climate change. These trends indicate an opportunity for farmers to engage more directly with citizens, as policymakers, media, scientists and activists already have been doing."

Mark Brennan, professor and UNESCO Chair in Community,

Leadership, and Youth Development at Penn State, said the work has the potential to be helpful to farmers and that it's important to remember that empathy—putting ourselves in the place of others to understand their actions and beliefs—is very different from sympathy.

"When farmers and consumers can better understand each other, we can better foster innovation, increase food security, and enhance the adoption and diffusion of new techniques and markets that benefit all," Brennan said. "This empathy also shows that farmers and consumers are not that different and want the same things many times. Connecting with them builds understanding and breaks down the artificial divides that are often propagated in our society. We are better together in the end.

According to the researchers, the work was inspired by the dual way that food production both contributes to and is affected by climate change. For example, raising livestock and producing food products can create greenhouse gas emissions that help trap heat close to the surface of the Earth. Simultaneously, these effects of climate change also affect food systems in a variety of ways, including less water or poorer soil quality for livestock and crops.

Unay-Gailhard said this intersection gives farmers a unique perspective, and while conversations about food production and climate change typically happen at the social and political level, the rise of new social media platforms is giving farmers new ways to speak out.

"Today's young farmers are becoming involved in climate actions in different forms than previous generations," she said. "Even though farmers are still in the early stages of using social media to initiate conversations about climate change, some social media platforms like TikTok present an opportunity to use new forms of communication with 'millennial- or Gen-Z-style' humor to connect with diverse communities on the topic."

With the goal of better understanding the potential TikTok has for generating empathetic conversations about climate change, the researchers performed a two-step analysis.

First, they analyzed how users engaged with TikTok videos posted by farmers during the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference, which took place during October and November 2021. It was chosen for the study because it engaged a high number of young environmental activists from across the globe. They ended up with a study sample of 29 TikTok videos that consisted of 2,965 conversations involving 187 accounts from the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand.

The researchers said that, because of how the TikTok algorithm works to serve content to viewers, they assumed viewers were recommended videos regardless of how they might engage with the content. They analyzed whether the conversations fit into three different levels of empathy, including emotional empathy and two different types of cognitive empathy: interpretational, in which users signaled understanding and interpretation of the viewpoints in the video, and explorational, in which users aimed to further explore or improve their understanding of the video.

In the second step of the study, the researchers interviewed 12 farmers from the U.S., U.K., Canada and Australia who currently use TikTok to better explore their values, attitudes and beliefs surrounding climate change dialogs on the platform.

The researchers found that while many videos were successful in triggering emotional empathy, only a few were able to inspire cognitive empathy. However, they also found that the farmers they interviewed believed that TikTok still has a higher potential for fostering empathetic conversations compared to other social media platforms.

"When we talked to farmers, they believed that creating entertaining content on TikTok resulted in more engagement more quickly than content on YouTube, where it takes longer to reach viewers," Unay-Gailhard said. "They also felt that presenting themselves and their viewpoints in 'imperfect' ways promotes engagement on TikTok, compared to Instagram, where pleasing aesthetics are valued, or X—previously known as Twitter—which is highly polarized."

The interviewed farmers added that, on TikTok, presenting a straightforward argument with playful and humorous tones allows conversations and even arguments to take place with less tension.

According to the researchers, the findings that TikTok can play a role in engaging audiences in conversations about climate change. Additionally, Unay-Gailhard said the work explores more broadly how empathy is changing in an increasing digital society.

"What is notable from the narratives of TikTok farmers is how empathy among farm-interested viewers turns the platform into a learning landscape," Unay-Gailhard said. "The self-representation of farmers on TikTok with professional identities is not only about having a voice and joy but also reciprocally investing in others in their online community. This reciprocity emerges with gathering and sharing experiences and knowledge within informal educational contexts."

In the future, the researchers said additional studies could explore how content could go beyond triggering emotional empathy and foster cognitive empathy, as well.

**More information:** İlkay Unay-Gailhard et al, An examination of digital empathy: When farmers speak for the climate through TikTok, *Journal of Rural Studies* (2023). DOI: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2023.103075

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