Using TikTok for Political Action: The Willow Project, Global Climate Change, and Health

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Abstract

In the fight against climate change, young people have taken the lead. This was demonstrated in recent efforts to influence the discontinuation of The Willow Project, a large-scale operation to allow drilling in the pristine National Petroleum Reserve which is public land in Alaska. Despite the fact that plans for this project were approved by governmental leaders, it is important to document the online effort that was made to oppose this. This cross-sectional, descriptive study analyzed 100 TikTok videos posted on the popular hashtag #StopTheWillowProject (412,300,000 cumulative views at the time of the study). A content analysis was conducted to identify and delineate the messages that were conveyed in the first 100 English language videos that appeared with the hashtag #StopTheWillowProject. The most popular content categories related to The Willow Project were advocacy (n=87), animal endangerment (n=81), global climate change (n=70), and a call for action (n=53). The cumulative number of views in this sample was 110,763,667. The mean number of views were 1,107,636, with likes, comments, and shares averaging 211,987; 4,040; and 13,213 respectively. The mean number of views was significantly higher for videos that mentioned, depicted, and/or insinuated issues related to the ecosystem (p=.01) and animal endangerment (p=.01). Of the 53 videos that included a call to action, nearly all (96%) calls were to sign a petition. While the primary aim of #StopTheWillowProject to halt approval for drilling was not ultimately met, this viral campaign can still positively influence the organization of future campaigns.

Introduction

In the fight against climate change, young people have taken the lead. Swedish citizen, Greta Thunberg, was a teenager when she started an international movement to bring heightened awareness to other teens around global climate change. This awareness came largely in the form of encouraging climate strikes that demand action. *Fridays for Future* was started in 2018 after young activists protested in Sweden (Belotti et al.,

2022, Fridays for Future, 2023). This was the beginning of a massive social networking effort which has now partnered with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (UNICEF, n.d.). In 2019, *Global Week for Future* empowered millions of teens around the globe to use their voices to advocate for action to be taken on global climate change (Sengupta,2019; Taylor and Watts 2021).

To accomplish such a feat, networking and communication about these events were essential. Online social networks are a critical part of mobilizing environmental activism (Boulianne and Ohme 2021). A 2021 Pew Center Research Survey revealed that 32% of those who fall into the "Gen Z" demographic cohort and 28% of the "millennial" cohort have taken action within the past year to address global climate change (Funk, 2021). Furthermore, "Gen Z" and "millennial" respondents interacted with social media related to global climate change at a higher level than respondents from older generations (Funk, 2021). Findings also revealed that younger versus older Americans were more likely to support approaches that rely less on fossil fuels or gradually withdrawing the use of fossil fuels altogether (Funk, 2021). This was demonstrated in recent efforts to influence the discontinuation of The Willow Project, a large-scale operation to allow drilling in the pristine National Petroleum Reserve which is public land in Alaska (U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, 2023). Despite the fact that plans for this project were approved by governmental leaders, it is important to document the online effort that was made to oppose this.

Major criticism of this 8-billion-dollar project is centered around the negative contribution to global climate change by releasing over 200 million metric tons of carbon emissions (Friedman et al., 2023). Further, many are concerned about damage to the ecosystem as this land serves as a habitat for many species that would be disrupted by drilling (Friedman et al., 2023). Climate activists took to the internet to protest The Willow Project and gained unprecedented attention through their social media activity, placing public pressure on policy-makers. This was demonstrated most widely on TikTok, a highly popular social media platform.

TikTok has an unprecedented following with 3.5 billion global downloads (The Social Shepard, 2023), and is a medium that can relay current day concerns and serve as a tool for activism through its short, easily accessible video content. Content can be categorized with use of hashtags to increase visibility to those who are searching for similar content (Oladipo, 2023). It is most used by those ages 10-19, and recent studies have shown that children spend an average of 75 minutes per day on this platform globally (The Social Shepherd, 2023). Recent studies have shown TikTok as a powerful social networking tool in raising awareness and action around social issues (Williams, 2020) like climate change.

TikTok was noted in the press as having a viral (extremely popular) campaign with the hashtag, #StopTheWillowProject. At the time of this

study, this hashtag had the most views on the topic (418.8 million). While coverage of the popularity on this viral hashtag was widespread in the press (Chiu, 2023; Murray, 2023; Stallard & Conley, 2023), we did not identify any scientific papers that examined viral messaging of #StopTheWillowProject. The purpose of this study was to examine the 1) types of messaging developed as part of this hashtag, 2) specific political actions that were encouraged, and 3) reach of this messaging on the TikTok platform.

Methods

This cross-sectional, descriptive study analyzed 100 TikTok videos posted on the popular hashtag #StopTheWillowProject (412,300,000 cumulative views at the time of the study). The use of a hashtag on TikTok allows videos to be part of a clickable content hub where all videos tagged with this hashtag are housed. A content analysis was conducted to identify and delineate the messages that were conveyed in the first 100 English language videos that appeared with the hashtag #StopTheWillowProject. Content categories (See Table 1) were created by the researchers based on academic and news articles covering this event (the viral nature of the hashtag #StopTheWillowProject) and use of social media for activism. Each video viewed was also categorized as being created by professional or non-professional sources. Numbers of views, likes, comments, and shares were recorded. Microsoft Excel was used to analyze data including descriptive statistics and one-tailed t-tests (a=.05). All data collection and coding occurred in June 2023. This study did not involve human subjects and did not require IRB review.

Results

All 100 videos in the sample were made by non-professionals during the governmental decision-making timeframe and related social media action attempting to stop the project from moving forward (February and March of 2023). The most popular content categories related to The Willow Project were advocacy (n=87), animal endangerment (n=81), global climate change (n=70), and a call for action (n=53). The cumulative number of views in this sample was 110,763,667. The mean number of views were 1,107,636, with likes, comments, and shares averaging 211,987; 4,040; and 13,213 respectively. The mean number of views was significantly higher for videos that mentioned, depicted, and/or insinuated issues related to the ecosystem (p=.01) and animal endangerment (p=.01). Of the 53 videos that included a call to action, nearly all (96%) calls were to sign a petition. The category of benefits for residents (e.g. jobs, economy) was not present in any of the videos and therefore was excluded from the analysis. There were significantly more likes for videos that mentioned, depicted, and/or insinuated global climate change (.04), danger

to the ecosystem (p=.01), and animal endangerment (.008). Further, the same was true for comments: videos that mentioned, depicted and/or insinuated global climate change (p=.05), danger to the ecosystem (p=.01), and animal endangerment (p=.01) got significantly more comments. The same was also true for shares: videos that mentioned, depicted and/or insinuated global climate change (.05), danger to the ecosystem (p=.03), and animal endangerment (p=.03) got significantly more shares.

Discussion

In only a few months, #StopTheWillowProject on TikTok gained widespread attention. The popularity of this hashtag reflects an effort led on a platform frequented mostly by a younger population. This is consistent with research that highlights an "emergence of young people as agents of change in the global climate change arena and the urgency of engaging them in climate change governance and policy making" (Han and Ahn, 2020).

Climate and environmental issues can play a pivotal role in politics (Bomberg, 2021). The cornerstone of the #StopTheWillowProject was to impact political approvals by the Bureau of Land Management for an extensive drilling project in Alaska (U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, 2023). On March 13, 2023, despite intense resistance by citizens who protested and petitioned, the Bureau of Land Management approved The Willow Project (U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, 2023). Over half of the videos in this sample mentioned or insinuated politics related to The Willow Project. The extent to which this decision, which negated prior assurances, will impact future political decisions among young voters is yet to be seen.

Among the videos on TikTok, global climate change, danger to the ecosystem, and animal endangerment significantly increased interaction in the form of likes, shares, and comments. Discussions among younger populations related to global climate change are being heard and are often framed around a demand for honesty and measurable action (Nature Editorial, 2021). Animal endangerment also generated a significant amount of interaction among the videos in the sample. There is little research documenting the use of animals for highlighting environmental degradation. One study of depictions of two decades of animal images in articles on climate change in a popular magazine found that vulnerability was being poignantly highlighted and displayed. This research is consistent with the findings of this study in indicating that animals are increasingly being used as indicators of environmental degradation, providing a powerful reminder of the impacts of climate change (Whitley and Kalof, 2014). Similarly, use of ecological change imagery proved to generate interaction. According to The Climate Communication Project, "Images are important because they are representations of the issue in people's minds – they are what people think of when they think of climate

change. Complex concepts like climate change are given power through imagery that creates a common understanding of the images that represent it" (Corner, 2018).

 This was a small study which examined one hashtag on a single global climate change effort. In addition, the videos included were in English only, which is limiting, especially as this is a globally charged effort. More research is needed to accurately capture global climate change activism and efforts on social media and TikTok, specifically. While the primary aim of #StopTheWillowProject to halt approval for drilling was not ultimately met, this viral campaign can still positively influence the organization of future campaigns. More attention could be paid to earlier and more coordinated efforts that can harness existing data. A digital coalition-building platform such as Torch^{TM} aggregates social media communications from advocacy groups, elected officials, and other mission-driven organizations that can be searched in real time (Roje, 2019). Accessing real-time data of this nature to analyze and produce content for targeted groups may effectively raise awareness, drive public discourse, influence voting patterns, and consequently result in policy change around climate change and health.

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	N	Views	%	Likes	%	Comments	%	Shares	%
	100	110,763,637	100	21,198,731	100	404,037	100	1,321,338	100
Mentions, depicts, and/or insinuates global climate change	70	90,975,035	82.1%	17,705,089	83.5%	324,447	80.30%	1,125,740	85.19%
Mentions, depicts, and/or insinuates danger to the ecosystem	42	84,033,018	75.9%	15,443,971	73.0%	260,316	64.43%	1,013,634	76.71%
Mentions, depicts, and/or insinuates danger of carbon being added to the atmosphere	33	57,706,177	52.1%	10,784,021	51.0%	173,342	42.90%	750,852	56.82%
Mentions, depicts, and/or insinuates animal endangerment	81	103,117,209	93.1%	19,705,123	93.0%	374,700	92.74%	30,557	2.31%
Mentions, depicts, and/or insinuates politics related to the project	48	62,615,197	56.5%	10,567,749	50.0%	189,087	46.90%	278,748	21.09%
Mentions, depicts, and/or insinuates general aspects of drilling in the arctic	37	60,637,259	54.7%	11,255,763	53.1%	185,992	46.03%	419,151	31.72%
Mentions, depicts, and/or insinuates danger/harm for residents	4	95,779	.09%	9,593	.05%	1,161	0.29%	450,246	34.08%
Mentions, depicts, and/or insinuates advocacy	87	110,686,728	99.9%	18,768,673	88.9%	266,166	65.88%	1,188,663	89.96%
Mentions, depicts, and/or insinuates a specific call for action	53	53,690,557	48.5%	13,893,544	65.5%	228,963	56.67%	917,192	69.41%

NOTE: Not mutually exclusive

TABLE 1. Content and metadata of 100 #StopTheWillowProject TikTok videos