

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION –EXAMINING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TIKTOK USER GENERATED CONTENT DURING 2025 FLOOD IN PAKISTAN

Dr. Syeda Afsheen Sohail¹, Professor Dr. Fouzia Naz², Muhammad Ehsan³

¹Assistant Professor, Department Media Studies and Communication Design, Indus University,

²Professor, Department of Mass Communication, University of Karachi,

³Department of Mass Communication, University of Karachi

¹afsheen.sohail@indus.edu.pk, ²fouzianaz@uok.edu.pk, ³ehsanmails2@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Syeda Afsheen Sohail

Abstract

Since 2016, TikTok has become an effective means of visual communication with billions of active users worldwide. The platform has secured a prominent space on the social media landscape during the last decade. This research paper attempts to analyze the functions that TikTok has serviced in during 2025 floods in Pakistan that resulted from incessant monsoon rains, administrative deficiencies in climate communication and community preparedness. In the midst of this crisis, TikTok emerged as an unconventional but powerful storytelling platform where ordinary citizens shared their lived experiences, emotions as well as calls for action. This research aims to examine the User-generated content (UGC) published on TikTok during the flood, to understand how visual storytelling contributed to climate action awareness in Pakistan. The study is based on a qualitative content analysis of selected TikTok videos with the intention to investigate the themes, framing styles, and emotional tones that defined this digital storytelling. The research study explores 50 selected short-form videos that were created by affected individuals, volunteers, and local influencers. For this purpose, the TikTok videos are searched using the relevant hashtags and 50 videos have been selected for qualitative content analysis. The selected TikTok content has been analyzed through thematic analysis technique. The analysis indicates and supports the claim of the study authors that the use of visual narratives on TikTok and similar platforms can bridge the gap between climate change science and the everyday realities of the most affected individuals. The study concludes that alongside traditional media, the authorities and common people need to understand the potential and significance of TikTok as effective platform for crisis communication.

INTRODUCTION

The global community has been experiencing intense waves of climate induced disasters over the last decade. Pakistan being one of the most climate vulnerable countries of the world has been

experiencing these disasters repeatedly in form of heat waves, glacier meltdowns, cloud burst, and devastating monsoon floods (Khan, 2025). In 2025, Punjab and Sindh provinces of Pakistan

experienced heavy monsoon rainfall and glacial melting that eventually led to disastrous flood that spread across several regions of the countries and caused substantial human and economic loss (Bibi, Khan, & Zaheer, 2026)

During these chaotic time, the traditional media platforms including radio and television were employed by the government as they have the history of successfully performing the duties of communicating information related to the disaster to the masses. Alongside, the digital media also evolved as a significant and useful medium for information dissemination and documentation and narration of the disaster. Digital media platforms, specifically social media provided individuals an opportunity to share their experiences, real-time situation and updates regarding the flood (Hussin, Zakaria & Ahmad, 2016). While sharing information and seeking support from the authorities; many individuals also transformed from ordinary media users to effective communicators and advocated during the time of disaster.

Alongside other social media platforms, TikTok evolved as a highly influential and popular digital avenue for environmental storytelling. The short-form multimodal storytelling format of TikTok enabled convenient content creation as the users effortlessly combined visuals, narrations, music and text to develop engaging content that was spread rapidly and reached wider audience in less time. People at large found this platform very effective for real time events documentation and commentary as well as for sharing their emotions related to certain incidents. Eventually, TikTok established itself as an important and useful platform for sharing stories of miseries and survival and building conversations around the environmental and social issues. (Zeng and Yan, 2024; Khoury & Hemsley, 2025).

Research exists surrounding TikTok and environmental communication that provides a solid basis for the effectiveness of TikTok as a storytelling and environmental discourse tool. The advantage of being a good medium for environmental communication is that TikTok is a social media platform useful in reaching people and telling a story through the combination of a

visual and an audio element. One of the studies that analyzed several hundreds of TikTok videos from a handful of countries illustrated that, within the scope of environmental communication, the integration of visuals and personal narratives is where the strength lies, and this study demonstrated that the environmental issue of climate change is one of the issues that is poorly articulated within the environmental communication domain.

During a humanitarian crisis, the audience receives and analyzes the user-generated content related to the crisis. User-generated content is based on social media communication. While social media communication can be regarded as informal communication, it serves the purpose of keeping users informed about a particular event or crisis. It is, at the same time, a platform for venting users' viewpoints about the event or crisis. Such User-generated content can be analyzed as a holistic picture of the particular event or crisis. In TikTok, social media users can access and utilize the infrastructure of algorithmic content diversity and unlimited social media content. Such continuous content production enables the users of TikTok to analyze the same event or theme, in this case, a crisis or disaster (Obreja, 2024)

While TikTok's role in digital communication is expanding, research on how the platform constructs narratives about climate emergencies in a developing country, Pakistan, is virtually non-existent. Most of the studies done on this topic focus on Western settings or inter-platform studies rather than looking at a specific environmental crisis. This is why it is critical to investigate how social media users in the most exposed areas of the world articulate climate emergencies. It can help us comprehend how the broader public image is constructed in response to the environmental crisis.

This study analyses the gaps in the user created content on TikTok about the 2025 Pakistan Floods by analyzing creator's story documenting/ personal advocacy and communication where the case is made to comprehend the effect of climate change. This analysis overviews the narrative and structural design and the TikTok video emotional appeal. The outcomes of this research study are

helpful for policy making in determining the importance and significance of TikTok to communication with masses during any natural disaster or crisis. It will help them to bridge communication gap that is often observed in such situation resulting in human and financial loss. For the policymakers, media practitioners, and environmental communication scholars, this study will provide strategies to engage target audiences through the new media platforms.

Literature Review

The rise of digital media has resulted in rapid changes in both the understanding and the communication of crises. Crisis communication has traditionally been the domain of state authorities and media organizations. The advent of social media means communication in crises becomes multi-directional and participatory as individuals are empowered to record, produce, and share their own content in the context of crises (Silver, 2019)

Grantham (2025) analyzed communications in a tropical cyclone case and attempted to find the intersection point of traditional and digital media that forms a more significance channel of communication. The researcher observed that the traditional, isolating, channels are still relevant in many situations, however over the time social media, and more specifically TikTok, has positioned itself as the critical channel of communication and dissemination of real-time information. Grantham makes an improvement to vertical communication theory by stating that the communication coming from the bottom of a social system, and which is typically ignored by legacy media systems because media responses are too slow or there is no response, thus bridging the media gap and focusing the communication. The bottom theory of social systems has validated the need for participatory communications and positioned the individual and the people's participatory movement in the context of crisis disasters at the core of communicating and providing information in the context of multiple crises.

Houston et al. (2015) have illustrated that social media, in times of a crisis, facilitates the processes

of assessing and disseminating information, enabling the collective and shared understanding of the community, and particularly empowering the single individual to operate as a "citizen journalist," especially in crises and events. The researcher believes that social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and TikTok have provided avenues of storytelling to the general public and they can communicate to the masses at the time of crisis for multiple purposes including asking for help, advocacy or simply updating the situation that surrounds them.

The body of work on visual storytelling and expression in climate communication continues to broaden. Another example is Zeng and Yan (2024), who conducted a cross-region and multi-modal research of climate content on TikTok and users' video-based environmental storytelling. The researchers discovered that climate communication on TikTok sophistication rests on users' integration of visual elements and personal narratives. Zeng and Yan (2024) examined thousands of videos across multiple nations. They asserted that TikTok users' ability to construct emotionally compelling narratives on environmental issues is facilitated by the platform's multi-modal features such as video, on-screen text, music, and voiceovers. Such features transform the environmental issues to the users from being abstract, to personal and proximate. This finding is significant in the context of framing flood content in Pakistan, where the visibility and immersion of personal storytelling may derive from the experienced reality.

The focus on storytelling is one of the emerging bodies of research that center social media influencers and content creators in environmental communication. Iqbal et al. (2025), for example, analyzed the discourse of "green influencers" and confirmed the role of social media influencers in the promotion and advocacy of pro-environmental practices. The findings revealed that, when the environmental communication is simple and authentic, the audience is more likely to embrace the message. Iqbal et al. (2025), state that social media democratizes climate communication by empowering user(s) to become advocates for the cause. In the context of disasters, climate

communication is significant as the affected audience and advocates become the voice of environmental discourse.

It is also useful to consider digital engagement in emergencies from the sense-making perspective of crises. In exploring TikTok and crisis sense-making, Khoury and Hemsley (2025) argue that the platform offers users an activated sense-making condition for an event while scrolling through seemingly endless short videos. Their analysis suggests that TikTok's algorithm is likely to be determinative of the narrative videos that users are presented with, causing crises to users in broken and fragmented narratives. In this sense, Khoury and Hemsley (2025) argue that this affords users the opportunity to make sense of events in a relatively more integrated sense, as it is the synthesis of personal narratives, emotional eruptions, and informational fragments.

Duan et al. (2023) also investigated crisis communication on TikTok and YouTube concerning the floods in California in 2023. Among the platforms studied, TikTok was found to enhance the perception of immediacy, emotional personalization, and engagement. In comparison to TikTok, YouTube was described by the authors as more structural and informational, and therefore Duan et al. (2023) described TikTok as the most ideal platform for live communications in the case of emergencies. This is attributed to the quick communication of audience members about the event to the masses. TikTok is about quick emotional engagement and storytelling to the audience.

The implications of digital forms of communications including algorithms involved in the communications continue to be explored. Obreja (2024) looks at how TikTok users understand and Engage with Algorithmic structures on the sub TikTok. One of the findings indicates that TikTok users use informal strategies to adjust the emotional intensity of the content and the type of narrative to be able to maximize the reach of the content. Obreja (2024) argues that these informal strategies transform the storytelling and the dissemination of TikTok videos, most particularly during a crisis when the visibility of

the content is important to resonate that the public needs to pay attention to the issue at hand. Public opinion studies have confirmed the media's influence on framing and the perceived risk of climate change. Within the communication of climate change, Schäfer and O'Neill (2017) argue that the visual frame often determines the extent and depth of interest and understanding of the audience. The presence of images of climate change impacts reinforces the perceived risk of climate change impacts and boosts the emotional response.

Digital activism is well documented, particularly the use of social media to advocate for an issue and to publicize the problem. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) use the term "connective action" to describe the phenomenon where personalized communication, enabled by digital technologies, leads to collective action. It is within this framing that we can analyze user engagement on TikTok and their various ways of communicating about climate change using narratives, hashtags, and content remixing. The social media and climate communication nexus has been growing through increased scrutiny and studies, and notable gaps still exist in Pakistan, a country that has truly been under-studied when social media and climate communication research is concerned. Most social media and climate communication studies have been in the West, and for cross-border research, the Western researchers tend to neglect the smaller countries like Pakistan. Pakistan is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, and flooding research is scant, with very few studies done to research the digital climate emergency communication.

This study is attempting to address the research gap. The study will look at the user-generated content on TikTok during the 2025 floods in Pakistan. The study will look at the Pakistan floods TikTok videos and narrow them down to the storytelling narratives, the themes, the emotional tones that are manifested, and the story telling videos made for the sharing of climate narratives and social media videos during the crisis. This study will help expand the research and fields of digital storytelling, crisis communication, climate change communication, TikTok and participatory

communication, and will provide pathway to examine TikTok potential role as a social media platform for social change, crisis communication, and participatory development communication.

Research Gap

There have been numerous research studies conducted on significance of social media at the time of crisis (e.g., Cheng, 2022; Eriksson, 2018; Hu et al., 2025) however, there is little to no research on short-form video applications such as TikTok and climate disaster communications in relation to natural disasters occurred in Pakistan. Most literature is either Western-centric, or cross-national (Zeng & Yan, 2024; Duan et al., 2023), and literature focusing on Pakistan, an area of extreme vulnerability is almost nonexistent. Also, literature on visual storytelling, influencer communication and crisis communication exists, but no significant amount of literature attempts to analyze the various components or elements of narratives, from structure and theme to emotional expression, as a means of facilitating sense making of climate disasters. There is also little literature on TikTok, and even less on the practice of crisis communications as an attempt to connect a climate change narrative to an experienced disaster. This research attempts to address these issues and analyze the TikTok narratives of the 2025 Pakistan floods, to explore climate communication in articulated regions of digital communication and climate change.

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis focused on TikTok videos related to the Pakistan floods of 2025. The videos were collected using following hashtags:

- #Pakistan Floods
- #PakistanFlood2025,
- #Climate Crisis, and
- #Flood in Pakistan.

A total of 50TikTok videos were purposefully sampled as available to the public. One TikTok post was considered one unit of analysis. For coding, three analytical dimensions were applied:

- i.Narrative Style (Personal storytelling, Advocacy, and Informational updates)

- ii.Themes (Suffering, Resilience, Accountability, Flood updates, and Climate awareness), and
- iii.Emotional Tone (Sadness, Hope, Anger, and Empathy).

The analysis was restricted to publicly accessible content, and details about the users were not collected.

Research Findings

The 2025 Pakistan floods impacted millions and were popular on TikTok. Both stories and videos were analyzed and a variety of categories were determined. TikTok enabled a form of responsive and active expression of a disaster using many modes of storytelling. The majority of these videos were self-narrative in a sense that people told first-person stories about the destruction of the floods in their communities (TikTok user @ zainjaved.zj, 2025). A Detailed descriptions about the destruction of homes and infrastructure and the displacement of people were common in the videos. Engaging the audience and immersing them with voice over and text on screen were common in these videos as well. TikTok videos were different from traditional media in that they humanized the disaster and gave an insider perspective. Advocating videos that criticize government inaction and demand authorities to respond to the disaster (TikTok user @ ali.iqbalch) while encouraging the audience to donate and volunteer to activist were also common (TikTok user @ muslimhandsuk). Informative videos were the least common. Informative videos included updates on the floods, descriptions of the safety measures, and other local news.

Thematic analysis shows suffering, resilience, accountability, flood updates, and climate awareness as the five themes of interest in the data set. Of the five themes, emotional and physical suffering is demonstrated the most in the context of the impact of the floods and victims of the floods. Visuals of impacted homes, communities, and families who have lost their livelihoods impacted central narratives (TikTok user @ _saad_ahmad). Many individuals depict the community spirit, volunteerism, survival, and the joint efforts of resilience. Several videos depict participants as being active agents and

exemplifying coping mechanisms. These videos also exemplify modern accountability by criticizing the government. There is also a civic engagement dimension, and grassroots activism, where people try to update others about the floods. Interestingly, and in the context of most other themes, climate awareness emerged as the most recently developed and is present in the multiple videos where creators have made the connection between the floods and climate change and global warming (TikTok user @ qazisajeelahmad)

In terms of emotional tone, sadness and empathy were the most evident elements because sadness and empathy were the emotions depicted most in the videos. Many creators expressed sadness, distress, and concern for the affected communities. Sadness was further amplified by the emotional voiceover and background music. Anger was also present, particularly in advocacy

videos, and in the videos, the creators were angry about the inaction of the relevant authorities. On the contrary, videos depicting the recovery process and videos showing ‘hope alive’ with the support of volunteers and unified communities showcased ‘hope’. Most of these emotions were based on the experiences of the creators of the videos (TikTok user @ thealinouman). These videos also showed that emotional expression is important in engaging the audience and increasing the videos’ reach.

These findings also show that TikTok allowed the users to the great extent, the users expressed themselves personally, interacted with people, expressed their emotions and their opinions, and also the users politically engaged, especially in the videos about the flood crisis, where the users narratively, visually, and emotionally designed the videos with a greater valence degree.

Table 1
Key Findings from TikTok Content Analysis

Dimension	Key Findings
Narrative Style	Personal storytelling was the most common format, followed by advocacy and informational updates
Themes	Suffering and resilience were the most prominent themes across videos
Emotional Tone	Sadness and empathy were dominant emotions, reflecting the humanitarian impact of floods
Climate Communication	Several videos linked floods to climate change and environmental issues
Platform Role	TikTok served as a platform for storytelling, information sharing, and digital activism

Discussion and Analysis

This study analyzes the expression and framing of the lived experiences of climate change related flooding in Pakistan, using user TikTok as crisis communication message sharing platform. Through the assessment of narratives, themes and emotional tones depicted in the selected shortform videos, the study examines the substantial role of this platform in creating impact in crisis communication, climate change and raising public awareness. The dominant narrative mode of personal storytelling is the most significant result of this study. This is in support

of the Narrative Paradigm Theory which implies that storytelling is one way of interpreting a perplexing reality. While most people would look at news reports about a particular flooding event, TikTok users chose to video-narrate the flooding event and explain their lived experiences. This situates the environmental disruption totally within the personal and social sphere of the narrated flooding experience. These micro-narratives encapsulated the essence of the flood and the social context surrounding the emotional narrative arc, and consequently, highly boosted the engagement and reliability of the video. The

typical media representation of a crisis is to abstract the disaster and report in a voice of authority. In contrast, TikTok narratives were more about showing vulnerability and bringing the crisis to the fore.

Advocacy-oriented narratives signal a shift in the digital storytelling landscape from passive storytelling to digital storytelling as an interactive medium. They do not only point out a problem. They also critique and mobilize around the concerns of governance, the lack of infrastructure, and climate injustices. This aligns with Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective action, where individuals digitalize activism in self-defined, individualized, and dispersed ways as opposed to being part of a collective action. Thus, TikTok is a platform for storytelling, as well as a platform for dispersed climate activism.

The results of the thematic analysis are indicative of the varying ways users perceived the flood crisis, and in many instances, the interrelations (or lack thereof) in the many issues associated with the flood crisis. Most of the themes, suffering and resilience, reflect a dual narrative structure. Among suffering narratives, there was predominance of loss, suffering, displacement, and the crisis's environmental degradation. Resilience narratives, in contrast, focused on the community, the spirit, and the adaptive and supportive responses to the crisis. Provided counter-narrative. This duality is crucial because it suggests that the affected communities are not passive victims; instead, they are active agents grappling their own crisis.

The increased emphasis on accountability narratives is positive and advances the first-order case study. In such narratives, participants critically engaged with official accounts and disaster management. These findings are particularly interesting to the literature on participatory media, especially the assertions regarding social media users' ability to challenge narratives and demand accountability from media producers (Grantham, 2025). Given the low trust in institutional communication in Pakistan, the emergence of accountability narratives is greatly important.

Detecting climate awareness as a possible user-generated content theme is also one of the study's value points. Most of the videos didn't talk about climate change directly, but some of the videos mentioned the floods in the context of other environmental issues such as global warming and extreme weather. Outside the realm of official communication campaigns, this shows that climate change conversations are becoming a greater part of everyday digital communication. It adds to the work of Zeng and Yan (2024), who argue, in part, that TikTok starts to make environmental issues less abstract. In this case, flooding was the most prominent and relatable example of climate change.

Analyzing emotional tone from this angle explains the user engagement features of TikTok content better. The most emotionally expressed user engagement features, sadness and empathy, seem to suggest that TikTok content fosters an emotional bond between creators and the audience. Emotional tone is expressive, but in this case, it is also a significant contributor to user engagement and, as a result, increased content production. This aligns with the concept of algorithmic amplification, where social media algorithms prioritize emotionally charged content (Obreja, 2024). Hence, videos' emotional tones are not merely a reflection of the user experience, but contribute to how crisis content is placed and circulated.

The focus on suffering provides a contribution to the "politics of visibility" on TikTok. While many of TikTok's recommending systems favours visually striking and/or emotionally charged content, certain forms of suffering are showcased more than others. This results in an imbalanced view of the disaster in which suffering of the extreme is far more public than the everyday suffering and long-term coping and recovery processes. This signals the need to assess the implications of how social media platforms' design influences the narratives of the crises.

Such a study is particularly useful in addressing the gap in literature around crisis communication on TikTok in the Global South. The majority of digital media and climate communication research focuses on the Global North and often overlooks

the Global South's socio-cultural and environmental peculiarities. By situating the study in Pakistan, the research makes the case that digital narratives rely on the local context in which underdeveloped infrastructure, impoverished population, and traditional values are present. From a general perspective, the findings explore potential opportunities for user-generated content and climate communication. TikTok provides an opportunity for participants to experience and record their own environmental transformations and their individual narratives regarding the climate crisis. The democratization of communication challenges the epistemic authority of experts and institutions that monopolize the making and telling of environmental stories. There are challenges that come with this opportunity. The focus on user-generated content creates challenges for assessing the veracity of information and the potential for misinformation. While this study focused on documents and themes TikTok users commented on, future research should look into the verification of TikTok videos and the impact such videos have on the audience's understanding of climate change.

Conclusion

This study attempts to understand user-generated content about the 2025 flood crisis in Pakistan and the resulting narratives and documents another aspect of the role of digital communication in the convergence of climate change and crisis communication. Given the centrality of communication in the success of TikTok as a social platform, the findings of the study affirm that TikTok is a useful platform that allows users turn in to advocate and enable communication about the transnational social lived and environmental crisis. Communication with social advocacy is documented in the social discourse of the narratives.

The personal or storytelling narrative was the overwhelming preference of the respondents, and most certainly, there is a powerful communication potential of the storytelling form, a personal narrative. This narrative, without a doubt, contributed to the humane representation of the flood crisis the narrative was thematic, and

suffering and resilience were the most dominant characterization, and therefore, the most notable representation of the flood crisis and the affected communities. The presence of accountability indicates a civic discourse, and the users of TikTok are civic actively engaged.

The potential of digital storytelling to close the environmental disconnect is underscored by the presence of climate change consciousness in user-generated content. TikTok users, and creators of user-generated content, map out the interrelated/existential thematic of climate change, and articulate and shape the climate narratives beyond the disaster for the local flooded communities and the global climate. CCD narratives, the most fully integrated, storytelling with emotional appeal of the audience, are significantly impacted to audience engagement and visibility.

This research highlights the importance of using social media to communicate about the climate. Especially in relation to the multiple environmental crises, TikTok enables participatory storytelling and participatory sense making. Climate change communication, climate change understanding, and climate change action could benefit from additional research to determine the impact of digital storytelling, various algorithms in conjunction with different social media, audience engagement, and the response of multiple audiences.

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