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## TikTok, Tomatoes, and Teenagers: Using New Social Media Apps to Connect Extension Education with Younger Audiences

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# TikTok, Tomatoes, and Teenagers: Using New Social Media Apps to Connect Extension Education with Younger Audiences

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**Abstract.** Social media usage has precipitated changes in Cooperative Extension’s delivery of programs to amplify involvement with selected audiences and it is important that we craft relevant content for a variety of audiences. Current research tells us that social media and related content can enrich education and can create broader audiences for programming. Resources like blogs, podcasts, and geofilters have shown to be received positively by a wide range of audiences and have created greater rates of engagement. Yet, one platform that has received limited attention is TikTok, perhaps due to TikTok’s mixed reviews in educational systems. With current trends showing that 48% of 18-29 year olds are using the app, we believe that TikTok has great potential for connecting audiences with research-based information and engaging previously unreached communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, Cooperative Extension programs have begun utilizing social media in the design and delivery of their content (Mirando et al., 2012) to amplify involvement from select audiences (Garcia et al., 2018). Such changes have been proven to be beneficial, demonstrating the importance of crafting relevant content for a variety of audiences (Thompson, 2018). Current research tells us that social media and related content can enrich education and can create broader audiences for programming. Resources like blogs (Beale et al., 2021), podcasts (Gonzalez et al., 2021), and geofilters (Davis et al., 2021) have shown to be received positively by a wide range of audiences and have created greater rates of engagement. Yet, one platform that has received limited attention is TikTok (<https://www.tiktok.com/en>), perhaps due to TikTok’s mixed reviews in educational systems (Klein, 2019). With current trends showing that 48% of 18–29-year-olds are using the app (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), we believe that TikTok has great potential for connecting audiences with research-based information and engaging previously unreached communities.

## WHAT IS TIKTOK?

TikTok is a platform wherein users post videos between 15 and 60 seconds. Videos can have filters applied to them to enhance appeal. Content is completely heterogeneous and includes comedic skits, lip syncs, instructional videos, PSAs, rants and commentaries, and dances. TikTok’s user demographics range from young children to adults (Pew, 2021), and the platform has guidelines that require all content to be appropriate for minor audiences. Creators may use hashtags to share the reach of their video, “Stitch” their videos to others, and “Duet” with other videos. To Stitch means to add on to existing content, whereas the Duet feature is useful for directly addressing videos from other creators. Exceptionally popular creators can opt into the “Creator Fund,” which generates ad revenue for creators.

Since TikTok is a video-based platform, its relevance to Extension requires further examination. Why would Extension expand educational materials to TikTok when many programs and educational methods are already housed on YouTube and have garnered success on the platform (Dorn & Hobbs, 2021; Fawcett et al., 2021)? First,

TikTok has a friendlier interface than YouTube for uploading content: TikTok is optimized for hand-held devices, while YouTube remains more compatible with computers. TikTok also allows users to watch short, digestible videos, while YouTube is geared toward longer content, which necessitates the presence of ads. TikTok is designed for in-the-moment learning and engagement opportunities, like other accessible platforms such as Twitter, while YouTube is meant for long-term engagement. Both TikTok and YouTube are useful in educational contexts, but it would be easier to film and upload a TikTok promoting an event or providing an educational resource compared to filming a YouTube video and uploading it to the platform. In Extension educational settings in which audiences may be in settings away from a computer (farm, work, and other), utilizing a smartphone-based platform makes the materials more accessible. With its hashtag and tagging capabilities and easily shareable format, TikTok is also designed to track engagement to boost popular videos, allowing several videos and trends to “go viral” and reach many different audiences. Recently, the most viral video was a baked feta pasta recipe (Neal, 2021), which encouraged other people to easily learn a new pasta recipe through the video, create their own, and (visually) share their results with others.

### TIKTOK IN EXTENSION CONTEXTS

TikTok can be easily downloaded onto most devices, and all that is needed to create and upload a video is a camera, microphone/headphones, and an internet connection to upload the video. In terms of immediate use, Extension educators may employ TikTok for multiple purposes:

- For promotions, Extension professionals could upload short, attention-grabbing videos of programs and educational opportunities to their followers. They can also add links in their profile to direct viewers to their websites.
- Videos can be short explanations of a program, comments about past programs, or another kind of engaging video that promotes Extension programs.
- With some basic editing, Extension professionals can create videos for a variety of topics, including food preservation, crop fertilization, Extension office contact information, introductions for local Extension professionals, and other related content.
- Extension professionals may turn what would normally be longer explanations into a 60-second video. This video may include captions that viewers can read while professionals demonstrate a method or visually share results.
- One popular technique on the app is the “pause and read” where viewers may pause to read longer text that the creator has provided. Once the viewer is done reading, they simply un-pause to continue.

There are multiple ways that TikTok can support the creation and engagement of content with Extension audiences, as demonstrated by the following examples:

- The Tri-District Handwashing Challenge (Hartsfield et al., 2020), which emphasizes proper handwashing techniques.
- The Virtual Youth Livestock Show (Jennings & Brown, 2020), which includes a class for TikTok videos of the 4-H member and their animal doing their favorite TikTok.
- Extension professional Abby Whitaker showcases how to create engaging and educational videos in a short timespan by using #WeedID and teaching about a new weed every Wednesday (Whitaker, 2020).
- Ontario 4-H (n.d.) uses TikTok to highlight group activities.

### MORE WAYS TO ENGAGE VIA TIKTOK

One of the greatest strengths of TikTok is the variety of ways users can engage with the content on the app. Commenting on videos is generally unrestricted, so one can freely engage with other videos, share your opinions, or ask questions. Users may critique misinformation using the Stitch and Duet features. Finally, there is also a “live” feature in which creators may livestream and engage with viewers to demonstrate different educational topics in a longer format. Livestreams would be useful for informal question and answer sessions on different topics.

# Tik Tok and Extension Education

## SUMMARY

TikTok provides unique engagement opportunities, and there are multiple tools currently available for learning how to use the app (McGlew, 2020). TikTok has been scarcely explored in informal education settings, though it is popular in K–12 settings (Roderick, 2020; Zalaznick, 2019). TikTok provides a wealth of ways to educate and engage people. Regardless of whether the program is virtual or in-person, accessible educational content remains a top priority for the continued relevance of Extension, and TikTok provides the perfect platform for creating content that is accessible, digestible, and wide-reaching across the Extension system.

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