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TIKTOK AND INFORMATION PRACTICES AMONG GENERATION Z UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study examines the characteristics of users, as well as the patterns of use and information consumption on TikTok among university students at the Latin University of Costa Rica, with a focus on the media practices of Generation Z. Based on a quantitative survey applied to 530 students born between 1995 and 2008, variables such as usage frequency, types of content consumed, and perceptions of the platform as an information source are analyzed. The results reveal intensive, predominantly passive, and highly personalized use, where entertainment predominates, yet specific forms of technological appropriation also emerge. Although TikTok is not yet established as a consolidated informational channel, students show interest in educational content and engage in practices that combine leisure with casual information seeking. It is concluded that the relationship between Generation Z and TikTok should be understood as an algorithm-mediated practice, characterized by personalization and low production of original content.

Keywords: TikTok, Generation Z, algorithmic culture, digital platforms, information practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has significantly altered Generation Z's relationship with social platforms, positioning TikTok as a central player in their daily lives (Guerra, 2024). Although it was originally conceived as an entertainment application, the platform has evolved into a multifaceted space where young people not only socialize but also learn, express themselves, and participate actively. This evolution highlights its function as an accessible source of interaction and information for this digital generation (Pedrouzo & Krynski, 2023), which tends to use TikTok for informational purposes.

It is possible that TikTok shapes communicative experiences and processes of meaning-making among university students, which demonstrates the need to address this

phenomenon from a critical and contextualized perspective (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). From this approach, where performativity, visuality, and immediacy constitute distinctive features, it is possible to observe how the platform connects with broader transformations in youth communicative logics, characterized by formats that privilege the brief, the emotional, and the viral (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). In this sense, TikTok must be understood not only as a consumption tool but as a cultural interface that reflects and shapes contemporary ways of inhabiting the digital world.

Consequently, this study seeks to analyze the informational practices of students from the Latin University of Costa Rica, belonging to Generation Z, in their daily interaction with TikTok. Through a quantitative survey applied to 530 students born between 1995 and 2008, the frequency of use, the types of content consumed, and the perceptions about the platform's informational value are examined. The objective is to provide empirical evidence that allows to understand the communicative dynamics of this generation in the university digital environment.

This study constitutes a first approach to understanding how consumption practices on TikTok influence the daily construction of meaning and digital identity among young university students, without this necessarily implying a critical or deliberate appropriation of the media environment.

1.1. Technological Appropriation, TikTok, and Generation Z

Social networks have evolved from being simple platforms of interaction to becoming fundamental nodes for the circulation of meanings and the distribution of information in digital environments. TikTok, which began as an application focused on creating short videos for entertainment purposes, has managed to position itself as a source of significant, though not predominant, informational participation among young people. According to the Digital News Report of 2023, 44% of young people between 18 and 24 years old use TikTok, it being the main source of information for 20% of them (Reuters Institute, 2023). This data confirms the emergence of a cultural shift in youth informational practices, oriented towards visual, brief, and algorithmically mediated formats (Mohsin, 2022; Davies et al., 2014).

This phenomenon can be analyzed from the notion of technological appropriation, understood not simply as access to devices or platforms, but as the users' capacity to reconfigure technologies based on their own interests, contexts, and lifestyles (Siles et al., 2022; Jenkins et al., 2013). In the case of Generation Z, TikTok is not only consumed passively but is integrated into daily practices where entertainment, the search for information, and the construction of digital identity coexist. As Livingstone & Helsper (2007) argue, the differentiated use of digital media among young people is not explained solely by technical or access variables, but by interpretive frameworks that give meaning to these practices.

In Latin America, and more specifically in Costa Rica, TikTok has over 2,002,597 active users, consolidating itself as the third most used social network. Young people find in this platform an ideal environment to interact in a dynamic and visual way with their social reality (Lee & Abidin, 2023).

In summary, the utilization of TikTok by Generation Z must be comprehended as a component of a more extensive communicative ecosystem. In this context, the adoption and adaptation of technology is evident not solely in the creation of content but also in the selection, dissemination, and reinterpretation of ephemeral and viral formats. These formats function as contemporary modes of connection, belonging, and participation.

TikTok redefines the dynamics between content producers and consumers in the contemporary digital ecosystem. Far from an exclusively passive logic, young people interact, react, remix, and share content in real time, developing a participatory flow that transforms the way information is generated and disseminated (García-Orosa, 2021). This performative appropriation, often algorithmically guided, implies a situated agency, where individual expressiveness is linked to collective processes of identification and belonging.

In the Costa Rican context, data from the first national report on digital platforms reveal that users spend on average 94 minutes per day on TikTok, consolidating it as one of the most frequented platforms by young people (Brenes Peralta et al., 2023). This data suggests a sustained daily involvement that goes beyond superficial entertainment, opening space to explore how digital subjectivities and socialization dynamics are produced.

The importance of TikTok among Generation Z is also explained by its architecture designed for immediacy, visuality, and constant feedback. In this sense, it is pertinent to consider that this generation has been characterized by its capacity to communicate, generate content, and access information in real time, without the traditional mediations that imposed waiting or institutional hierarchies (Zemke et al., 2014, cited in Álvarez Rammos et al., 2019). The platform thus functions not only as a medium but as a social and cultural space in which new forms of interaction, representation, and meaning-making are updated.

1.2. Technological Appropriation as a Sociocultural Process

From the perspective of sociotechnical studies, technological appropriation must be understood as a culturally mediated process, in which subjects not only use technologies but integrate and re-signify them from their particular experiences and symbolic frameworks. More than an instrumental adoption, it is an active incorporation that transforms digital tools into components of routines, imaginaries, and social relationships. In this line, Carroll et al. (2002) emphasize that appropriation occurs when users modify and insert technologies into their daily practices, giving them new meanings based on their own needs.

Inspired by the contributions of Michel de Certeau (1980), this approach makes it possible to understand appropriation as a creative and, at times, subversive act: users are not limited to following the uses intended by technological developers, but rather reorient them according to their own needs, values, and identities. In this sense, platforms like TikTok cannot be reduced to environments of passive consumption, but operate as scenarios where meanings are negotiated, social relationships are redefined, and contemporary forms of youth agency are deployed.

Digital ecologies, a concept introduced by Buckingham (2007), offer a framework for understanding how young people insert themselves into multiple media spaces in order to construct meanings, explore identities, and negotiate their sense of belonging. This broad

perspective allows for analyzing the communicative dynamics that traverse youth beyond specific platforms. In this sense, contemporary platforms like TikTok can be interpreted as current expressions of these digital ecologies, characterized by communicative practices centered on performativity, visuality, and immediacy (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

At the same time, it is essential to frame these practices within the discussion on the digital rights of youth, a topic addressed by Third et al. (2014), who warn about the algorithmic and structural conditions that affect access, participation, and protection in digital environments. This critical view allows situating TikTok not only as a space of consumption but also as a terrain where dynamics of power, control, and media resistance are configured.

In the Costa Rican context, the use of TikTok by young people shows how these appropriations are conditioned by structural factors, such as cultural capital, access to connectivity, and educational level. Likewise, Brenes Peralta et al. (2023) point out that, although access to digital platforms may be equitable, this does not guarantee a homogeneous or critical use of them. On the contrary, technological appropriation depends on particular interpretive frameworks and on inequalities in the available material opportunities.

Furthermore, this process is configured as a form of informal and continuous learning. Interaction with TikTok is not merely receptive: young people modify algorithms through their behavior, generate their own content, and integrate into ephemeral communities of affinity, where videos, narratives, and performances circulate that allow them to express and, at the same time, build their digital subjectivities. As Hendler et al. (2008) argue, this cycle of creation, consumption, and redistribution not only reinforces the user's symbolic autonomy but also makes visible new forms of platform-mediated creativity.

Understanding technological appropriation, then, becomes indispensable for analyzing how Generation Z in Costa Rica incorporates platforms like TikTok into their informational routines, converting them into emerging spaces for content circulation and exploration of topics of interest.

1.3. TikTok and Generation Z

University students of Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2008, constitute the first complete cohort of digital natives. Since their childhood, they have been continuously exposed to technological environments, which has shaped not only their communicative practices but also their way of constructing subjectivity and digital identity. Unlike previous generations, these young people do not conceive technology as an external tool, but as an inherent extension of their daily life, where platforms like TikTok emerge as privileged scenarios for entertainment, socialization, and, increasingly, learning (Lee & Abidin, 2023).

This generation shows a clear preference for brief, dynamic, and easily circulated audiovisual content, a phenomenon that evidences a transformation in the modes of informational consumption, which are increasingly immediate, fragmentary, and unstructured (Brito et al., 2015). In this context, TikTok has significantly altered the ways in which young people access information and participate in the digital public space. Recent studies show that the platform not only acts as a primary source for following cultural trends and current events but also promotes a participatory and interactive logic that displaces the unidirectionality of

traditional media (Sidorenko et al., 2021).

In Costa Rica, research like that of Brenes Peralta et al. (2023) reveals that TikTok holds a prominent place among the most used platforms by young people, and that its consumption is linked not only to recreational purposes but also to processes of self-expression, identity building, and social participation. This appropriation of the digital environment is framed within a logic where content is not only consumed but is constantly created, edited, and re-signified. As Lundy (2023) indicates, TikTok has become a symbolic space where young people exercise agency, redefine discourses, and challenge hegemonic narratives through visual, humorous, or performative languages. This growth of TikTok is replicated worldwide, with solid indicators of user expansion and time spent on the platform (Iqbal, 2023).

The platform allows users not only to get informed but also to establish affective and symbolic connections with communities of affinity, generating a personalized and emotionally resonant communicational experience. This digital experience reinforces the need for belonging and visibility, enabling participation in debates on public interest issues, from climate activism to gender-based demands. Thus, user-generated content (UGC) becomes a vehicle for empowerment, as it facilitates access to multiple and decentralized narratives (Kim, et al. 2012).

Studying this daily interaction between young people and TikTok allows for understanding not only their media habits but also the broader cultural processes that are reconfiguring the digital public sphere, social bonds, and forms of emerging citizenship. In summary, TikTok is not just a trendy social network, but a sociotechnological phenomenon that condenses the tensions, aspirations, and forms of expression of a generation that fully inhabits the digital ecosystem. This phenomenon is part of the logic of youth media participation described by Burgess & Green (2018), where platforms are not only consumed but also inhabited as cultural spaces.

In this sense, the appropriation of TikTok by university Generation Z can be understood as an unconventional informational practice, where entertainment and emotional participation intertwine with incidental access to political and social content. As Pesántez-Valarezo et al. (2024) point out, TikTok not only shapes entertainment habits but also has a strong impact on the opinion formation of young people, which evidences a shift in the ways this generation accesses, interprets, and engages with digital information.

1.4. Generation Z and Social Networks

The emergence of TikTok in the media habits of Generation Z marks a turning point in the forms of access, circulation, and production of information. This platform, initially conceived for entertainment, has been quickly appropriated by university youth as a hybrid space where informational consumption intertwines with self-expression (Morejón-Llamas et al., 2024), identity play, and participation in public affairs. Far from being a simple shift from traditional media to digital, this turn evidences a profound reconfiguration of media ecologies, in which brief, emotionally charged, and highly shareable visual content becomes the cultural norm (Sidorenko Bautista et al., 2021).

From a situated perspective, it is essential to consider how these practices are shaped by material and symbolic conditions. In Costa Rica, for example, the appropriation of TikTok by university students cannot be dissociated from the socioeconomic context, connectivity levels, and educational trajectories that mediate its use. Brenes Peralta et al. (2023) point out that the preference for platforms like TikTok is anchored in a generational logic that prioritizes immediacy, visuality, and algorithmic personalization. This configuration not only facilitates the dissemination of information but transforms the very experience of knowing: getting informed no longer requires searching, but simply swiping, watching, and reacting. The interface replaces the index, and the feed replaces the table of contents.

In turn, interaction with TikTok embodies emerging forms of youth agency. The possibility of producing and disseminating one's own content endows young audiences with a voice in media scenarios that were previously inaccessible. McCashin & Murphy (2023), in their analysis of TikTok and mental health, emphasize how this platform has become a relevant space for the socialization of public discourses from below, even when institutional channels remain absent or delegitimized. Thus, TikTok operates as a digital laboratory where Generation Z rehearses narratives, assembles identities, and disputes meanings, redefining not only what is considered information but also who has the right to produce, validate, and amplify it.

2. OBJECTIVES

This study set out as a general objective to analyze the forms of use and informational consumption of TikTok among university students of the Latin University of Costa Rica, as a digital platform that articulates dynamics of technological appropriation, content dissemination, and reconfiguration of the daily media experience. The central interest lays in exploring how exposure time, the types of content viewed, and subjective assessments about the credibility of information shape the digital practices of these young people in academic and extra-institutional contexts.

Specifically, the aim was to identify usage differentials according to sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, and degree program, in order to understand the factors that mediate the adoption of TikTok as a significant, though not exclusive, source of access to informational content. Likewise, student perceptions about the veracity, quality, and usefulness of the information consumed on the platform were examined, paying attention to the ways in which these judgments impact daily and academic decision-making, as well as critical positioning in the face of phenomena such as disinformation or infotainment.

Finally, the study intended to provide data on the changes in the way young people access information. TikTok is understood not only as an entertainment platform but also as an environment where informational content is disseminated and criteria on current issues are developed.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used an exploratory and descriptive quantitative design, based on the application of a digital survey aimed at the university community of the Latin University of Costa Rica, which included students, staff, and teachers. The questionnaire was designed to collect data on frequency of TikTok use, types of content consumed, and perceptions of its informational value. Data collection was carried out during the month of September 2024, using a form

distributed via institutional email, which allowed for broad and efficient coverage.

From the total of 631 responses obtained, an intentional sample of 530 people who met the inclusion criteria was refined: being an active student and having been born between the years 1995 and 2008. To do this, cases that indicated their occupation as "Studying" or "Working and Studying," and whose age ranges were between 18 and 30 years, were filtered.

To ensure coherence with the study's objectives, all responses from teachers and administrative staff were excluded. The analysis focused exclusively on university students from Generation Z, in order to ensure a direct relationship between the objectives, the population under investigation, and the interpretation of the results.

Responses from people outside the age range or from other sectors of the university community were eliminated, in order to ensure coherence between the theoretical framework and the analysis group.

The analysis was performed using descriptive statistics, resorting to frequencies and percentages to identify general characteristics of content consumption on TikTok, as well as preliminary relationships between variables such as age, gender, type of content, and frequency of use. As Pozo-Velasco et al. (2025) point out, the use of digital surveys is especially useful for studying informational phenomena in young populations, used to interacting in virtual environments.

It is acknowledged that the exploratory nature of the study, the use of a non-probabilistic sample concentrated in a single private institution and the male overrepresentation limit the generalizability of the findings. For this reason, the results must be interpreted as a situated approximation of TikTok use in Costa Rican university contexts, and not as an exhaustive description of Generation Z. For subsequent studies, it is suggested to include qualitative techniques, comparative approaches between public and private sectors, and the analysis of user-generated content to broaden the understanding of the phenomenon.

4. RESULTS

The results obtained allow for drawing a preliminary cartography of the role TikTok plays in the digital habits of the university student community, providing an empirical basis for interpreting its daily appropriation among Generation Z youth. The majority of surveyed individuals indicated using TikTok several times a day (426 cases), followed by a minority who access the platform once a day (34 cases), and a small group who reported not using it (90 cases), as evidenced in Figure 1. It is worth noting that, although 631 responses were obtained, the analysis is restricted to 530 cases that meet the defined inclusion criteria: being a university student and having been born between 1995 and 2008. This filtering allowed delimiting the sample to the subjects who effectively represent the study's group of interest.

Table 1 reveals that TikTok has been structurally inserted into the digital routines of this generation: 67.5% of the total claim to use the application several times a day, while 14.3% declare having no contact with it. This intensity of use suggests that the platform does not operate as a space for occasional consumption, but as a constant media environment that

accompanies the daily life of young university students. Far from being a simple entertainment application, TikTok thus becomes an interface that articulates ways of being in the world: from leisure to the search for information and subjective expression. This pattern of intensive use demands a reflection on the mechanisms by which digital platforms shape, in real time, social imaginaries, youth narratives, and media consumption practices in the Costa Rican university sphere.

Table 1.

Tik Tok usage frequency.

Tiempo	Frecuencia	Porcentaje
Varias veces al día	426	67.5
No utilizo TikTok	90	14.3
Algunas veces a la semana	52	8.2
Una vez al día	34	5.4
Menos de una vez a la semana	29	4.6
Total	631	100.0

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Table 2 shows a relatively even distribution of daily exposure time to TikTok among different user groups: 148 people report using it for less than 30 minutes, 160 indicate between 30 minutes and one hour, 133 fall within the range of one to two hours, and 146 claim to spend more than two hours per day on the platform. This fragmented pattern suggests that there is no single form of use, but rather a plurality of intensities that respond to lifestyles, academic routines, and differentiated forms of technological appropriation.

More than a homogeneous consumption, what is observed is a flexible relationship with the platform, in which TikTok is incorporated for more or less prolonged periods according to the personal rhythms of each student. This variability points to TikTok's capacity to insert itself into multiple attention regimes and daily temporalities, becoming an interface adaptable to diverse sociotechnical configurations.

In this sense, the platform not only accompanies leisure moments but is integrated as an available resource for affective browsing, individual expression, and algorithmic connection, which reinforces its role as a versatile environment in the digital practices of Generation Z.

Table 2.

Time dedicated to the use of TikTok.

Tiempo	Frecuencia	Porcentaje
Entre 30 minutos y 1 hora	160	25.4
Menos de 30 minutos	148	23.5
Más de 2 horas	146	23.1
Entre 1 y 2 horas	133	21.1
En blanco	44	7.0
Total	631	100.0

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Table 3 reveals that, while TikTok is beginning to acquire relevance as a source of information, its role is still inscribed in an ambivalent logic. While 236 people indicated that they access informational content "sometimes," 129 do so "rarely," and 126 "frequently." These data show that, although there is an informational use, the platform continues to be used predominantly for entertainment purposes. This finding suggests an ambiguous appropriation, in which the informational and the playful coexist without the boundaries between them necessarily becoming blurred.

According to Fialho et al. (2023), TikTok has not consolidated itself as a structured space for the active search of information, but rather functions as a hybrid medium where informational content is introduced incidentally into a continuous flow of algorithmically curated videos. In this environment, information is integrated into narrative forms that privilege visuality, immediacy, and affectivity, characteristics that reflect a digital culture permeated by the logic of perpetual scrolling.

This peripheral use of TikTok as an informational source reinforces the idea of a media ecology where the distinction between entertainment and knowledge becomes porous. The platform thus configures itself as a scenario where young people access informal and fragmentary knowledge, in a register that does not always demand verification or depth, but which does connect with their contemporary ways of inhabiting information.

Table 3.

The use of TikTok as an information search engine.

Tiempo	Frecuencia	Porcentaje
A veces	236	37.4
Rara vez	129	20.4
Sí, con frecuencia	126	20.0
No, nunca	125	19.8
En blanco	15	2.4
Total	631	100.0

Source: Elaborated by the author.

As observed in Table 4, entertainment represents the primary motivation for using TikTok among Generation Z university students, with a total of 462 mentions, equivalent to 73.2% of responses. This result confirms the platform's predominant role as a space intended for immediate gratification, supported by a communicative logic centered on visual elements and the constant generation of emotional stimuli.

In contrast, other motivations such as learning new content (50 mentions, 7.9%), seeking to follow trends and viral challenges (58 mentions, 9.2%), or connecting with other users (12 mentions, 1.9%) appear much more marginally. This distribution suggests that these students' appropriation of TikTok clearly prioritizes playful and entertainment aspects, relegating other educational or social functions to a secondary level.

Table 4.

Main reason to use TikTok.

Motivo	Frecuencia	Porcentaje
Entretenimiento	462	73.2
Otro (especificar)	58	9.2
Aprender algo nuevo	50	7.9
En blanco	45	7.1
Conectar con amigos	12	1.9
Seguir tendencias y desafíos virales	4	.6
Total	631	100.0

Source: Elaborated by the author.

This hierarchy of uses should not be understood as a mere individual preference, but as the result of an algorithmic design that privileges viral, brief, and highly performative content. The very architecture of TikTok shapes consumption practices, orienting them toward a constant flow of visual stimuli that maximize time spent on the application but tend to minimize the informational or reflective depth of the content.

In this context, the platform acts as a cultural device that reinforces certain ways of inhabiting the digital: fast, affective, and centered on spectacularity. Although learning and social connection practices exist, they are absorbed by a media ecology that privileges the ephemeral, where entertainment becomes the predominant channel for accessing, interpreting, and sharing content. The finding, therefore, not only describes a usage pattern but also illuminates the conditions of possibility for other, more critical or deliberate forms of technological appropriation.

Regarding Table 5, a central characteristic of the media behavior of the university Generation Z is observed: the majority of respondents (87.3%) state that they do not create content on TikTok regularly, limiting themselves to consuming it, either exclusively (463 people) or occasionally generating posts (93 people). Only 3.6% (19 people) report producing content consistently. This distribution suggests that, although TikTok has been

celebrated as a platform for participation and creativity, in the Costa Rican case its use remains predominantly centered on content reception.

Table 5.

Individuals as content creator in TikTok.

Creador de contenido	Frecuencia	Porcentaje
No, solo consumo contenido	463	73.4
Ocasionalmente	93	14.7
En blanco	56	8.9
Sí, con regularidad	19	3.0
Total	631	100.0

Source: Elaborated by the author.

From a sociotechnical perspective, this tendency can be partly explained by the platform's algorithmic architecture, which favors pre-selected viral content in the "For You" section, reducing the exposure of original creations from users with low activity or a small follower base. This functioning has been widely analyzed by Tejedor et al. (2024), who describe how TikTok organizes visibility based on an opaque recommendation system that prioritizes virality and time spent on the platform.

This finding invites us to nuance narratives that present youth as automatically creative subjects in digital environments. Although productive and expressive appropriations exist, they do not constitute the norm. The everyday use of TikTok by university students responds more to logics of entertainment and companionship than to explicit communicative or expressive motivations. Thus, the platform consolidates itself as an environment of immediate gratification, rather than a space of expanded agency.

For its part, Table 6 introduces a more nuanced dimension by revealing the criteria that motivate young people to follow content creators on TikTok. The most relevant factor is thematic affinity (269 people), followed by the creator's personality (147) and content quality (57). This data is particularly significant, as it points to a form of selective appropriation in which users prioritize the personal relevance of content over its format or aesthetics. It is a curatorial logic that, while operating within an ecosystem governed by the algorithm, margins of agency are introduced, allowing users to configure an informational environment tailored to their interests.

Table 6.

Motivations to follow a content creator in TikTok.

Motivación	Frecuencia	Porcentaje
Temas de interés específico	269	42.6
Calidad del contenido	147	23.3
Personalidad del creador	78	12.4
En blanco	59	9.4
Otro (especificar)	57	9.0
Tendencias virales	21	3.3
Total	631	100.0

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Along the same lines, 95% of survey respondents state they use TikTok primarily to view content generated by other people, while a mere 5% say they create and share videos. This asymmetry demonstrates that the platform's adoption does not correspond to a traditional participatory model, but rather to a consumption model centered on visibility, immediacy, and fragmented access to external narratives. TikTok's social function thus fits into a logic of observation rather than interaction. Furthermore, a majority of users consider sharing their own content on TikTok to be of little or no importance, which confirms that the platform is used more as an environment for consumption than for identity expression. This practice reveals a relationship with the digital environment that is functional, recreational, and personalized, but not necessarily creative or dialogic.

Regarding digital belonging, the data show that the vast majority of respondents do not identify with specific communities within TikTok, such as fandoms or interest groups. Although these communities can play a relevant role on other platforms, on TikTok they tend to adopt a more ephemeral and fragmentary form. As Tompkins and Guajardo (2024) point out, fandoms on TikTok do not always correspond to cohesive structures; instead, they are articulated through hashtags, viral sounds, and trends that emerge and disappear rapidly. This dynamic hinders the consolidation of lasting forms of collective belonging, privileging interactions based on momentary visibility over sustained engagement.

From the perspective of subjective impact, it is observed that TikTok has generated relevant changes in digital habits: for many students, it has increased the daily time they dedicate to platforms, transformed their forms of interaction on social networks, and even influenced their consumption decisions. This set of effects suggests that the platform not only entertains but also structures the digital daily life of those who use it more intensively.

When asked about which aspects of TikTok are most attractive, content personalization appears as the most valued attribute. This response aligns with the way users describe their experience: tailored to their interests, light, and determined by an algorithm that learns from their own behaviors. To a lesser extent, the brevity of the videos and the thematic variety are valued, which completes a picture where the use of TikTok is deeply mediated by the platform's techno-social design, rather than by participation in the classical sense.

On the other hand, Table 7 shows a clear difference in TikTok usage frequency by gender: 47.1% of women use it several times a day, compared to 19.7% of men. This difference suggests that intensive consumption of the platform is more entrenched among female users, which could be explained by a stronger emotional, expressive, or aesthetic connection to the visual content TikTok offers. This finding coincides with studies that have documented more frequent interaction by women with platforms focused on image, fashion, and personal narrative, in contrast with more instrumental uses by other groups.

Table 7.

Frequency of using TikTok by gender.

% del total 631						
Género	Frecuencia					Total
	Algunas veces a la semana	Menos de una vez a la semana	No utilizo TikTok	Una vez al día	Varías veces al día	
En blanco	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%
Femenino	5.4%	2.7%	5.2%	2.5%	47.1%	62.9%
Masculino	2.7%	1.9%	6.2%	2.5%	19.7%	33.0%
No binario	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%	0.5%
Otro (por favor, especifique)	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Prefiero no decir	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.2%	0.6%	1.1%
Total	8.2%	4.6%	14.3%	5.4%	67.5%	100.0%

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Likewise, when the sample is segmented by age, it is observed that among young people aged 18 to 21—the most representative segment of Generation Z—the primary motivation for using TikTok is to access specific topics of interest, followed by content quality. This discover reinforces an idea previously suggested: although the use of the platform is predominantly framed within entertainment logics, it is not a superficial or undifferentiated consumption. On the contrary, it is a curated experience shaped by the user themselves, who selects content according to their personal, cultural, or even educational affinities. This pattern confirms that, while interaction is passive in terms of production, it is not necessarily passive in terms of meaning. Young people configure personalized pathways within the algorithmic ecosystem, where agency lies not in content creation but in the capacity to choose, filter, and reinterpret what they consume. In this framework, the platform does not impose content unidirectionally but operates as a structure of opportunity, shaped by continuous interaction between algorithmic logic and subjective decisions.

In this way, TikTok becomes an algorithmically mediated environment, yet inhabited by practices that express thematic, aesthetic, and symbolic criteria. The apparent passivity is, in reality, a form of interpretive participation, where users exercise a type of agency that, while not explicit in creation, is evident in the construction of an informational consumption landscape that is meaningful to them.

Table 8.

Motivation for using TikTok per groups of ages.

% del total: 631							
Motivación							
Grupo de edad	En blanco	Tendencias virales	Calidad del contenido	Otro (especificar)	Personalidad del creador	Temas de interés específico	Total
En blanco	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%
18 - 21 años	3.6%	1.4%	14.3%	4.3%	7.9%	23.8%	55.3%
22 - 25 años	1.4%	0.5%	4.9%	1.3%	3.0%	10.6%	21.7%
26 - 30 años	0.3%	0.2%	2.2%	1.6%	0.3%	4.4%	9.0%
31 - 35 años	0.8%	0.6%	1.0%	0.5%	0.6%	1.4%	4.9%
Más de 35 años	1.0%	0.6%	1.0%	1.4%	0.5%	2.4%	6.8%
Total	9.4%	3.3%	23.3%	9.0%	12.4%	42.6%	100.0%

Source: Elaborated by the author.

The study's findings allow for the delineation of a precise picture of how university students from Generation Z in Costa Rica engage with TikTok. This relationship is characterized by intensive, predominantly passive, and highly personalized consumption, in which the algorithm plays a central role in shaping user experiences. Access frequency to the platform is high, especially among women, who report more consistent use than their male counterparts. However, this repeated use does not mean into active content production practices but rather into silent participation, guided both by individual interests and the recommendation logics inherent to the algorithmic system.

The most consumed types of content, such as humor, entertainment, and tutorials, suggest a fragmentary appropriation where interaction responds primarily to dynamics of distraction, recreation, and light socialization. Although uses related to information seeking are recorded, they remain on the margins of the daily experience. TikTok thus emerges as a space for incidental exploration, closer to algorithmic navigation than to a deliberate or structured search for knowledge. This situation creates a tension between the platform's participatory potential and its actual use, which is oriented toward immediate gratification rather than critical or dialogic participation.

One of the most significant elements of this research is the persistence of passive consumption across all analyzed segments. The majority of surveyed individuals do not generate content nor consider it relevant to do so. Even among the group of young female users, whose frequency of use is higher, content creation is scarce or non-existent. This behavior points to a more structural phenomenon: although TikTok presents itself as an interactive environment, its technical architecture promotes a type of experience closer to contemplation than to active intervention.

The primary motivation to follow content creators, identified as thematic affinity, reinforces the hypothesis of a personalized and curated consumption rather than community participation. Interactions are organized around individual interests, without the consolidation of collective forms of identification or belonging. The platform, in this sense, functions as a space for individualized symbolic exchange, where consumption practices are

determined more by personal preferences than by relational bonds.

Simultaneously, the data shows that TikTok is not merely an entertainment channel but an active agent in reconfiguring digital habits. The platform has influenced how young people distribute their time, interact with other social networks, and make consumption decisions. This influence evidences that its presence cannot be reduced to a logic of superficial leisure; rather, it constitutes a cultural mediation that transforms ways of inhabiting the digital ecosystem.

Collectively, the results affirm that TikTok has established itself as a platform of sustained algorithmic consumption, where appropriation is mediated by a technological architecture that regulates the visibility, relevance, and access to content. Youth agency, within this framework, manifests in the selection of content rather than in its creation or circulation. This usage pattern points to a form of minimal yet constant, individualized yet widely disseminated digital participation, defining new ways of being in the digital realm without necessarily transforming it.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study's results indicate that TikTok has become a central digital environment in the media practices of Costa Rican university students from Generation Z. Although its use is primarily oriented toward entertainment, its daily integration positions it as a significant platform for socialization, symbolic circulation, and, in certain cases, incidental access to informational content. However, its role as an informational channel must be understood as emergent and nuanced: the data reveals a fragmentary appropriation that combines entertainment with occasional moments which discover relevant topics, without consolidating into a deliberative or structured space for information.

This form of appropriation, however, should not be interpreted as an absence of people's capacity to act within pre-existing structures. Following Michel de Certeau (1980), it is possible to read these uses as everyday tactics that allow users to adapt the medium to their own ends. The consumption of humorous, tutorial, or informational videos does not constitute a mere reproduction of the platform's interests but a practice that articulates personal preferences, cultural frameworks, and technological affordances. From this perspective, technological appropriation is not limited to content creation but also involves incorporating the platform into the subjects' informational and expressive routines. This form of use reveals a domestication of the algorithmic environment, which operates based on its own criteria, albeit mediated by the logic of personalized recommendation (Brenes Peralta et al., 2023).

One of the most relevant findings concerns the ambivalent perception of TikTok's informative function. While 46% of participants acknowledge that the platform significantly influences their understanding of current affairs, another important group downplays this influence and expresses distrust in the veracity of the available information. This tension reflects a digital subjectivity that oscillates between appropriating TikTok as an emerging informational channel and a critical awareness of its limitations as a reliable space. As Sidorenko Bautista et al. (2021) point out, the informational dimension of TikTok is still incipient and intertwined with affective narratives and entertainment logics that hinder the consolidation of a fully critical or deliberate use.

Another striking aspect is the relevance of thematic personalization as a criterion for following creators. Some 42% of surveyed individuals indicated they follow content creators for the specific topics they address, above attributes like personality or technical quality of the content. This preference indicates that youth agency manifests primarily in curation rather than production. It is a selective consumption that, although governed by the algorithm, also responds to personal interests, shared social imaginaries, and forms of affective identification that creators manage to mobilize (Lee & Abidin, 2023).

In this regard, the platform offers potential that has not yet been fully explored for formative purposes. The fact that 91% of respondents express interest in tutorials or educational content suggests that TikTok could become an informal learning environment with great potential among youth audiences. However, this potential depends largely on the capacity of institutional and educational actors to generate relevant, accessible, and reliable content. As McCashin and Murphy (2023) warn, platforms like TikTok have been underutilized by public actors in the realm of mental health and education, despite their enormous penetration among young audiences.

The appropriation of TikTok by university students reveals an experience mediated by variables such as gender, age, and cultural capital. Young women use the platform more frequently but do not show a greater propensity to produce content. In fact, active creation is marginal across all analyzed segments. This finding nuances narratives that assume a creative hyperactivity in digital environments and suggests that participation does not always translate into visible production, but into personalized, selective, and emotionally charged forms of consumption.

Overall, the results suggest that TikTok inserts itself into young people's daily lives as a device for algorithmic cultural consumption rather than as a sphere for public deliberation or citizen participation. Although informational uses exist, they are subordinate to dynamics of entertainment and immediate gratification, which reinforces the significance of emotions, aesthetics, and the staging of everyday life in contemporary digital practices. Nevertheless, the symbolic relevance of these interactions and their capacity to shape subjectivities, model perceptions, and construct ways of being in the digital world should not be underestimated.

To summarize, it is important to highlight the limitations of this study. As it relies on a convenience sample from a single Costa Rican university, the results are not generalizable to the entire national youth population. Its value lies in offering a situated approximation, useful for opening new lines of research that explore the modes of TikTok appropriation in Latin American contexts more deeply, where dynamics of access, use, and meaning are still poorly documented in the international literature.

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