

Generation Z and Ecuadorian TikTokers: uses and gratifications among university students studying Communication

Generación Z y tiktokers ecuatorianos: usos y gratificaciones en estudiantes universitarios de Comunicación




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Abstract:

Social media has now reshaped the processes of information creation and circulation, thereby transforming consumption patterns. The aim of this study is to determine, using Uses and Gratifications Theory, the influence of content produced by Ecuadorian TikTokers on the motivations of Generation Z students on the Communication degree programme at the Technical University of Cotopaxi, and to incorporate

Resumen:

En la actualidad, las redes sociales han reconfigurado los procesos de creación y circulación de la información, que han transformado las dinámicas de consumo. El objetivo de este estudio es determinar desde la Teoría de los Usos y Gratificaciones, la influencia de los contenidos de tiktokers ecuatorianos en las motivaciones de la Generación Z de la Carrera de Comunicación de la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi, e incorpo-

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the academic year as a cross-sectional segmentation variable, in order to analyse variations in perception inherent to the educational process. As part of the quantitative design, a survey was administered to 201 participants. The assisted recognition technique was employed to minimise false recognition bias. The reliability of the instrument was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = 0.724$), which indicated acceptable internal consistency. Data processing included a stratified analysis according to academic year. The results show that the most preferred content is oriented towards humour and entertainment, and functions as a mechanism for stress relief and emotional gratification. Digital entertainment cannot be understood as a neutral practice, as it acts as a device that shapes perceptions, reinforces interpretative frameworks and redefines the dynamics of interaction within the university environment.

Keywords:

University students; virtual identity; Generation Z; uses and gratifications; Ecuadorian TikTokers.

rar el ciclo académico como variable de segmentación transversal, para analizar las variaciones en la percepción inherente al proceso formativo. Como parte del diseño cuantitativo, se aplicó una encuesta a 201 participantes. Se empleó la técnica de reconocimiento asistido para minimizar sesgos de falso reconocimiento. La fiabilidad del instrumento se verificó mediante el coeficiente alfa de Cronbach $\alpha = 0.724$, lo que evidenció una consistencia interna aceptable. El procesamiento de los datos incluyó un análisis estratificado según el ciclo académico. Los resultados muestran que los contenidos con mayor preferencia se orientan al humor y al entretenimiento, y funcionan como mecanismos de liberación de tensiones y gratificación emocional. El entretenimiento digital no puede entenderse como una práctica neutral, pues actúa como un dispositivo que modela percepciones, refuerza marcos interpretativos y redefine las dinámicas de interacción en el entorno universitario.

Palabras clave:

Estudiantes universitarios; identidad virtual; Generación Z; usos y gratificaciones; tiktokers ecuatorianos.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the development of digital technology has become abundantly clear, leading to social change due to the ubiquity of various platforms and the mass connectivity of users around the world (Gutiérrez-Arenas *et al.*, 2024). When connecting en masse, internet users acquire, create and disseminate information as prosumers (Colás-Bravo *et al.*, 2013; Fajardo-Pascagaza *et al.*, 2024).

In this context, TikTok has emerged as an innovative platform in the social communication landscape, being used primarily for the entertainment of young audiences and for forging connections with other members of the digital community (Ramírez-Pérez *et al.*, 2021; Soto, 2022; Klimenko and Herrera-Varela, 2022; Trejos-Gil *et al.*, 2024; Méndez-Mjuelos *et al.*, 2023). Since its creation in 2016, it has rapidly achieved global reach, particularly during the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (García-Muñoz and Rangel-Romero, 2024; Quiroz, 2020). This led people to visit this app more regularly, in order to counteract the reality they were experiencing (Suárez-Álvarez and García-Jiménez, 2021). One of the demographic groups associated with this practice was Generation Z, comprising people born between 1995 and 2010. This group shares a common chronological, social and historical context that highlights shared patterns of behaviour and consumption in digital environments (Twenge *et al.*, 2010). Among its distinctive characteristics is the transition into working life through the start of a university degree or early entry into the labour market. However, this generation was one of the hardest hit during the health crisis, due to the forced shift to online learning and job losses, resulting in greater vulnerability in terms of academic education and socio-economic stability (Pham *et al.*, 2024).

Regarding the level of engagement Generation Z has with social media, studies show that between 2022 and 2024, the number of active TikTok users exceeded 1.3 billion, establishing it as one of the leading platforms for video viewing (Hook Agency, 2025). In 2025, 94% of young people used at least one social media platform on a daily basis, whilst 70% checked their social media more than five times a day; this confirms that the features of these platforms act as channels for visibility and digital interaction (Lee, 2025). As for the intensive use of TikTok, Generation Z spends an average of 89 minutes a day on the app, opting for short videos; furthermore, content with sound and repeat functions records 42% higher engagement compared to traditional videos (Hook Agency, 2025).

Despite TikTok's growing global popularity, in Ecuador the platform has approximately 12,000,000 users, representing 69.2% of the total population (Pesántez-Valarezo *et al.*, 2024). However, there are no up-to-date data on its specific use by Generation Z. The available information relates to general studies, such as those analysing TikTok's influence on young people's voting intentions or their rejection of advertising managed via the platform's interface (Pesántez-Valarezo *et al.*, 2024). This lack of statistical data limits our understanding of the consumption patterns, motivations and communication practices of university-aged Generation Z, highlighting the need for more detailed studies to characterise their interaction with TikTok content.

Ecuadorian university students are predominantly members of Generation Z and are highly experienced in technological environments and in using mobile devices, social media and digital platforms (Montero-Corrales, 2025). However, although there is a high level of familiarity with information and communication technologies, their digital skills do not always reach advanced levels of critical, creative and academic application, as evidenced by studies in higher education in Latin America. Thus, within this framework, Ecuadorian Generation Z university students have managed to combine the intensive use of social media and platforms such as TikTok to develop new skills that enable them to harness these technologies for learning and entertainment during the ongoing technological transformation in higher education (Pegalajar-Palomino and Rodríguez-Torres, 2023).

In the process of interaction that takes place from Ecuador or any other country, a virtual community is formed around shared interests and preferences, with the aim of capturing the audience's attention and empathy; as a result, so-called influencers or TikTokers emerge (Gutiérrez-Rentería, 2017; Bucknell-Bossen and Kottasz, 2020; Abidin, 2020; López-Jiménez *et al.*, 2022; Mulier *et al.*, 2022; Jiménez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2025; Virós-Martín *et al.*, 2025). The defining characteristic of these figures is their ability to influence the conduct, behaviour or opinions of their followers, thereby adopting a new form of leadership within the technological sphere (Balseca-Mera and Galarza-Schoenfeld, 2024; Maldonado-Pérez, 2024; Martínez-Borda *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the concept of content creators emerges, referring to people who publish videos on any subject (Booth and Matic, 2011; Ariza *et al.* 2022). Influencers with the greatest digital reach receive financial benefits, in line with the number of reactions and views their content receives. Similarly, their content influences the decisions of those who identify with them or aspire to their lifestyle, leading to a dependency rooted in digital interconnection (Hautea *et al.*, 2021; Jiménez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2025; Martínez-Sanz and Solano-Santos, 2025)

1.1. Theoretical Framework

This study revisits and updates the epistemological premises of the Uses and Gratifications Theory through categories that demonstrate a correlation with the young academic population, given that they regularly access social media to meet their emotional, relational and social needs in order to find satisfaction and interactivity (Tarullo, 2020). The theory put forward by Blumler and Katz in 1973 and 1974 became an alternative to the traditional paradigm, which viewed the audience as a passive entity in the communication process. It was confirmed that recipients are active and have the capacity to accept or reject media content to satisfy or gratify a particular emotional need (Park *et al.*, 2009; Gil-Fernández and CalderónGarrido, 2021; Rovira-Collado *et al.*, 2024).

Today, the rise of social media reinforces the premise that Uses and Gratifications Theory is based on the view that members of an audience are active participants who interpret audiovisual content to meet their psychological and social needs, in relation to personal expectations, motivations and internal norms that facilitate deliberate interaction with digital media (González-Vázquez and Igartua, 2018; Segado-Boj *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, to explore how the content of a media outlet influences audience perceptions, we revisit the structural and deductive framework proposed by authors such as Blumler and Katz (1974), Rivas-Herrera and Igartua (2021) and Mateus *et al.*(2023):

1. Cognitive: acquisition of information, knowledge and understanding
2. Aesthetic and affective: emotion, pleasure and feelings
3. Personal integration: credibility, stability and status
4. Social integration: interaction with family and friends
5. Stress relief: escape and entertainment

These elements enable us to broaden our reflection towards a digital environment based on the consumption of audiovisual products, where expectations rise in line with what users express. A superficial identity is reaffirmed before a community that justifies the use of social media (Espinel-Rubio *et al.*, 2021).

1.2. Objectives

The main objective of this study is to determine, using the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the influence of content produced by Ecuadorian TikTokers on the motivations of Generation Z students on the Communication degree programme at the Technical University of Cotopaxi. The academic year is incorporated as a cross-sectional segmentation variable to analyse variations in perception inherent to the educational process. Taking a cross-sectional approach, the following specific objectives are proposed:

SO1. To identify the most popular Ecuadorian TikTokers among Communication students, considering the relationship between the academic year and the level of recognition of content creators.

SO2. To classify the content consumed by Communication students, distinguishing thematic preferences according to academic year and the content shared by the most popular Ecuadorian TikTokers.

SO3. To describe the predominant motivations in the content consumed by Communication students in accordance with the categories of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, based on the most popular Ecuadorian TikTokers and the academic year.

In Ecuador, Latin America, and Spain, studies on TikTok (Suárez-Álvarez and García-Jiménez, 2021; Sánchez-Amboage *et al.*, 2022; Burgaleta-Pérez *et al.*, 2024; Burgaleta-Pérez and Lalangui-Campoverde, 2025) have focused on analyzing content creators and their productions, examining narratives, aesthetics, thematic themes, as well as variables related to age, gender, nationality, or ethnicity. On the other hand, when the focus is on college students, research has analyzed the impact of this platform on learning, academic participation, engagement, and social and political behaviors (Rendón *et al.*, 2022; Yélamos-Guerra, 2022; Flores-Loaiza *et al.*, 2024; Torres-Toapanta *et al.*, 2024; Díaz-Vera *et al.*, 2025). For this reason, the present study makes a distinctive contribution by incorporating the academic cycle as a cross-cutting and segmentation variable, constituting a methodological innovation by highlighting the reconfiguration of digital practices in motivations and consumption patterns throughout the university trajectory. In this way, it provides evidence situated within the Ecuadorian context, opening up a comparative, broad, and replicable line of inquiry in other higher education systems

The hypothesis is that the academic level is significantly related to the type of content preferred on TikTok and to the perceived gratifications. In this regard, it is expected that there will be differences in consumption patterns between students in early and advanced academic levels, both in terms of content types and associated gratifications.

2. Methodology

The use of a survey as part of the quantitative design made it possible to identify trends and numerical patterns to build knowledge in the field of digital platforms (Cadena-Iñiguez *et al.*, 2017). Purposive non-probabilistic sampling was applied by defining the Communication Program at the Technical University of Cotopaxi as the unit of analysis, given its direct relationship with social media use due to content creation in the participants' academic training and professional development (Noguera-Vivo and Grandío-Pérez, 2025; Tejedor *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, as a public institution, it offers a conducive setting, with students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and regions, which enables the collection of more representative and diverse data (3 and Brunner, 2022). During the April-August 2025 academic term, the study population consisted of 201 students: first cycle (33), second cycle (34), third cycle (19), fourth cycle (29), fifth cycle (22), sixth cycle (24), seventh cycle (8), and eighth cycle (32). Regarding potential sources of bias, non-response was not recorded, as the entire selected population responded. With regard to self-selection, the academic context was considered due to its influence on willingness to respond. Likewise, social desirability was taken into account, understood as the tendency to provide responses that align with academic expectations.

To identify the most popular TikTokers in Ecuador, the study by Burgaleta-Pérez *et al.* (2024) was used as an initial reference. The authors examined more than 1,800 videos from 19 TikTokers, identifying patterns in the messages and correlations between variables such as gender, age, and ethnicity. These findings were then compared and updated using data from the websites *HypeAuditor* and *StarNgage* (Lee, 2025), platforms designed to identify influencers worldwide. The first platform contains a database of over 11,000,000 users. Its filters facilitate the search for audiences and content creators by covering aspects such as country, city, and language (Bautista-Jara and Chávez-Yépez, 2020). The second platform analyzes influencers' most recent 30

posts to calculate engagement levels and provide up-to-date data, thereby leading the virtual market with this implementation model (Oneto-González *et al.*, 2020; Puente-Riofrio and Uquillas-Granizo, 2022).

The final sample was obtained using a dataset containing directly observable and measurable variables from the TikTok interface -such as username, age, gender, and number of followers-for accounts with over one million followers. This inclusion criterion is consistent with research published in high-impact journals, such as that by Suárez-Álvarez and García-Jiménez (2021), Sánchez-Amboage *et al.* (2022), Burgaleta-Pérez *et al.* (2024), and Burgaleta-Pérez and Lalangui-Campo (2025). Regarding the exclusion criterion, the possibility of considering only the most popular TikToker was ruled out, as this would generate representativeness biases and restrict the generalizability of the results (Tufekci, 2014). Therefore, capturing a greater diversity of preferences and content styles improves the accuracy of the findings (Chen *et al.*, 2024).

In addition, rather than asking participants to spontaneously name a content creator they remembered or found familiar, aided recall was implemented as a digital audience measurement technique. As a result, a closed reference framework consisting of 32 profiles was obtained. This strategy was adopted to reduce false recognition and avoid confusion in the selection of a native TikToker or influencer from other platforms, and to improve reliability, ensuring that all participants evaluate the same set of observations (Alvarez-Martinez *et al.*, 2024; Hall, 1982).

Table 1. Ecuadorian TikTokers with over one million followers

N=	User	Age	Gender	Followers
1	@indiskovar3.0	24	Female	31.0 M
2	@soysuco	26	Male	24.3 M
3	@melissaendara	24	Female	13.1 M
4	@anthonnyswagg3	33	Male	11.1 M
5	@otraceutadetutoriales	22	Female	6.4 M
6	@donday	33	Male	6.4 M
7	@jhonycevallos	34	Male	6.3 M
8	@jordanalvarezz	24	Male	5.9 M
9	@yildabanchon	23	Female	5.2M
10	@alexcifuentesfit	22	Male	5.1 M
11	@jorgito_guayaco	32	Male	4.9 M
12	@jeffersonrescataec	32	Male	4.0 M

13	@elioldan	22	Female	3.8 M
14	@leitogranda	30	Female	3.8 M
15	@samiaalava	22	Female	3.1 M
16	@la_campita	21	Female	2.9 M
17	@ginaalopez	25	Female	2.8 M
18	@andrewarevalow	24	Male	2.3 M
19	@ñustapicuari	19	Female	2.3 M
20	@angelinams01002	17	Female	2.1 M
21	@annyborja2	27	Female	2 M
22	@shailyngarzon	25	Female	2 M
23	@chrisxtrejo	25	Male	1.9 M
24	@jeyderrescataoficial	34	Male	1.9M
25	@alexvizuete93	31	Male	1.9M
26	@emmaguerrerosquera	29	Female	1.6 M
27	@jhonvalverde	26	Male	1.6 M
28	@michaelsteve	27	Male	1.5 M
29	@melizayumisaca	26	Female	1.3 M
30	@monico.86	36	Male	1.2 M
31	@nancyrisol	21	Female	1.2 M
32	@jhontahancruzjc7	25	Male	1.1 M

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from HypeAuditor and StarNgage

2.1. Instrument and statistical validation

Based on the established data, the instrument underwent a validation process through pilot tests conducted by the research team, in which students from various academic programs participated to evaluate its functionality and applicability. As a result, the items related to the recognition level of Ecuadorian TikTokers were adjusted, since participants were unable to identify them by their usernames. In the new instrument, photographs of the 32 TikTokers were included to facilitate socio-virtual detection (Montoya-Zavala *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, it was determined that the questions should follow a multiple-choice design to reduce forced response bias, broaden the diversity of answers, and provide a more detailed understanding of the information (Bartelborth, 2020; Calderón-Garrido & Gil-Fernández, 2022). To determine the statistical reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for the eight questions previously selected and adjusted in the pilot test. This measure of consistency is based on the relationship between the variance of each item and the total variance of the questionnaire. When items are highly correlated with one another, they do not vary independently but tend to change together, resulting in a higher alpha value. The R software (version 4.5.1) was used, as it is widely recognized in the methodological literature for its reliability. After coding the responses on numerical ordinal scales, the value obtained was 0.724, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011).

2.2. Ethical considerations

Participation by respondents was voluntary, following a verbal explanation of the study's objectives. Furthermore, it was emphasized that the information collected would be used solely for academic purposes, in order to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the data and to avoid infringing on students' privacy (Campos *et al.*, 2025). Secure storage mechanisms were implemented for the content, and participants were asked to use their own mobile devices to access the Google Forms platform. Care was taken to ensure they understood the context of the research, its approximate duration, and the nature of the questions (Lalangui-Campoverde *et al.*, 2025). This procedure ensured that the data collection was more closely aligned with the ethical principles contained in the Declaration of Helsinki, the university's institutional and logistical provisions, and international guidelines for research involving human subjects (Mainardes, 2019).

2.3. Stratified Analysis

To ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings, a stratified analysis was conducted to overcome the limitations of general approaches, which tend to homogenize data and obscure variations among identified internal subgroups. This technique made it possible to control for distortions and ensure the specificity of perceptions and patterns differentiated among participants in each academic cycle (Ochoa-Sangrador *et al.*, 2022). To organize and code the information, a Microsoft Excel workbook was used to construct cross-tabulation matrices that facilitated the specific segmentation of the elements studied and the visualization of patterns by university stratum. Each row represented a participant with their various responses, while the columns corresponded to the academic cycle variable. The selection of this variable was based on criteria of accessibility, relevance, and direct alignment with the research objectives. Its connection to the participants' educational process or

development allowed for the observation of variations in the gratifications perceived by students regarding the presented content (Suarez-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2024).

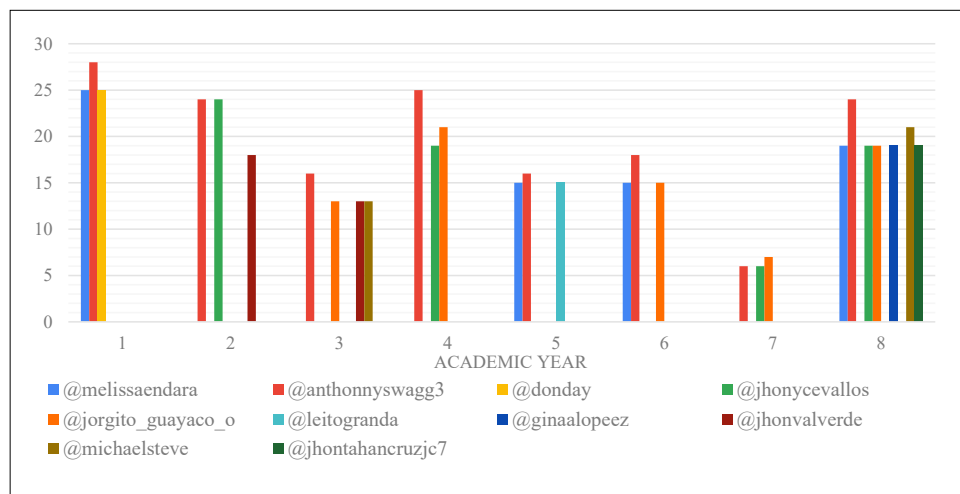
In this way, the stratified analysis increased the diversity across academic cycles and the internal validity of the results. It thus constituted a distinctive methodological contribution, revealing nuances and differences that a global analysis would not have been able to detect.

3. Results

As part of the administration of the instrument, it was found that the students' ages range from 18 to 28 years. Regarding gender distribution, 53.20% are women and 46.80% are men. The highest concentration of students is in the first through fourth academic cycles, accounting for 71%, while the fifth through eighth cycles account for the remaining 29%, revealing lower participation at higher levels.

R1 based on OE1. To identify the most popular Ecuadorian TikTokers among Communication students, the relationship between the academic cycle and the level of recognition of content creators is considered.

Figure 1. Popular Ecuadorian TikTokers in the university community



Source: Compiled by the author

As shown in Figure 1, which displays the distribution of responses regarding recognition of the most popular Ecuadorian TikTokers over eight academic cycles, stable patterns and significant variations in user preferences are evident.

The first academic year highlights @anthonnyswagg3 (comedy, dancing), @melissaendara (beauty, blogging, parodies), and @donday (lip-syncing, dance). The preference for these creators stems from a desire for entertainment and emotional

connection. They serve as a source of recreation and escapism, especially for students just starting college, who find in TikTok a space for communication, socialization, and relaxation.

In the second cycle, the distribution remains centered on @anthonnyswagg3, but diversifies with the presence of @jhonycevallos (humor, motivation) and @jhonvalverde (comedy, music, reflections). A trend emerges in which viewers prefer not only entertainment but also motivational content focused on self-understanding and career guidance.

The trend in the third cycle points toward a decline in popularity. Mentions are spread across TikTokers such as @anthonnyswagg3, @jhonvalverde, @michaelsteve (comedy), and @jorgito_guayaco (humor). However, the most popular content continues to focus on everyday humor.

In the fourth cycle, engagement increases, with an emphasis on creators such as @anthonnyswagg3, @jorgito_guayaco, and @jhonycevallos, all of whom produce comedy content. This resurgence signals a transition toward content that blends humor with representations of popular culture.

In the fifth cycle, the figures of @anthonnyswagg3, @melissaendara, and @leitogranda (family, humor, fashion) stand out. This selection combines everyday experiences with the aspirational realm: fashion, lifestyle, and humor. It seeks role models for emotional and generational identification that transcend the notion of popularity inherent to the Ecuadorian TikToker.

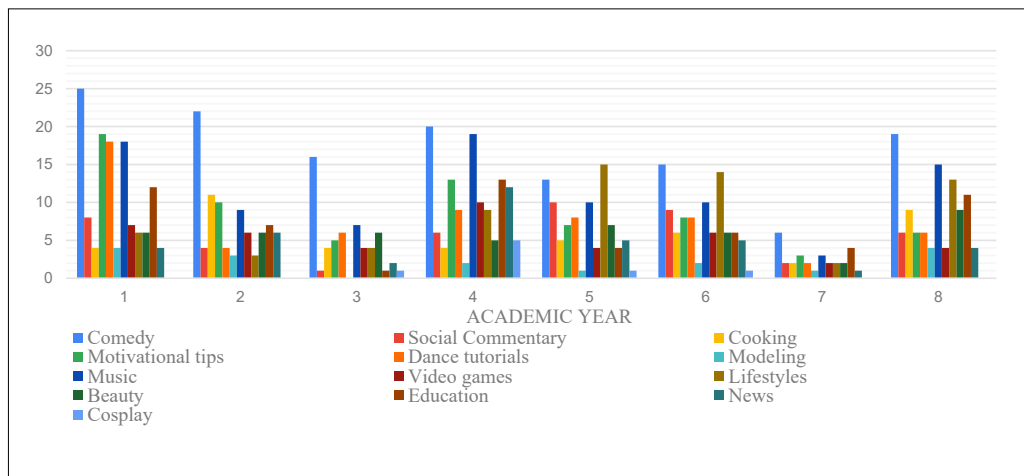
In the sixth cycle, @anthonnyswagg3, @melissaendara, and @jorgito_guayaco dominate. Humorous content remains the favorite.

The seventh grade ranks @jorgito_guayaco_o as the most recognized, followed by @anthonnyswagg3 and @jhonycevallos. This is because it is the grade with the fewest students, resulting in a lower proportion of responses compared to the other grades. There remains a correlation with TikTokers in the comedy genre.

The eighth cycle ranks more than three TikTokers as the most popular. In first place is @anthonnyswagg3, followed by @michaelsteve (comedy), and in third place, with an equal number of mentions, are @ginaalopez (comedy, makeup), @jhonycevallos, @melissaendara, @jorgito_guayaco, and @jhontahancruzjc7 (comedy), all with humorous, motivational, and aesthetic content.

In short, there is a consistent concentration on a small group of Ecuadorian TikTokers, particularly @anthonnyswagg3, whose presence spans all educational levels. Popularity is not distributed evenly because recognition in the digital environment does not depend exclusively on the academic cycle, but rather on the ability of certain Ecuadorian TikTokers to maintain constant visibility across different educational levels. This suggests that communication students tend to focus and legitimize their attention on a small group of creators, reinforcing dynamics of symbolic centralization in which a few profiles accumulate high levels of recall and positioning.

R2 based on OE2. Classify the content consumed by communication students, distinguishing thematic preferences according to the academic cycle and the content shared by the most popular Ecuadorian TikTokers.

Figure 2. Classification of content according to the academic cycle

Source: Compiled by the author

As shown in Figure 2, the first cycle highlights a preference for comedy content (25 mentions). This is followed by motivational tips (19 mentions), music (18 mentions), and dance tutorials (18). This indicates that comedy plays a fundamental and constant role as the primary source of entertainment for students, due to its ability to promote relaxation and disengagement at various points throughout the academic year. The limited presence of categories such as education, social commentary, or news suggests that in the early academic years, TikTok use is linked more to fun than to learning or reflection.

The second cycle continues the trend toward comedy (22 mentions); however, mentions of motivational advice and music decline. Meanwhile, cooking (11 mentions) features prominently. This shift is influenced by TikTokers with diverse content (@ginaalopez or @leitogranda), who incorporate themes related to home life and everyday routines.

With reduced engagement, the third cycle ranks comedy (16 mentions) and music (7 mentions) among the top preferences. The other categories achieve marginal figures. Consumption becomes sporadic and selective, with a lack of focus on critical or professional content.

The fourth cycle features several themes: comedy (20 mentions), music (19 mentions), education (13 mentions), and motivational content (13 mentions). The content from TikTokers such as @jhonycevallos or @jhonvalverde reflects a dual approach that blends humor with advice and inspirational narratives.

In the fifth cycle, comedy decreases (13 mentions) while preference increases for lifestyle (15 mentions), social criticism (10 mentions), education (4 mentions), and beauty (7 mentions). This indicates a shift toward content that reflects personal aspirations, professional identity, and critical thinking.

In the sixth grade, comedy is the most popular choice (15 times); however, there is an increase in the selection of social commentary (9 times), lifestyle content (14 times), and education (6 times). This results in a balanced mix of educational, reflective, and entertaining content. This diversity of interests is framed within content aligned with personal and academic goals, reflecting more intentional consumption.

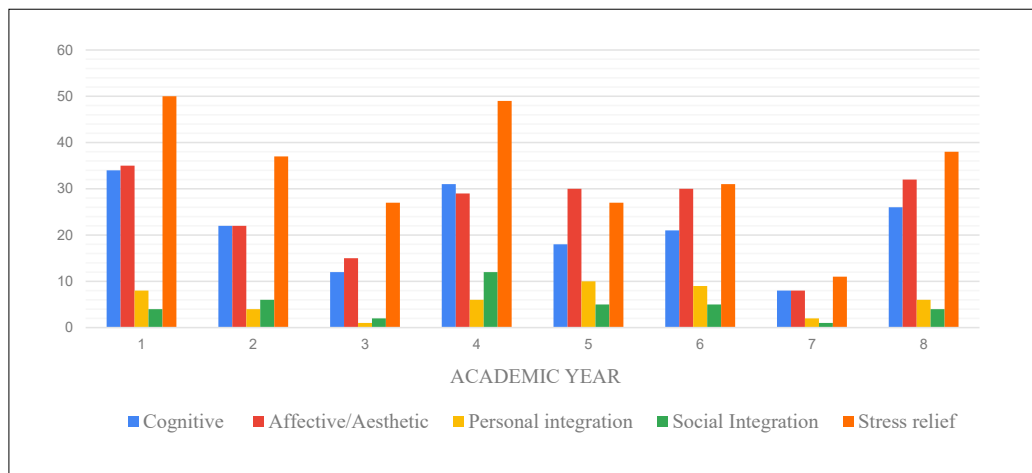
The seventh grade shows lower overall engagement; comedy (6 times) and motivational advice (3 times) remain the preferred content. The limited content consumed reinforces the idea that entertainment serves a relaxing function rather than an informative one.

In the eighth cycle, there is a diverse resurgence of content: comedy (19 mentions), music (15 mentions), lifestyle (13 mentions), and education (11 mentions). The variety of thematic areas encompasses professional, emotional, and recreational domains.

Although slight variations are observed in the thematic classification, consumption is primarily associated with entertainment, revealing a weak foundation in terms of educational or professional development. Even in the upper grades, comedy maintains a dominant position, suggesting that the content created by Ecuadorian TikTokers has a greater influence on shaping preferences than academic progress itself. Although motivations diversify in the fifth, sixth, and eighth cycles, this does not displace the recreational umbrella but rather complements it. Consequently, the continuity in the thematic hierarchy is grounded in recreation.

R3 based on OE3. Describe the predominant motivations in the content consumed by Communication students according to the categories of Uses and Gratifications Theory, based on the most popular Ecuadorian TikTokers and the academic cycle.

Figure 3. Content preferences and their correlation with the Uses and Gratifications Theory



Source: Compiled by the author

In Figure 3, the first cycle shows high levels of motivation, with the “stress relief” category (50 mentions) and the “affective/aesthetic” category (35 mentions) standing out. Aesthetic gratification is complemented by an attraction to content such as makeup and blogs, created by content creators like @melissaendara, @donday, or @anthonnyswagg3. Cognitive gratification (34 mentions) indicates that, in the early stages, students consume entertainment-based content to stay informed and learn through tutorials.

In the second cycle, motivations related to stress relief (37 mentions), affective/aesthetic (22 mentions), and cognitive (22 mentions) remain predominant. The content consumed reveals an active emotional component linked to humor, aesthetics, and symbolic identification with young TikTokers. Meanwhile, at lower levels, the motivations are personal and social integration.

In the third cycle, fewer motivational factors are observed compared to the previous cycles. The cognitive and affective levels do not exceed 27 mentions. This is explained by less interaction with the content presented. However, stress relief (27 mentions) continues to emerge as the emotional outlet in students’ personal identification.

The fourth cycle shows one of the highest rates of stress relief (49 mentions), during which students begin to consider criteria for thematic inclusion and exclusion, such as those published by @jhonycevallos or @jhonvalverde. Cognitive motivation (31 mentions) and affective/aesthetic motivation (29 mentions) remain high. Notably, this is the only cycle to record 12 mentions in the personal integration category, reflecting a more complex and functional experience in digital consumption.

The only cycle where the affective/aesthetic (30 mentions) and personal integration (10 mentions) categories predominate is the fifth. There is still a strong emphasis on stress relief (27 mentions) and cognitive (18 mentions) spaces, confirming a mixed trend between learning and emotional entertainment.

In sixth grade, a pattern similar to the earlier grades is observed, in that stress relief (31 mentions) and affective/aesthetic (30 mentions) gratifications continue to appear as the most predominant categories. In third place is cognitive content (21 mentions). This reflects a balance in the selection of content that provides entertainment alongside academic or emotional value. Motivational, social, and humorous discourse are combined within digital exploration.

The seventh cycle is characterized by the lowest interaction rates with the preselected categories; however, “stress relief” has the highest number of mentions (11). Short-form content with a relaxing effect is preferred.

In the eighth cycle, motivations are consolidated: stress relief (38 mentions) and affective/aesthetic (32 mentions). This student segment combines the consumption of humorous content with reflective and emotional purposes, implying a greater interest focused on critical thinking and stress reduction.

The preference for stress relief across all grade levels indicates that TikTok functions primarily as a mechanism for emotional regulation in the face of academic demands, rather than as an educational tool. Although cognitive and personal development dimensions appear at certain levels, they do not overshadow the platform’s recreational nature. Consumption responds to dynamics of immediate gratification promoted by contemporary digital culture. Even in higher grades, where greater alignment with professional and reflective interests is observed, the affective and aesthetic component remains central, given that identity construction and symbolic validation outweigh the critical or academic appropriation of the content.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study partially align with the research by Espinel-Rubio *et al.* (2021), who identify the affective and aesthetic as recreational functions. However, they demonstrate that this landscape expands with the use of other platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube for academic purposes; their functionalities are leveraged for educational communication, resource sharing, and the building of learning communities.

In comparison with subsequent studies, Virós-Martín *et al.* (2025) conclude that Spanish adolescents perceive the influence of digital tools on their social lives in a superficial manner, an aspect that contrasts with the case of Ecuadorian university students regarding the influence on their daily activities. However, it is clarified that the European study is grounded in psychological and social well-being, whereas the present research focuses on the academic sphere.

Fresneda's-Osorio (2025) study highlights that both men and women access TikTok in a similar manner and consume content primarily related to humor and sports, with no significant differences by gender. In contrast, the present study observes a preference for comedy, followed by music, educational content, advice, and lifestyle topics, indicating a preference for a variety of content.

Other studies, such as those by Cuesta-Cambra *et al.* (2021), confirm that young people actively use the internet out of a desire to obtain real-time information. Although university students use the platform for entertainment, this does not imply that they form a lasting emotional bond with content creators; rather, their use is limited to leisure and entertainment. In addition to emotional escape and entertainment, other frequent uses include motivational advice, dance and cooking tutorials, and educational content.

In this article, the results show that recognition of Ecuadorian TikTokers consistently centers on creators associated with humor and motivation, particularly figures such as @anthonnyswagg3 and @jorgito_guayaco, who appear consistently across several academic cycles. This recurrence confirms that entertainment constitutes the dominant focus of student consumption, beyond specific variations at each level.

Regarding thematic areas, comedy achieves the highest values in most academic cycles, while education and social criticism register significantly lower figures. Although diversification toward lifestyle content and social criticism is observed in intermediate cycles, these increases do not displace the preference for entertainment.

Stress relief shows the highest scores across nearly all levels, followed by the affective and aesthetic dimensions. Therefore, TikTok functions as a space for emotional regulation in the face of academic pressure. Although cognitive motivation reaches significant levels in certain stages, it fails to surpass the dimensions linked to leisure, highlighting a persistent tension between the platform's educational potential and its recreational use. The absence of educational content creates a gap between the pedagogical potential of the digital environment and its actual adoption by university students. This poses a challenge for Ecuadorian higher education in terms of critical digital literacy and the pedagogical reframing of social media.

One of the strengths of this study was the implementation of stratified analysis using cross-tabulation matrices for the segmentation and cross-sectional analysis of the academic cycle variable and its relationship to the previously established

objectives. This approach made it possible to observe in detail and with specificity the consumption preferences of university students across the eight academic cycles.

The main limitation lay in the absence of a critical-interpretive component that delves into the meanings that college students ascribe to the digital content they consume, preventing the capture of discursive or ideological nuances. Consequently, it is recommended that future research incorporate qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, ethnographies, and discourse analysis. This will allow for a more reflective perspective on the role of TikTokers as cultural mediators and opinion leaders in youth and academic spaces.

Regarding digital inequalities and divides, the study did not incorporate socioeconomic variables, technological access, or digital capital to explore structural differences in TikTok usage. It is recommended that future research integrate indicators related to access conditions, digital competencies, and socio-educational trajectories, in order to analyze whether recreational consumption responds solely to cultural preferences or to inequalities in academic access capacity within socio-digital environments.

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6. Specific contributions of each author

	Names and Lastnames
Study design	Belén Flores Zúñiga
Methodology	Edison Cristóbal Lalangui Campoverde
Data Collection and Analysis	Belén Flores Zúñiga and Edison Cristóbal Lalangui Campoverde
Discussion and Conclusions	Edison Cristóbal Lalangui Campoverde and Belén Flores Zúñiga
Writing, Formatting, Review, and Approval of Versions	Edison Cristóbal Lalangui Campoverde and Belén Flores Zúñiga

7. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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