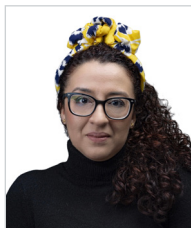

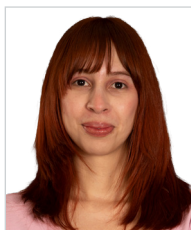


Incidental consumption and social validation: information practices of centennial university women in Medellín on social media

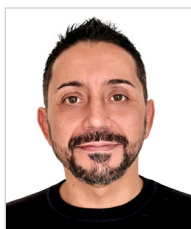
Consumo incidental y validación social: prácticas informativas de mujeres centennials universitarias de Medellín en redes sociales



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Abstract:

This article analyzes the digital and informational consumption practices of centennial university women in Medellín, Colombia, with an emphasis on their relationship with current affairs information circulating on social media. Adopting a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory approach, the study combines data from an online questionnaire (n=443) with semi-structured interviews (n=5). It examines three dimensions: the use of digital devices and platforms, content consumption, and perceptions of current affairs information. The findings show that participants access news in an incidental and fragmented manner and regulate their consumption to avoid emotional overload. A marked distrust of traditional information sources is observed, with credibility instead placed in the consensus within their digital communities and affective ties. A tension emerges between the discourse of productive technology use and actual practices centered on leisure, where most participants act as passive consumers. Instagram and TikTok function as the main informational spaces, prioritizing educational and social topics as areas of greatest engagement. The findings contribute to understanding how new audiences reconfigure informational authority and the meaning attributed to current affairs information, privileging horizontal collective validation over traditional, vertical informational models.

Keywords:

Generation Z; Centennial women; Incidental news consumption; Social media; Media Trust.

Resumen:

El presente artículo analiza las prácticas de consumo digital e informativo de mujeres centennials universitarias en Medellín, Colombia, con énfasis en su relación con la información de actualidad que circula en redes sociales. Desde un enfoque cualitativo, descriptivo y exploratorio, se combinan datos de un cuestionario en línea (n=443) con entrevistas semiestructuradas (n=5). El estudio aborda tres dimensiones: uso de dispositivos y plataformas digitales, consumo de contenidos, y percepción sobre información de actualidad. Los resultados muestran que las jóvenes acceden a noticias de manera incidental y fragmentaria y regulan su consumo para evitar sobrecarga emocional. Se constata una marcada desconfianza en las fuentes informativas tradicionales, con la credibilidad depositada, en cambio, en el consenso entre su comunidad digital y sus vínculos afectivos. Emerge una tensión entre el discurso de uso productivo de la tecnología y las prácticas reales centradas en el ocio, donde la mayoría actúa como consumidora pasiva. Instagram y TikTok funcionan como principales espacios informativos, priorizando temas educativos y sociales, su foco de mayor compromiso. Los hallazgos contribuyen a comprender cómo las nuevas audiencias reconfiguran la autoridad informativa y el significado atribuido a la información de actualidad, privilegiando la validación colectiva horizontal sobre los modelos informativos tradicionales y verticales.

Palabras clave:

Generación Z; Mujeres centennials; Consumo informativo incidental; Redes sociales; Confianza mediática.

1. Introduction

1.1. Conceptual framework

We live in a hyperconnected society where factors such as immediacy and the abundance of content have displaced traditional models of communication. This change is expressed most strongly in Generation Z, considered the first fully digital generation (Arango Lozano, 2019), who, unlike Millennials, who grew up between analog and digital, were born into a media ecosystem dominated by the Internet, social networks, and the need for constant connectivity (Gallego Gómez *et al.*, 2024; Garitaonandia *et al.*, 2020; Kantar, 2018).

This is how Generation Z, also called Centennial, is often defined in Spanish-language scholarship, through what are known as the “four i’s”—a term that refers to four elements beginning with the letter *i* in Spanish: Internet, irreverence, immediacy, and uncertainty (García Rivero *et al.*, 2022; Martínez-Estrella *et al.*, 2023).

Mobile devices have become the primary point of access for new generations to the many dimensions of their digital lives: from entertainment and social relationships to information consumption and training and education. (Gil Ramírez y Gómez de Travesedo, 2018; López Vidales y Gómez Rubio, 2021; Peña-Fernández *et al.*, 2022; Marugán Solís y Martín Critikián, 2023). In this ecosystem, two aspects valued by this generation stand out: identification with influential figures –such as influencers– (Martín Cárdbaba *et al.*, 2024; Catalina-García *et al.*, 2021) and the possibility of learning through the content they share, which reinforces the informal, visual, and personalized nature of their learning trajectories (Suárez-Álvarez *et al.*, 2023).

Several studies agree that social networks and audiovisual platforms –such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitch– have displaced the attention once held by traditional media, reshaping the information habits of young audiences (Fernández-Muñoz *et al.*, 2024; García Rivero *et al.*, 2022; IAB Spain, 2023; Marín-Dueñas y Simancas-González, 2019; Marugán Solís y Martín Critikián, 2023; Suárez-Álvarez y García-Jiménez, 2021).

In this digital ecosystem, information circulates alongside entertainment content and social interaction practices on social networks. As a result, a significant portion of news exposure occurs without there being a deliberate search. The literature has conceptualized this phenomenon under the term incidental information consumption. Several studies show that, in the case of the Centennial Generation, this phenomenon favors passive, fragmented, and intermittent reception practices (Catalina-García *et al.*, 2015, 2021; Pérez-Escoda y Pedrero, 2021; Farias-Batlle, *et al.*, 2024; Ceballos-del-Cid *et al.*, 2025). This concept is also linked to the *News Find Me* phenomenon, according to which users believe that information “finds them” without the need for an active search (Gil de Zúñiga y Cheng, 2021).

Cortés Quesada *et al.*, (2023) highlight the rise of new information formats based on short micro-content and rapid consumption, designed to be viewed quickly on digital platforms. These formats, comparable to “snackable content”, have become their preferred way of accessing content. In this way, nanojournalism emerges as a phenomenon that seeks to convey news in a brief and accessible manner, finding in TikTok a fertile ground to connect with Gen Z, its main audience (Díaz-Lucena y Vicente-Fernández, 2023). However, it is also evident that other age groups are beginning to adopt this agile and visual communication format (IAB Spain, 2023). In this line of argument, social networks serve as their primary source of entertainment and information (López Vidales y Gómez Rubio, 2021; Martín Cárdbaba *et al.*, 2024; Pérez-Escoda y Pedrero, 2021).

Nevertheless, this phenomenon presents some contradictions: although young people increasingly distrust conventional media, they do not view social networks as fully truthful sources either. This reflects a divergence between the desire for informational autonomy and a distrust in the face of message overload and the proliferation of fake news (Pérez-Escoda y Pedrero, 2021). It is also noteworthy that, although the number of content views grows every year, the participation of the audience decreases: fewer “likes,” comments, and shared posts are registered (Díaz-Lucena y Vicente-Fernández, 2023). Despite their apparent detachment or disinterest, they actually express a different form of engagement shaped by co-creation, identity building, and a sense of community belonging (Giraldo-Luque *et al.*, 2017; Luo, 2025; Suárez-Álvarez *et al.*, 2023), all within a context mediated by information overload, polarization (Lobera y Rubio, 2015), and an unusually heightened awareness of the negative effects of excessive technology use (Peredy *et al.*, 2024).

1.2. Theoretical framework

From a theoretical point of view, this study draws on the theory of uses and gratifications, which posits that audiences are not passive recipients but active agents who use media to satisfy cognitive, affective, social-integration, and identity-construction needs (Katz, Blumler y Gurevitch, 1973). In the digital context, this perspective allows us to understand how young Centennials orient and re-signify their information consumption based on emotional and identity-related motivations, even in settings shaped by algorithmic logics and incidental exposure.

Likewise, the phenomenon of context collapse (Marwick, 2011) is relevant to understanding how, in digital environments, diverse audiences converge in the same space with heterogeneous characteristics, making it difficult to anticipate who receives the messages and under what expectations. In response to this phenomenon, the notion of “imagined audiences” has been created as a strategy to reduce ambiguity about the users to whom content is directed.

These qualities place this audience within a context of constant change, which Bauman (2015) described as “liquid modernity”, where according to this author, nothing is stable and everything flows in an era where the unstable is the only enduring certainty, even affective bonds tend to be brief and superficial. In this way, young people learn to move across multiple simultaneous and shifting realities, where digital technology is the environment in which social, cultural, and informational relationships are produced.

According to Sánchez Riaño *et al.* (2022), the identity of Centennials is built around six axes that guide their ways of being in the digital environment. Their friends and close social environment are their reference groups to define tastes, attitudes, and opinions, while their aesthetic search reflects the desire to continually reinvent their physical and virtual image. In this way, the dynamics of social validation, the search for approval and the strategic management of the digital image operate within this framework of permanent exposure. Influencers constantly appear as new leaders who inspire behaviors and ways of thinking. In addition, approval on social networks strengthens their self-esteem and fuels the creation of a personal brand. Finally, their sense of belonging emerges from recognition within digital communities where they share common values and styles, combined with the consumption of trending products.

In line with this digital dynamic focused on affective connection and identity construction, Giraldo-Luque *et al.* (2017) propose a classification of the motivations that drive young people to interact on social networks, grouping them into personal, social, communicational, and professional categories. This view is complemented by the work of Owen *et al.* (2018), who identify six predominant emotions in the digital experience of Generation Z: pride, fear, compassion, frustration, humor, and hope.

In this way, the shift of informational authority towards relational validation and influencers can be interpreted from the same logics of social gratification and community belonging (Suárez-Álvarez *et al.*, 2023).

1.3. State of the art

International research has largely focused on the general characteristics of Generation Z as the first generation of digital natives. These studies describe them through their digital practices, generational values, and media consumption habits (Arango Lozano, 2019; Sánchez Riaño *et al.*, 2022); as well as through the analysis of information consumption and the use of

social networks as platforms for access to news (Catalina-García *et al.*, 2015, 2021; Gómez de Travesedo y Gil Ramírez, 2020; Farias-Batlle *et al.*, 2024). However, most of these studies approach the generation as a relatively homogeneous group without systematically disaggregating habits and perceptions according to gender.

Although some research has incorporated gender as a variable in the analysis of media use and digital habits –whether through comparisons between men and women in professional fields such as journalism, or through the study of the relationship between stereotypes and social-media content consumption among adolescents (Ganzabal Learreta *et al.*, 2021; Martín Cárdbaba *et al.*, 2024)– these approaches do not focus on the qualitative exploration of the daily information practices of Centennial university women, which is the focus of this work. In this regard, the specific analysis of the female segment continues to be limited, particularly in the Latin American context, as much of the academic production on the topic has been developed in European and/or Anglo-Saxon settings. Similarly, the literature reveals gaps in relation to studies focused on the perceptions of young university students about their digital and informational consumption.

Within this framework, the present study provides the following differentiating elements: (1) it focuses on Centennial university women; (2) it qualitatively examines the perceptions of digital consumption and informational credibility of these young women; and (3) it analyzes the case of Medellín as a Latin American digital context.

1.4. Contextual framework

The study is located in Medellín, a city that in the last decade has consolidated itself as an urban ecosystem oriented towards technological innovation, connectivity, and digital transformation, through public policies focused on education and digital inclusion (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2024, 2025).

This context is particularly relevant in the analysis of youth information practices, as it combines high levels of connectivity, widespread access to mobile devices, and an active governmental presence in digital literacy initiatives, as mentioned above. Analyzing university women in this environment allows for a situated reading of a global phenomenon, incorporating cultural and territorial variables typical of the Latin American context.

1.5. Objective and design of the study

From a qualitative approach of a descriptive and exploratory nature, the research employs an online questionnaire administered to young university students aged 18 to 24 residing in the city, from which 443 responses were obtained. This was combined with semi-structured interviews conducted with a subset of this population. This raises the question: What are the main practices of digital and information consumption among Centennial women in Medellín? The analysis is organized around three main objectives: (1) Describe the uses and preferences of digital devices and platforms among Centennial university women in Medellín. (2) Explore the digital content they habitually consume within their everyday digital environments. (3) Analyze how they access, perceive, and share current information within the digital environments they inhabit.

In this way, the study aims to understand how these young women manage their relationship with technologies and digital sources in a context characterized by overexposure and immediacy.

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach and design

The study adopted a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory approach, aimed at understanding the uses, meanings, and practices of digital and information consumption among Centennial university women in Medellín.

The methodological design was based on the techniques of the online questionnaire and the semi-structured interview. The first technique draws on the growing body of specialized literature that supports the use of digital tools to investigate the online behavior of the Centennial generation (Ganzabal Learreta *et al.*, 2021; Martínez-Estrella *et al.*, 2023). The second technique was selected because it allows the perceptions, experiences, and discourses of the participants to be explored in a flexible manner. According to Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández-Collado, and Baptista Lucio (2014), this technique allows for the maintenance of a basic thematic guide to orient the encounter with the interviewees, without restricting spontaneity or the emergence of new categories.

Although an online questionnaire was applied, it was not intended to produce representative estimates or make statistical inferences. In line with the exploratory nature of the study, the survey was used from a qualitative perspective as an initial mapping tool: it allowed the identification of recurrent trends, perceptions, and response patterns that informed the selection of participants and the construction of the semi-structured interview script. These interviews made it possible to deepen and contrast the preliminary findings of the questionnaire through an interpretative analysis aimed at understanding meanings, experiences, and criteria of informational credibility.

As Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza Torres (2018) point out, qualitative research favors the depth of analysis over statistical generalization and seeks to interpret the meanings that individuals construct around the social phenomena they experience. In this case, the focus is on exploring, in a situated and contextualized manner, the ways in which young women access, use, and make sense of the information they encounter on digital platforms.

Along these lines, the interviews made it possible to examine the questionnaire findings in greater depth and to contrast the trends identified in this first instrument, while also recognizing convergences, contrasts, and reformulations within individual discourses. This process resulted in a qualitative and sequential triangulation between instruments, aimed at the interpretive contrast of the results.

In line with the study's objectives, the questionnaire included questions aimed at identifying the devices used, the platforms through which participants connect, and the types of content they consume (see Appendix A). The semistructured interviews, in turn, explored in greater depth the ways in which participants access current information, their perceptions of informational credibility, and the everyday criteria they use to interpret and share content considered to be current (see Appendix B). This articulation made it possible to link the general trends identified in the questionnaire with individual perceptions that explain the meanings attributed to these practices.

2.2. Population and sample

The target population consisted of university women belonging to Generation Z or the Centennial cohort (18-24 years old) who, in addition to identifying as women, were residents of urban areas of Medellín and active users of digital devices. Access to the participants was achieved through a call circulated in university settings and through digital dissemination aimed at students who met the established criteria, which resulted in 443 responses to the online questionnaire.

From these 443 responses, five participants were selected for individual semistructured interviews aimed at exploring in greater depth the perceptions and practices identified in the questionnaire. The selection was carried out through purposive sampling, incorporating diversity in age within the established range (18-24 years), different areas of academic study, and types of institution (public or private), to broaden the range of experiences considered and avoid an excessively homogeneous group composition. Their profiles are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Profile of the interviewed participants

Code	Age	Academic Program	Disciplinary Area	Type of University
E1	22	Graphic Advertising Communication	Social Sciences	Private
E2	23	Biology	Natural Sciences	Public
E3	24	Fashion Design	Fine Arts	Public
E4	18	Marketing	Administrative Sciences	Private
E5	21	Mathematics	Basic Sciences	Public

Source: Author's own elaboration

2.3. Analysis procedure

The instruments were applied during the second half of 2023. For the treatment of empirical material, thematic analysis was used- a qualitative technique that allows the identification of recurring patterns of meaning in the data from a systematic process of coding and categorization (Braun y Clarke, 2006; Hernández-Sampieri *et al.*, 2014). This technique was selected for its methodological flexibility and its suitability for the analysis of discourses from interviews and open-ended responses in questionnaires.

The procedure consisted of an initial manual coding, followed by the grouping of relevant segments into emerging categories, and finally the organization of the findings around the three previously defined analytical axes. This approach facilitated an interpretative and structured reading of the data, without losing sight of the complexity and density of the experiences narrated by the participants.

The analytical process enabled the identification of patterns related to the functional organization of digital platforms, modes of access to information, dimensions associated with information consumption, and the criteria by which participants delimit what they recognize as current information. These emerging categories were later contrasted across instruments to strengthen the interpretative consistency of the findings. The analytical categories derived from this process correspond directly to the dimensions explored in the instruments included in the annexes of the article.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Informed consent, data confidentiality, and the freedom to withdraw at any time were guaranteed. The use of textual excerpts was authorized by the participants, and their anonymity was preserved in accordance with ethical principles in research. Accordingly, in the results section they will be identified as E1, E2, E3, E4, and E5.

3. Findings

From a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory approach, the analysis was structured around the three axes mentioned earlier: (1) use and preference of digital devices and platforms; (2) consumption of digital content in these environments; and (3) perceptions of current information. Both the data collected through the online questionnaire and the testimonies obtained in the semistructured interviews were considered.

3.1. Use and consumption of digital devices and platforms

The results of the online questionnaire indicate that the mobile phone is the device most used by the Centennial women participating in the study, with the smartphone being the center of their digital experience. This finding is reinforced by semi-structured interviews, in which participants describe the cell phone as an extension of their daily lives and essential for both personal and academic activities. For example, E1 stated that “it is an extension of my body,” while E3 noted that “you wake up and the first thing you do is look at your phone.” For her part, E5 expressed that, “I feel that without my phone I wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

In addition to smartphones, participants reported that they use several devices at the same time and can use two to four devices simultaneously. After the cell phone, the laptop is the second most used device, and the television is also present to a lesser extent. It was also found that other screens, such as desktop computers, tablets, and video game consoles have a less widespread use among the participants.

Unlike the questionnaire, the interviews introduce a critical dimension by evidencing an ambivalent experience in the face of technological use: although technology facilitates access and autonomy, it also generates perceptions of saturation and dependence. Along these lines, some interviewees described self-care and digital self-regulation strategies aimed at limiting connection times and the use of applications:

E4: “I’ve deleted apps because I felt they were taking too much of my time.”

E1: “Sometimes I set time limits because otherwise I end up spending hours.”

In contrast, the questionnaire reflected that most participants spend between four and seven hours a day using their preferred device. The data collected in the interviews showed that these young women tend to concentrate their digital activity at two key moments of the day: the early hours of the morning and in the evenings. Specifically, they mention that they tend to interact more frequently on their preferred platforms between 7:30 and 8:00 a.m., at the start of their day, and again between 8:00 and 10:00 p.m., as part of their evening routines. These intervals reflect both their available time (considering their academic schedules and periods without access to Wi-Fi) and their need for social connection or emotional disconnection, depending on the time of day.

The survey revealed that, in general, the young university women tend to keep active sessions on up to eight digital platforms simultaneously. However, their most frequent use is concentrated in three or four applications within the same technological category. In the case of platforms that require a subscription or payment, such as audiovisual or music streaming services, the tendency narrows to one and, at most, two accounts per person. *Netflix* and *Spotify* stand out as the most widely used and preferred paid options in these two categories, based on the type of content they offer and the familiarity the participants have with their interfaces and catalogs.

Additionally, the testimonies show that their constant digital immersion does not automatically translate into high technological competence. It became evident that most interviewees do not identify as “digital natives,” despite having grown up during the Internet era. In this regard, E1 stated, “Even though they always say we are a digital native generation, I don’t think we fully are.”

3.1.1. Majority preference: social networks

When asked about the technological category they use and value the most, social networks emerged as the most predominant choice. Instant messaging appeared in second place at a considerable distance. The use of music streaming platforms ranked third, although with a notably smaller share. Meanwhile, video games, video streaming, and live broadcasts were at much lower levels of preference within the group.

A noteworthy finding from the interviews is that most of the participants express uncertainty about what can be classified as a social network and what cannot, as well as about which functions are typical of each of the technological categories that were investigated. As a result, they choose to call the different digital platforms social networks. Several interviewees described this perception explicitly: E1 stated, “I feel like everything is a social network; I don’t know which one is just a messaging app or what” while E3 noted, “I’m not sure whether Instagram is a social network or a photo app –everything feels mixed together to me.” E4 added, “To me, all of these things are social media, although some are more for messages or videos.”

3.1.2. Instagram: the dominant social network

Within the social media category, Instagram stands out as the platform most widely used and preferred among the young participants, as they all use it actively. TikTok is positioned in second place, followed by YouTube, which also holds a significant presence. Pinterest appears less frequently, though its use remains relevant, especially if you consider its more specialized nature.

The study found that although Facebook is perceived by this generation as an “outdated” social network, it continues to have considerable adoption among the young women. In contrast, Twitter (now X) shows moderate use, and LinkedIn stands out as the platform with the lowest presence among the main social networks.

3.1.3. WhatsApp: the universal communication application

In instant messaging, the questionnaire showed that WhatsApp dominates overwhelmingly. Instagram appears again in this category, fulfilling a dual role as both a social network and a messaging tool, with similarly high levels of use.

The interviews, for their part, showed that the participants use WhatsApp as their main means of communication and turn to other platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube for entertainment. On this point, E3 explained, “The instantmessaging category is my favorite because, throughout the day, I have to communicate with many people, and I prefer to do it through WhatsApp.”

3.1.4. Reasons for using their preferred platforms

Leisure and entertainment clearly top the list. Social life follows closely in second place. Studying and learning occupy the third position. In the intermediate positions appears “staying up to date with news and events,” followed by work or networking. Shopping holds a lower priority, and expressing opinions ranks last.

In this sense, only a small minority use the platforms to express their opinions publicly. The questionnaire allowed us to infer that, in general, the women use the different categories for mostly social and entertainment purposes, not to create content or actively participate. In this regard, E4 remarked, “I don’t post much, I prefer to see what others upload.”

In the interviews, the young women reported being more careful about what they post on their different social networks: their posts, the possible aesthetic variations in their content, and the tastes they display are all shaped by the intention to build and reinforce their personal brand in digital spaces. As E4 noted, “You only show what you want others to see.”

3.2. Use and consumption of digital content

3.2.1. The content they prefer

The results of the questionnaire showed that young women in Medellín are mainly inclined to consume humorous and social content. These formats are the most popular among the participants, in line with the reasons they themselves mentioned for using social networks: leisure, entertainment, and social interaction.

However, when semi-structured interviews were conducted, a different discourse emerged. In this context, several participants emphasized that they use technology for academic and work purposes, which contrasts with the consumption patterns reported in the questionnaire and highlights a discrepancy between entertainment practices and representations of productive use, which is evident in the testimonies of the interviewees. In this regard, E3 explained, “I do use a lot of networks to distract myself, but also for things at the university.”

In contrast, as previously mentioned, LinkedIn, the social network focused on networking and professional profile development, appeared as the platform with the lowest usage among their social networks in the questionnaire results.

3.2.2. *Fear of social judgment*

In line with the above, this difference makes it possible to identify perceptions linked to the social pressure these young women experience. Centennial university women in Medellín express concern about being labeled as unproductive or as procrastinators, revealing the presence of a stigma associated with “wasting time” on social networks or consuming content considered “superficial” or “frivolous.” On this point, the interviews gathered the following testimonies:

E2: “I feel that if you say you spend a lot of time on social networks, people see you as someone who doesn’t do anything.”

E4: “There’s this pressure to be productive all the time.”

In sum, when responses were gathered through the anonymous questionnaire, the participants most often reported consuming content associated with entertainment and social interaction. By contrast, in the semistructured interviews, conducted in a context of direct identification, discourses emerged that highlighted academic and productive uses of technology.

3.2.3. *Negative feelings: the emotional cost*

The interviews made it possible to identify perceptions related to the emotional impact that social networks generate for them. The participants noted that digital platforms produce negative feelings; specifically, depression, anxiety, or constant pressure to maintain or construct an idealized lifestyle like the ones portrayed on those platforms. This is reflected in testimonies such as that of E1, who stated, “Sometimes you compare yourself a lot, and that affects you,” and that of E3, who explained, “Because we’re always behind a screen, we don’t know how to interact with others, and that leads to many things such as anxiety and depression. It is complicated, and I feel that sometimes we do not use social networks in the right way.”

They also pointed out that there is a marked disconnection from real life, accompanied by a strong dependence on their direct interaction with social networks. On this point, E5 said, “You see perfect lives and feel pressure.” This finding shows that although they use technology intensively and rely on it for their socialization, the young women are aware of its negative emotional impact.

Similarly, some participants reported that they try to avoid content that causes them anxiety, stress, or discomfort. When asked what types of content generates these feelings, most pointed mainly to the news. In this regard, E3 stated, “The news makes me anxious, so I prefer not to watch it so much.”

Several interviewees acknowledge that they hold the belief that their personal lives would be much calmer if they did not have the possibility of accessing the internet, which allows, on the one hand, communication with others to be “of higher quality” as E3 indicated and, on the other, to take full advantage of other activities. In this regard, E1 said, “For example, I used to enjoy a movie more without any distractions.”

The testimonies also revealed concerns related to the personal image they project on social networks. In other words, the interviews showed a disjunction between their actual use of these platforms (primarily for entertainment) and the image they

wish to project (a productive use). For this reason, E2 stated, “I am more careful about what I post,” and E1 remarked, “I think a lot before uploading something because it stays there.”

3.2.4. *Hybrid socialization*

The findings suggest that the young participants engage in a form of hybrid socialization. Although they use technology intensively to communicate, they make clear distinctions according to the type of relationship they have with their interlocutors. In particular, they all agree that they prefer face-to-face interaction with family and close friends, associating it with more authentic and meaningful relationships.

For example, E3 noted that “facetoface communication creates a greater sense of closeness.” Similarly, E5 expressed that “I feel that I prefer inperson interaction when you already have a relationship, a real bond with that person.” In contrast, they consider technologymediated communication to be more functional or practical and more oriented toward academic or workrelated settings, or toward less close contacts, without fulfilling the same affective role as direct, inperson interaction.

3.2.5. *Topics that truly matter to them*

Beyond the differences in how they use digital platforms or the types of content they prioritize, the study made it possible to identify the topics that generate the greatest interest among Centennial university women in Medellín. Participants expressed a strong connection to educational and learning-related content, which aligns with their status as university students. In this regard, E5 noted, “I like to follow accounts that talk about important things or that teach something.”

However, the most frequently mentioned and emotionally charged interest is linked to social causes and collective well-being, including issues related to gender equality. Regarding equality and inclusion, the interviews showed that they consider themselves “open-minded.” In this sense, they view themselves as an open and inclusive generation that is receptive to differences.

At the same time, mental health occupies an increasingly prominent place in their daily interests and is discussed openly and naturally. The interviews show a critical reflection on the emotional effects of the digital environment; as E1 pointed out, social networks can build “an imaginary of life that is very difficult to lead,” which generates comparative pressures and personal demands.

There was also a moderate interest in staying informed about current affairs, a concept they associate with content related to celebrities and pop culture. In addition, travel-related topics are consumed as aspirational references, linked to desired experiences.

This thematic diversity reflects an informed audience that is also emotionally connected to the causes, symbols, and concerns that shape their current stage of life.

3.2.6. *Formats and content*

The interviews and surveys showed that the young women feel more comfortable consuming audiovisual content that is brief and aligned with their personal interests. They prefer agile, relatable formats that are easy to integrate into their daily routines, such as short clips, stories, and reels within the social media category, and short series within the audiovisual streaming category –formats they choose because they find them useful, entertaining, or emotionally meaningful. To that effect, they respond positively to the rise in miniseries offered by the different streaming platforms.

3.2.7. *Seamless navigation across platforms*

An important pattern revealed by the study is that Centennial university women in Medellín move organically across different categories and platforms. They do not think in rigid compartments of technological categories nor draw sharp distinctions between types of content or platforms. In fact, as previously mentioned, the results show that they tend to understand all these platforms under the single concept of social networks. In this regard, E5 stated, “I think that everything you see on your phone and can share is like a social network; I don’t pay much attention to categories.”

They spend most of their time connected and switch instinctively between different applications and services according to their immediate needs. Each platform fulfills a specific function at a given time, and they move among them naturally. Platforms are used based on their ability to entertain, inform, or support their academic life.

Transversally, both the questionnaire and the interviews identified a pragmatic relationship with the digital. Along these lines, E1 stated, “I go from one application to another depending on what I need at the moment,” while E3 noted, “I use several networks a day; I look at one and then another.”

3.3. *Perception and circulation of information about current affairs in digital environments*

3.3.1. *A moderate interest in news*

The questionnaire showed that about a quarter of participants use the platforms to keep up with news and events. This places information consumption in the middle of their priorities: more important than shopping or expressing opinions, yet significantly less central than leisure, entertainment, or social life.

Most participants noted that, although they do not seek out news directly, they do stay informed about what is happening through what they see, share, or comment on social networks. The desire to “stay in touch” and “find out what’s going on” appears repeatedly as a central motivator.

In this vein, news reaches them while they browse, watch videos, or interact with others, without necessarily involving an intentional search. On this point, E4 commented, “I don’t look for news, but it pops up while I’m watching other things.” Similarly, E2 noted, “You find out because you see it in stories or because someone shares it.” In this way, a usage pattern emerges in which the connection to information is not necessarily intentional or mediated, but relational and contextual.

Thus, news consumption is transformed: it circulates in short, casual formats within an ecosystem where entertainment, learning, and personal ties shape how one stays informed. Thereby, the relationship with current information is intermittent, emotionally regulated, and deeply mediated by affinity with the person who shares it.

3.3.2. *The collapse of traditional authority*

Another finding identified in the study is that these young women do not regard traditional authority figures as authoritative. The interviews reflect a high level of skepticism toward them. For example, E1 stated, “I don’t trust newscasts very much.” Similarly, E3 noted, “You don’t know what to believe, so you look at several things,” while E5 added, “I prefer to see what several people say before believing a media outlet.”

Traditional media –newspapers, television newscasts, and informational radio programs– were rarely mentioned as sources of information. Official institutions, governments, and established organizations are received with deep skepticism. They do not accept information simply because it comes from a recognized institutional source; and when that is the source of a claim, they validate it through their close circles or through other sources they already have mapped on social networks.

Instead of resorting to traditional sources, young women seek to validate information through networks. Their verification method involves consulting multiple sources on the internet and social media, seeing what other users are saying, asking their digital community, and reaching conclusions based on a social consensus rather than on the institutional authority of the source.

These young women also noted that the level of detail with which information can be produced on social networks is not necessarily something that gives them peace of mind or a sense of security. However, when they search for or verify news, they turn –often in this order– to platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.

3.3.3. *Communities as filtering mechanisms*

Communities or reference groups play a central role in how Centennials relate to information. They are not only important; they are the main points of reference for acquiring and shaping their tastes, attitudes, and opinions.

According to the testimonies, it was observed that the information is not validated by its institutional source, by the credibility of the media outlet that publishes it, or by the authority of the person who issues it. It is validated by the consensus of their digital community. If their friends, the influencers they follow, or their close social circle are talking about something and consider it to be true, that carries more weight than an article in a well-known newspaper or a statement from an official institution, as they openly stated both in the interviews and in the questionnaire.

Peer groups function as informational curators. Information arrives already filtered: “my friend shared this,” “I saw several people talking about this,” “it’s trending on my feed,” as they expressed in the interviews. As E2 explained, “If several people are sharing it, you already know it’s important.” E4 similarly noted, “I first look at what my friends are saying.” Likewise, E1 stated that “if it’s trending, you assume it’s true.” Validation, therefore, is collective and horizontal, not vertical and institutional.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to analyze the main practices of digital and information consumption among Centennial university women in Medellín, focusing on three dimensions: the uses and preferences of digital devices and platforms; the content they consume in their everyday connection environments; and the ways they access, perceive, and circulate current information. Overall, the findings align with trends previously identified in the specialized literature on the informational behavior of Generation Z or Centennials, while also revealing specific characteristics associated with Centennial university women in the context of Medellín.

In relation to the first objective aimed at describing the uses and preferences of digital devices and platforms, the study confirms, on the one hand, the centrality of the mobile phone as the main device in their daily lives (Arango Lozano, 2019; Vilanova y Ortega, 2017) and, on the other, reinforces that social networks are the main gateway to informational content among young people, progressively displacing traditional media (García Rivero *et al.*, 2022; Marín-Dueñas y Simancas-González, 2019; Suárez-Álvarez y García-Jiménez, 2021). Youth media consumption is integrated in dynamics of entertainment, socialization, and informal learning, which generates hybrid environments where the boundaries between information and leisure are blurred, as noted by López Vidales and Gómez Rubio (2021) and Martín Cárdbaba *et al.* (2024).

Likewise, the results corroborate the presence of incidental information consumption, documented in recent research (Farias-Battle *et al.*, 2024; Ceballos-del-Cid *et al.*, 2025), as well as its connection to the *News Finds Me* phenomenon described by Gil de Zúñiga and Cheng (2021), according to which people consider that they remain informed even without actively seeking news. In line with these approaches, participants access current events primarily through algorithmic flows integrated into their everyday digital routines.

Regarding the second objective, focused on the content consumed, the findings also align with studies that highlight the generational preference for short, visual, and emotionally meaningful formats, associated with the rise of micro-content and the so-called nanojournalism (Cortés Quesada *et al.*, 2023; Díaz-Lucena y Vicente-Fernández, 2023). Information is thus incorporated into a personalized media diet, selected according to criteria of practical interest, identity affinity, or emotional impact, consistent with what Pérez-Escoda and Pedrero (2021) propose.

With regard to the third objective –analyzing how young women access, perceive, and share current information– the results show that the shift from traditional media to social networks does not merely represent a technological change, but rather a transformation in everyday practices of informational validation. In this sense, credibility tends to be constructed through symbolic proximity and relational affinity with digital channels –including influencers and online communities– rather than through the institutional legitimacy of the media outlet, in line with what CatalinaGarcía *et al.* (2021) and Martín Cárdbaba *et al.* (2024) argue. Moreover, most young people belonging to this generation attribute little credibility to the news circulating online (FariasBattle *et al.*, 2024), a pattern that aligns with what was observed among the participants in this study. This finding is also consistent with Arango Lozano (2019), who contends that for this generation a single click is enough to access an immediate “truth,” a truth that can, in turn, be easily questioned or expanded upon by other content.

In the same way, the emotional dimension of information consumption observed in the participants is articulated with what was proposed by Owen *et al.* (2018) regarding the structuring role of emotions in the digital experience of this generation and

their awareness of the negative effects of excessive use of technology (Peredy *et al.*, 2024). This behavior is also consistent with research that links the intensive use of social networks with high levels of anxiety in young people, particularly women (Gómez Campos *et al.*, 2021).

However, beyond the convergences identified with previous literature, the results introduce relevant differential contributions. Overall, the findings suggest that for the participating Centennial university women, news consumption is not conceived as an autonomous practice aimed exclusively at updating news, but as an activity integrated into their daily management of personal well-being, identity, and social relations within the digital environments in which they interact.

In this sense, one of the main contributions of the study is along the lines of emotional regulation as an organizing principle of information consumption. Beyond confirming the presence of emotions in the digital experience, the participants develop practices of emotional self-management and self-regulation of their informational exposure. They select, avoid, or limit content and connection times according to the perceived impact on their personal well-being or sense of balance.

In a complementary way, the results show that the young women do not perceive the different digital platforms as differentiated spaces according to their communicative function but rather as an integrated ecosystem of daily interaction in which information, entertainment, and socialization are experienced continuously, without establishing clear technological categories. Consequently, the traditional boundaries between information consumption and digital leisure are also diluted, reshaping the ways in which current events are perceived within the digital space.

Likewise, the coexistence of intensive social media use and low levels of public expressive participation becomes evident. In contrast to the academic narrative that characterizes this generation as predominantly digital prosumers (Bertuzzi, 2021; Martín *et al.*, 2024), most participants adopt positions of active observation on social networks: they consume, evaluate, and occasionally share content, but rarely produce their own information or express opinions on public matters. This finding suggests that the digital participation of young women does not necessarily translate into discursive visibility; rather, it may take the form of more silent and selective modes of engagement.

Along the same lines, the study shows that information interest is mainly activated in the face of issues connected to personal experiences and social identities –particularly mental health, gender equality, and well-being. This indicates that informational relevance is built from experiential proximity rather than from the traditional hierarchy of the media agenda.

A particularly distinctive finding lies in the expansion of the meaning attributed to current information. For the participants, it is not restricted to following political, economic, or institutional news; rather, it incorporates content linked to personal interests, pop culture, digital trends, and aspirational references associated with lifestyles, well-being, or professional projection. In this way, the present is configured as a repertoire of socially significant content based on its daily usefulness and identity-based affinity.

Finally, the study shows that so-called hybrid socialization involves a functional and affective differentiation in the use of communication channels. While face-to-face interaction remains associated with meaningful bonds and emotional closeness, communication mediated by digital technologies takes on a primarily practical character oriented toward everyday coordination, academic activity, or interaction with less close contacts. This finding suggests that intensive technology use does not replace

facetoface interaction; rather, it redistributes relational functions according to the type of bond; a logic that is also reflected in the criteria of informational trust observed among the participants.

In sum, this study portrays young women who are informed in their own way, following logics characteristic of contemporary digital environments: permanently connected yet selective in their exposure; skeptical of traditional sources, yet emotionally invested in the content they deem relevant; and critical, though not particularly inclined toward public participation. Their practices highlight contrasts that are emblematic of the current moment: between informational overabundance and the need to curate content; between distrust of institutional channels and the trust placed in the symbolic proximity of their communities; between the desire for authenticity and the inevitable identity *performance* that unfolds on social media.

From an applied perspective, the findings reinforce the need to rethink media literacy and digital education strategies, proposed in other studies such as that of Kirscher and De Bruyckere (2017), and to orient them not only toward the development of information-verification skills, but also toward the critical and healthy management of media exposure, as highlighted by Santander-Salmon and Rodríguez-Ayala (2024).

Nevertheless, the results should be interpreted in light of the design limitations of the study. First, the research focuses on university women residing in Medellín, and therefore its conclusions cannot be generalized to the entire Centennial Generation or to other sociocultural contexts. Second, the number of interviews constitutes a limitation in terms of the variety of perspectives and experiences captured, which is consistent with the descriptive and exploratory nature of the study. In line with this, the data are based on practices and perceptions reported by the participants; consequently, the findings reflect the meanings these young women attribute to their informational consumption from their subjective experience, rather than corresponding to digitally observed or measured behaviors in real navigation contexts.

Finally, it should be considered that the practices observed are conditioned by the digital context in place during the period of study, meaning that the identified patterns may shift as predominant platforms, recommendation algorithms, or forms of online social interaction evolve.

Building on these considerations, future research could broaden the analysis through comparative designs that incorporate other population groups, diverse territorial contexts, or mixed methodologies that allow declared discourses to be contrasted with observable digital behaviors. Also, future studies could delve deeper into the contemporary redefinition of the concept of current information among young audiences, exploring how content related to wellbeing, digital culture, or personal aspirations blurs the boundaries between information, entertainment, and everyday experience. Finally, there is an opportunity to examine these dynamics comparatively from gender and intersectional perspectives in order to understand how different modes of trust, participation, and informational management are configured in digital environments, which contributes to rethinking traditional models of informational communication in changing sociotechnological contexts.

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6. Contributions

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Discussion and conclusions	Ana Catalina Quirós-Ramírez y Gustavo Morales-Gil
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7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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6. Appendices

APPENDIX A

Online Questionnaire

Digital and information consumption among Centennial university women in Medellín

Purpose of the instrument

The purpose of the questionnaire is to conduct an initial exploratory mapping of digital use practices, content consumption, and relationships with current information among Centennial university women. The results informed the selection of participants and the development of the semistructured interview guide.

1. General information

- Age
- Academic program
- Semester completed
- Do you currently reside in Medellín?
 - ▶ Yes
 - ▶ No

2. Access and use of digital devices

- What devices do you use most frequently?
 - ▶ Mobile phone or smartphone
 - ▶ Laptop
 - ▶ Tablet
 - ▶ Desktop computer
 - ▶ Other
- Which device do you mainly use to connect to the Internet?
- What are the reasons for using your preferred device?
- Approximately how many hours a day do you stay connected to the Internet?

3. Digital platforms used

- Which technological categories do you usually use? (*Multiple answers allowed*)
 - ▶ Social networks
 - ▶ Instant messaging

- ▶ Streaming platforms
 - ▶ Music streaming
 - ▶ Live streaming
 - ▶ Video games
 - ▶ Email
 - ▶ Video chat
 - ▶ Other
- Which technological category is your preferred one, and which platform within that category do you prefer?
 - What are the reasons you use that category the most? (Multiple answers allowed)
 - ▶ Study or learning
 - ▶ Work or networking
 - ▶ Social or family life
 - ▶ Leisure and entertainment
 - ▶ Shopping
 - ▶ Staying up to date with news and events
 - ▶ To express my opinion
 - ▶ Other (please specify)
 - ▶ None
 - Which digital platforms or apps do you usually use within social networks?
 - Which digital platforms or apps do you usually use within instant messaging?
 - Which digital platforms or apps do you usually use within streaming platforms?
 - Which digital platforms or apps do you usually use within music streaming?
 - Which digital platforms or apps do you usually use within live streaming or live broadcasts?
 - Of the platforms you use, which ones do you consider your main platforms? Why?
 - What is the reason you use those platforms the most?
 - At what times of day do you tend to connect most frequently?

4. Content consumed

- What types of content do you most frequently consume on social networks? *(Multiple answers allowed)*
 - ▶ Entertainment
 - ▶ Pop culture
 - ▶ Fashion and lifestyle
 - ▶ Education or learning
 - ▶ Humor
 - ▶ Opinion
 - ▶ Information or news
 - ▶ Digital trends
 - ▶ Well-being or mental health
 - ▶ Aspirational content
 - ▶ Other
- How do you usually come across this content?
 - ▶ Direct search
 - ▶ Algorithmic recommendations
 - ▶ Posts from people I follow
 - ▶ Content shared by friends
 - ▶ Trends or virality
- Do you usually get information about current events through digital platforms?
 - ▶ Frequently
 - ▶ Sometimes
 - ▶ Rarely
 - ▶ Never

APPENDIX B

Semi-structured interview guide

Digital and information consumption among Centennial university women in Medellín

Purpose

The interview aims to deepen and interpret the digital and information consumption practices previously identified through the online questionnaire, exploring meanings, perceptions, and criteria for engaging with information in everyday digital environments.

General information

- Age
- Academic program
- Type of institution:
 - ▶ Public
 - ▶ Private

1. Everyday use of digital environments

- Tell me what a normal day looks like for you in terms of your use of your phone or the internet.
- Which platforms do you use the most, and what do you mainly use them for?
- Which technological category is your preferred one, and which platform within that category do you prefer?
- Do you feel that some platforms serve different functions in your daily life?
- Do you think that sharing information online also fulfills a social or interactional function with others?
- Is it easier to communicate through technological media or in person?

2. Content and consumption experiences

- What types of content do you tend to consume most frequently?
- Are there types of content that feel more closely aligned with your personal interests or aspirations?
- How do you decide to keep watching or interacting with a piece of content?
- At what times of day are you most active on platforms?

3. Encounter with information about current affairs

- When you use social networks, do you come across information or news without looking for it?
- What do you understand as information about current affairs?
- Which topics appear most frequently for you?

4. Credibility and informational trust

- How do you decide whether information you see is trustworthy?
- Does the person who shares the information influence whether you trust it?
- Do you trust informational media, influencers, or people close to you more? Why?

5. Circulation and social validation

- In what situations do you decide to share information?
- Do you discuss or compare information with friends or digital communities?
- Do you feel that social networks help validate or question information?

7. Personal meaning of digital information

- What role do you think information plays today within your experience on social networks?
- Would you say that staying informed is part of your daily routine?