



TIKTOK, GENERATION ZETA AND UNIVERSITY: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

It is beyond dispute that social networks exert a profound influence on contemporary society. The debate surrounding this phenomenon has largely been resolved. The objective of this article is twofold: firstly, to present the evolution of the social network TikTok in the university environment six years after its launch; secondly, to analyse the perception of this social network by university students. The study is based on a review of the profiles created on TikTok by Spanish universities. Furthermore, a survey was conducted to ascertain the perceptions held by students regarding these institutional accounts.

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1. Introduction

The impact of social networks on contemporary society is indisputable, rendering the ongoing debate largely superfluous. It is now inconceivable to consider daily activity without the internet and social media. One might posit that it is feasible to envisage a day devoid of television; however, it is considerably more challenging to envisage a day in which one is not "connected" (WhatsApp, email, social networks). This is not a phenomenon exclusive to adult behaviour. Since childhood, young people "have been immersed in a digital environment, which they navigate through a process of imitation and intuitive learning, eventually developing their own experience-based understanding" (Galera & Abad, 2019, p. 175). Indeed, the prevalence of social network usage is notably high among the younger demographic. The term "Generation Z," also known as the "post-millennial" or "centurian" generation, refers to individuals born between the mid-1990s and the middle of the first decade of the 21st century. It is estimated that the number of individuals born in Spain between 1994 and 2010 is between 5 and 7 million. (Magallón Rosa, 2016). The majority of this demographic are currently engaged in academic pursuits or entering the workforce. They are digital natives, having been born and raised in an environment saturated with technology. The concept of a world devoid of connectivity is alien to them, as they rely on ICTs to fulfill their entertainment, recreational, informational, and even educational needs. (Días et al., 2015) In certain instances, social networks have become their primary mode of communication, eclipsing even direct interpersonal communication (Viñarás-Abad et al., 2023).

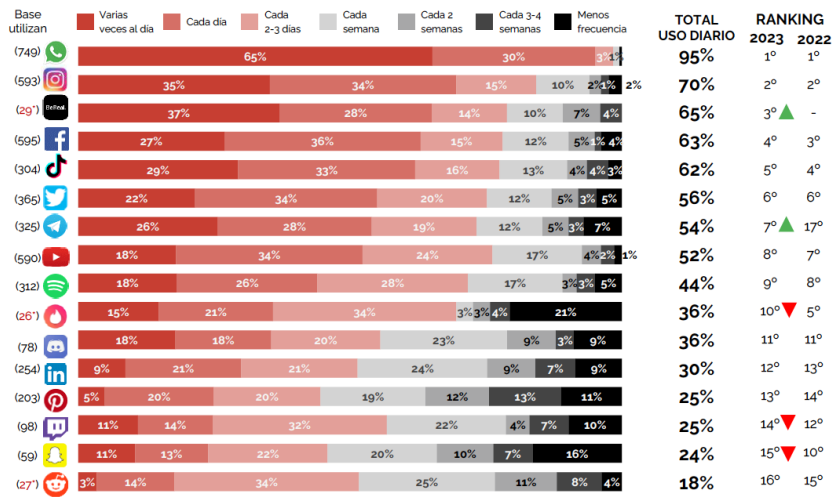
The IAB study indicates that the utilisation of social networks in Spain is undergoing a period of sustained growth. The level of usage remains consistent with previous years, with an average of 1 hour and 7 minutes per day. Individuals within the 12-34 age demographic dedicate the greatest proportion of their online time to activities, particularly those related to Spotify, Twitch, Discord, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and Tinder (IAB Spain, 2023).

A focus on the utilisation of social networks reveals that the primary functions are entertainment (80%), interaction (65%) and information (54%). Regarding members of the Zeta generation, the principal applications are somewhat different in nature, with a greater inclination towards interaction, information acquisition, inspiration, professional market monitoring and networking (IAB Spain 2023).

As the report's findings indicate, the mobile phone is the predominant device utilized for accessing social networks, with nearly 100% of the population employing it for this purpose. The device is utilised from the moment of waking and continues to be employed until the moment of retiring for the night. The period of greatest utilisation is after 16:00. WhatsApp is the social network most accessed via mobile (IAB Spain 2023).

With regard to the usage habits of social networks in Spain, the aforementioned IAB study, based on 850 interviews, indicates that the most frequently used social networks are WhatsApp and Instagram, followed by Facebook and TikTok. Despite its positioning as the third social network, BeReal's low penetration rate renders its usage insignificant at this time. The findings of the study corroborate the decline in the number of Facebook users and those of Tinder, Twitch and Snapchat, which are also experiencing a reduction in their user base. This is illustrated in Figure 1. It is noteworthy that over half of the population engages with the eight principal generalist social networks on a daily basis.

Figure 1. Frequency of use of social networks in Spain.



Source: IAB, 2023

In consideration of the aforementioned data, it is evident that the mobile screen represents the primary avenue for the consumption of information and entertainment. Members of the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts demonstrate a greater proclivity for utilising social media platforms, which are replete with micro-content, and which they themselves may also create. This content is consumed as audiovisual interludes. (Cortés Quesada et al., 2023). The significance of this content is such that a novel form of communication is emerging among young people in the Zeta and Alpha generations, with TikTok and Instagram emerging as the preferred social networks for this purpose. (Zhu et al., 2020). Conversely, studies such as that conducted by Marta Portales (2019) have already demonstrated the efficacy of micro-content for rapid consumption on mobile devices as a means of capturing the interest of young people and offering them a novel avenue for learning. The objective is to stimulate interest and facilitate engagement with the learning process among generations that have become increasingly disinclined towards the conventional pedagogical approaches espoused by their parents and grandparents.

The specific attributes of the Zeta generation present a significant challenge at all levels, including in the context of training and the manner in which they perceive their environment, as well as in the way that companies and institutions interact with them Solís y Critikian (2022) The challenge can be summarized as twofold: firstly, capturing attention, and secondly, retaining it and getting the desired message across. As one of the primary destinations for individuals from the Zeta generation, universities are compelled to adapt their discourses and messages to connect with an audience that is both appealing and crucial for their continued existence. "It is imperative that educators and educational institutions, particularly universities, are aware of this phenomenon" (Duart, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, it is important to note that social networks serve as a rapid and efficient platform for young people to access information. As evidenced by numerous studies, social media is a primary resource utilized by families when making decisions about higher education (Heidari et al., 2023).

1.1. TikTok, Six Years of Growth in Spain

To ascertain the provenance of the social network that is proliferating on the mobile devices of the Zeta generation, it is necessary to trace its origins back to 2017 in China. Zhang Yiming, who had accumulated considerable experience at Microsoft, had established an online platform in 2009 with the objective of disseminating information about real estate. He identified the potential of social networking and its use among young people and, in 2012, created ByteDance, a platform that hosted several Chinese social networking applications. These included BuzzVideo, Jinri Toutiao, Vigo Video and Douyin. The latter would subsequently serve as the precursor to TikTok (Llano, 2021).

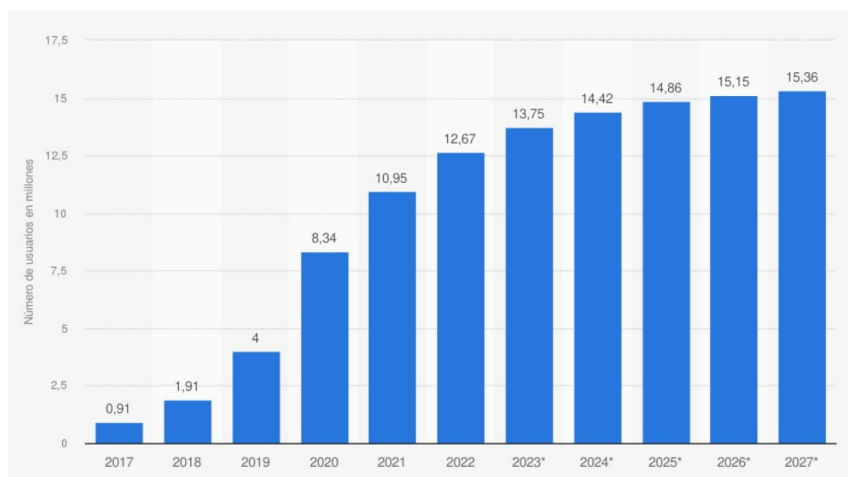
Zhang Yiming's ambition, coupled with the evident ascendance of social media, prompted him to establish Douyin in September 2016. The name, which translates to "vibrant sound" in Chinese, reflects the platform's core focus on video content. A social network designed to facilitate the sharing of videos

with a duration of between 15 and 60 seconds, which may be enhanced with a variety of filters, sound effects and musical accompaniment. A year later, with over 600 million users in China, the social network underwent a rebranding in May 2017 to extend its reach globally. While the platform was renamed TikTok worldwide, it retained its original name, Douyin, in China. In November of the same year, the company proceeded to acquire Musical.ly, and in 2018 the two social networks were merged. The number of downloads of the app increased exponentially, exceeding those of established platforms such as Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube within a relatively short timeframe. Subsequently, the social network in question has continued to expand, becoming the first of Chinese origin to transcend geographical boundaries and engage in competition with established platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. It is important to consider the significance of this achievement in the context of the vast cultural differences between China and the West (Fomperosa, 2020; Black Market, 2020). Indeed, certain governments within the European Union have initiated measures to restrict the expansion and penetration of TikTok within their jurisdictions, which has the potential to impede its continued growth. Nevertheless, the accelerated growth of a network that has existed for less than seven years is a notable phenomenon. TikTok's growth trajectory appears to be global in scale, with estimates suggesting that by the end of 2023, it had already surpassed 834 million active monthly users. By 2024, it is projected to reach 900 million users, and according to Bussines Insider, as cited by Statista (2024), it is anticipated to reach 955.3 million unique active users worldwide by 2025.

In the case of Spain, the social network of Chinese origin landed in August 2018. Its rise since then has been meteoric, and in 2023, when the social network first published its data in Spain, it claimed to have 18.3 million users (Prieto, 2023). The process accelerated during the Covid pandemic. In fact, the isolation forced by the pandemic "changed our lives in unpredictable ways and the virtual began to replace the world of work, interpersonal relationships and entertainment" (Quiroz, 2020).

Now that the health scare has passed, the normalisation of activity seems to have slowed the rate of growth, although it remains steady and much higher than that of other generalist social networks. According to the monographic study dedicated to TikTok by Statista (2024), the growth figures are not as optimistic as those of the company, although, as can be seen in Figure 2, the monthly active customer base in Spain will exceed 15 million by 2027.

Figure 2. Number of monthly active users (in millions)



Source: Statista 2024

2.1. Social Networks and the University

In light of this reality, the defined objective is to adopt a language that is accessible to young people in order to facilitate a connection with them. This concept motivates businesses to investigate the potential of social media as a means of acquiring new users. The university is no exception to this need to connect with a significant proportion of its audience in order to convert these young people into future customers.

As Valenzuela (2013) notes, the potential influence of generalist social networks in education is worthy of attention. By fostering student engagement and activity, these networks have the capacity to

enhance the learning process. Moreover, Rivera-Rogel et al. (2019) asserts that “it is evident to the university as an institution of higher education that it must capitalise on the utilisation of social networks to facilitate more expedient and proximate communication in accordance with contemporary demands” (p. 516).

However, beyond the utilisation of various channels to engage with its diverse audiences, the University, in its capacity as an institution, is duty-bound to function as a generator, repository and disseminator of knowledge. In this fundamental role, which is intrinsic to its identity, the necessity to communicate becomes an obligation. “Universities must contribute in a practical way to the advancement of communication that guides the educational community in matters of development and social welfare, based on their intellectual capital, with the objective of generating a positive impact” (Cortez Alburque, 2015). From this perspective, which extends beyond mere utilitarian considerations, the university, as a repository of knowledge, strives to engage with society in a manner that will facilitate its own development”. It is, therefore, vital to disseminate the significance of university endeavours and to enlist the support of society, including those beyond the university community, in the advancement and promotion of education and research (Parejo Cuéllar et al., 2016).

It is evident that universities have made considerable efforts in this regard, although the level of commitment and progress vary considerably. The websites of academic institutions have been populated with profiles of the universities themselves on the various general social networks. Consequently, all 92 universities that constitute the Spanish University System at the beginning of 2024 have established connections with the principal generalist social networks on their institutional home pages. It should be noted that for the purposes of this research, data from the Ministry of Universities relating to the annual report, Data and Figures of the Spanish University System 2022-2023, has been consulted. Between the publication of the aforementioned report and the completion of this research, five universities have commenced operations under state authorisation or have received the mandatory favourable report to do so. The main generalist social networks have a significant presence in all of them, as demonstrated in the following table.

Table 1. Profiles created by each generalist social network on the Institutional page of the 92 universities of the Spanish system (Year 2023).

| | Facebook | Instagram | Twitter | YouTube | LinkedIn | TikTok |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Universities | 90 | 87 | 88 | 87 | 78 | 32 |
| Percentage | 98,9% | 95,6% | 96,7% | 95,6% | 85,7% | 35,1% |
| Total followers | 3.595.17 | 1.996.95 | 3.080.595 | 1.849.548 | 6.318.083 | 102.984 |

Source: Own elaboration, 2023.

The majority of universities utilise the principal generalist social networks as a conduit for engagement with their prospective audience. In total, there are 461 institutional profiles on the six main social networks. The social media platforms in question are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and TikTok. The total number of followers across all accounts is 16,943,291. It should be noted that a significant number of these profiles may belong to the same individual, who may follow the institutional accounts of their university across multiple profiles. Additionally, it is possible that many of these profiles may belong to companies, institutions, or other types of accounts. Nevertheless, the number of profiles that bring together the accounts of the main university networks is noteworthy. In order to contextualise the data, it is sufficient to note that the total number of university students in the 2021-2022 academic year was 1,338,304 (Ministry of Universities 2023).

It is noteworthy that TikTok, a relatively recent generalist social network in Spain, has experienced a rapid and exponential growth since its inception in the country. Indeed, in a mere six years, it has ascended to become one of the most prominent competitors in the market, with the highest volume of views per year, exhibiting a growth of +109% compared to the previous year. Its penetration and affinity with the youngest sectors of the population propels it to one of the top positions in terms of capturing the attention of members of the Zeta and Alpha generations, as evidenced in Image 3.

Figure 3. Use of generalist social networks: frequency vs. intensity (Year 2023).



Source: IAB Social Media Study 2023.

2. Objectives and Hypotheses

In light of the aforementioned considerations, the present research is guided by the following objectives:

- To analyse the increased penetration of TikTok in the university environment in its first six years.
- To ascertain the extent to which universities consider TikTok an effective channel for connecting with the Zeta and Alpha generations.
- To ascertain whether university students of the Zeta generation perceive the institutional accounts created by universities on TikTok in a favourable light.

In addition to these two primary objectives, there is the possibility of investigating other secondary objectives that offer a more comprehensive perspective on the utilisation of social networks in academic institutions, with a particular focus on the role of TikTok. Among the secondary objectives is an investigation into the specific ways in which universities utilise TikTok to communicate with their audience. Furthermore, the objective is to ascertain whether the presence of universities on TikTok represents an additional step in their communication with students or an objective in itself. Ultimately, based on the perceptions of the students themselves, potential communication objectives are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of these accounts as a channel for influencing the potential audience of the universities.

3. Methodology

This study employs a bidirectional analysis, whereby the investigation is conducted from two distinct perspectives: firstly, from the standpoint of Spanish universities, and secondly, from the perspective of Generation Z students.

The initial phase of the study employed a quantitative methodology, utilising a prospective and descriptive approach to examine the variables under investigation. The subsequent section presents the findings of this analysis. The study universe comprised the 86 Spanish universities, both public and private, included in the Spanish University System published by the Ministry of Universities. As the report was published in 2023, the data on new universities was updated by consulting the Official State Gazette to ascertain which institutions have been granted state authorisation to offer official degrees.

Therefore, in addition to the 86 universities included in the Spanish University System 2022-2023 report, the following institutions have been incorporated, which will be offering official degrees in the 2023-2024 academic year:

- Universidad de Diseño, Innovación y Tecnología (BOE 01/marzo/2023)
- Universidad Internacional de la Empresa (BOE 25/noviembre/2021)
- Universidad CEU-Fernando III (BOE 3/octubre/2023)

- European University Vitoria-Gasteiz (BOE 11/noviembre/2021)
- Universidad a Distancia de Madrid (BOE 14/junio/2006)
- Universidad Intercontinental Empresa (BOE 21/septiembre/2021)

The study universe is constituted by the 92 public or private universities that constitute the Spanish university system in January 2024, the date of data collection for the purposes of this research. To analyse the data, a period of one and a half years was selected to observe the evolution of profile creation on the various generalist social networks. Consequently, an initial investigation was conducted between August and September 2022. The second phase of the investigation, comprising data collection, was conducted in February 2024. This has enabled an examination of the evolution in the creation of university profiles on the principal social networks over the course of a year and a half.

The social network TikTok has been the subject of particular scrutiny six years after its inception in our country. As it is the youngest generalist social network, the number of university institutions that have already created profiles on this network is significantly lower than in the rest of the networks, where it is almost 100% in several of them, as can be seen in Table 1. Nevertheless, the rate of penetration of this audiovisual content network based on short videos is, as can be observed, significantly higher than that of the other networks.

The second part of the study comprised a survey of young people belonging to the Zeta and Alpha generations, as part of the methodological design. Surveys are a widely used method in market research, as they facilitate the collection of extensive information from primary sources. Surveys facilitate the acquisition of standardised responses, which are straightforward to administer, simplify data collection, provide information that is not directly observable and allow partial studies to be conducted on a given topic. (Abascal & Esteban, 2005). In this study, a pre-designed and structured questionnaire was employed, which was distributed to respondents via the internet and mobile devices. Questionnaires represent one of the most widely used instruments for the collection of information in social research. This method “is particularly suited to determining the type of population and information that respondents can offer, as it refers to their professional, social, or personal world. In particular, the subject matter encompasses interests, motivations, attitudes, intentions, desires, and even personal behaviour” (Galera & Abad, 2019, p. 175). The surveys conducted have enabled the acquisition of detailed data pertaining to the utilisation of social networks. The total sample size for the study was 300 young people. The data analysed provides insight into the perceptions of individuals belonging to the Zeta and Alpha generations regarding the content of universities' TikTok accounts.

3.1. Variables Analysed

In order to conduct the requisite research, the principal variables under examination are set forth below:

- The number of university accounts created on TikTok over the five years that the platform has been present in Spain.
- The number of followers associated with each institutional account.
- The number of publications on each account created in 2023 will also be considered.
- Preferred social network usage.
- The weekly usage time of social networks.
- An understanding of the demographic profile of students who use TikTok at your university.
- The extent to which university institutional accounts on TikTok are monitored.
- Students' preferred content for this social network

In order to ascertain the level of activity of the universities on TikTok, the number of publications they made on this social network was recorded. As indicators of user interaction with the activity of the universities, the number of followers on social media was recorded, which indicates the extent to which the brand or entity is recognised on the social network. Additionally, the number of likes from users to their publications was also recorded. (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; De Vries et al., 2012).

4. Results

The growth in the number of official TikTok accounts on the institutional pages of Spanish universities has been rapid and continuous. The inaugural university TikTok account was that of UDIT (University of Design, Innovation and Technology), which was launched on 13 January 2020 (https://www.tiktok.com/@esne_es). It is noteworthy that UDIT had not yet obtained the requisite authorisation to commence its officially recognised degree programmes at the time. By the end of that same year, up to six university institutions had established their official accounts and were utilising the platform, which was the newest social network to arrive in Spain (Table 2). Subsequently, the growth has been uninterrupted. By the conclusion of 2021, a further seven universities had become involved, with a total of 12 universities featuring videos on the Chinese platform. In 2022, a further 11 universities joined the network, while a further eight accounts were created in 2023. From the beginning of 2024 until the conclusion of the data collection process for this research project, a single additional university has established an official profile on TikTok. On 1 January 2024, the University of Vigo extended its felicitations to its students on the occasion of the New Year from its recently established profile on the general social network. Consequently, in the six years since its introduction to Spain, TikTok has already amassed 31 official university accounts, representing approximately one-third of the total.

Table 2. Profiles created in TikTok on the Institutional page of the 92 universities that make up the Spanish system.

| Year | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|---------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| New accounts | 6 | 7 | 11 | 8 | 1 |
| Total | 6 | 13 | 24 | 32 | 33 |

Source: Own elaboration, 2023.

The collective following of the 33 TikTok accounts representing Spanish universities amounts to 102,984 followers, equating to an average of 3,322 followers per account. The account of IE University of Madrid has the greatest number of followers, with a total of 26,700. As is the case with other generalist networks in the university sphere, the age of the network is not a defining characteristic of the total number of followers or interactions with them. As is the case with other social networks, there are profiles that exhibit minimal or no activity, in contrast to other accounts that, despite being recent, demonstrate high levels of engagement and activity.

It is noteworthy that, during the monitoring period of the past sixteen months, the growth rate of TikTok accounts on institutional pages has exhibited an accelerating trend. Over the course of eight months between September 2022 and May 2023, the number of institutional accounts increased by approximately 100%, from 12 to 24. In terms of follower growth, the account demonstrated a significant increase, from 30,687 to 63,874. In the second study period, spanning from May 2023 to January 2024 (eight months), the number of accounts observed increased from 21 to 33. In this instance, the number of users did not double, but rather increased from 63,874 to 102,984, which represents a significantly higher growth rate than that observed in other generalist social networks within the university context.

In regard to the data yielded by the survey, a total of 300 questionnaires were deemed eligible for analysis. In terms of sex, 198 individuals, representing 66% of the total number of respondents, identified as female. The remaining 34% (102 individuals) were male.

In terms of age, 2.8% of respondents are under 12 years of age; 4.2% are between 13 and 17 years of age, and 65.2% of the total are between 18 and 23 years of age. A total of 26.8% of the population surveyed in this study are over the age of 23.

With regard to the social networks most utilized by young people, Instagram is the most prevalent among members of the Zeta and Alpha generations. It can be observed that approximately 84% of respondents have the application installed on their mobile device and utilise it regularly. WhatsApp is the second most utilized generalist social network, with a usage rate of 75.5% among the total population. TikTok occupies the third position with a 53.33% market share. These three networks are the most preferred, exhibiting a significantly higher preference than the rest. Consequently, 20.44% of respondents indicated that they use YouTube, 18.66% stated that they use X (formerly known as Twitter), 17.33% use LinkedIn, 4.88% use Facebook, and 4.44% use BeReal. Additionally, 4.88% of

respondents indicated that they follow other generalist networks not included in the survey, such as Telegram or Pinterest.

The survey revealed that 73.8% of respondents have an operational account on TikTok, while 26.2% do not have a profile on the Chinese social media platform. As previously stated, Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok are the social media platforms with the highest penetration among young university students.

In terms of weekly usage time spent on TikTok, 17.46% of respondents indicate that they utilise the platform for less than one hour per week. A total of 28.32% of respondents indicated that they utilise the social network for a period of between one and two hours. A total of 33.13% of respondents indicated that they would use the generalist social network for a period of between three and seven hours per week. Finally, 16.26% of respondents indicated that they use TikTok for between eight and 14 hours per week, while 4.81% stated that they spend more than 14 hours on the platform each week.

The social network, which specialises in the dissemination of short videos, appears to be an optimal channel for the entertainment of young people. The majority of respondents (57.77%) indicated that their primary motivation for using TikTok is to have fun. The second most frequently cited reason for using this social network is the wasting of time, with 40.44% of respondents indicating this as their rationale. Nevertheless, 30.22% of respondents indicated that they utilize TikTok as a source of inspiration on a range of subjects. A further 22.66% of respondents indicated that they obtain information from TikTok videos. In addition, the Asian social network is utilised by users for other functions, albeit to a lesser extent. These include dancing and viewing dance choreographies (11.55%), communicating with friends and acquaintances (9.77%), and, finally, meeting new people (2.66% of respondents).

The survey of 300 individuals from the Zeta and Alpha generations included a section devoted to the subject of TikTok and its usage among university students. In this section, respondents were queried regarding their awareness of the existence of institutional TikTok accounts on their university's website. Furthermore, respondents were queried as to whether they followed the aforementioned accounts and whether the content provided by the institution was of interest to them. In an open-ended question, respondents were invited to indicate the content they would like to see on the institutional TikTok accounts or find attractive.

Of the 300 young people surveyed, 60% indicated that they were unaware of the existence of an official TikTok account representing their institution. A total of 11.55% of respondents indicated that their university does not have an account on the Asian social network, while 28.44% stated that they were aware of the existence of an institutional TikTok account.

Nevertheless, awareness of the existence of an institutional TikTok account at the university does not necessarily imply following it. Consequently, 91.11% of young students do not follow the institutional TikTok account. A mere 8.88% of respondents indicated that they follow the official TikTok account of their educational institution. Moreover, 93.77% of young people indicate that they are not interested in the content disseminated by the institutional TikTok account, while only 6.22% express interest in the published material.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The objective of this study was to examine the role that TikTok currently plays among young people and to ascertain its penetration as a communication tool within the university context. Conversely, the objective was to ascertain the perceptions of the content disseminated by the university institutional accounts held by the younger generations, specifically those belonging to the Zeta and Alpha generations.

A systematic study of the evolution of TikTok accounts on the home pages of universities in the Spanish University System has demonstrated that the penetration of this social network is significant. Indeed, during the period in which the samples were collected for the study, the number of universities that have established a profile on TikTok has increased by almost twofold. The number of account followers increased from 63,874 to 102,984 over the course of eight months. The rate of growth remains considerable in comparison to other social networks, with instances of networks experiencing a decline in popularity among the younger demographic.

It is also noteworthy that universities are demonstrably committed to this communication platform as a novel channel for engaging with students. It is sufficient to note that the first Spanish university was only connected to TikTok four years ago. At the time of writing, there are already 32 universities with official accounts linked on their homepage. Furthermore, educational institutions at various levels, including schools, faculties, groups, and universities, are also represented. It should be noted that the present study considers only the homepage of each university, and thus does not include any information from schools, faculties, groups or departments that may be using TikTok to connect with students. It seems reasonable to posit that in the coming months and years, other universities will establish official accounts on the Chinese social network.

With regard to the utilisation of this platform by universities, it is noteworthy that the overwhelming majority of Spanish educational institutions have already established official profiles on other general social networks. The decision to open an account on TikTok does not appear to be driven by a perceived necessity, as has been observed in the past with other social networks that currently exert a greater influence than TikTok. This suggests that the decision to establish a presence on TikTok is driven by a desire to foster connections with the student community in a more mature and considered manner. It appears that universities are attempting to enhance student engagement by communicating with them on the platform they utilize and, potentially, in the language they prefer.

The rate of penetration of TikTok in Spanish universities appears to demonstrate a greater degree of flexibility and dynamism on the part of universities when it comes to adopting new generalist social networks. Once profiles have been created on the most common social networks, institutions are readily embracing new platforms and methods of connecting with their students. Therefore, given the existing networking infrastructures and departments, it seems reasonable to suggest that the process of incorporating new media and networks is somewhat more straightforward. It is important to note, however, that TikTok is currently experiencing a surge in popularity and has a high penetration rate among young people in the Zeta and Alpha generations, making it an attractive option for many institutions. Therefore, following the adoption of Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), LinkedIn and YouTube, universities could have considered other generalist social networks, such as Telegram or Pinterest, which were already established in Spain. However, the selected option, as evidenced by the adoption of TikTok by 31 universities in just four years, represents a notable departure from this precedent.

Conversely, the existence of official profiles on TikTok does not appear to be associated with the public or private status of the institution. Of the 31 universities with a presence on the Chinese generalist social network, 19 are public institutions of higher education in Spain, while the remaining 12 are private institutions.

The objective of this research was to ascertain the perceptions of young people regarding the institutional university accounts created on TikTok. In this regard, it is evident that there is a significant disconnect between the content being presented to young people on TikTok and their actual engagement with it. Despite the notable efforts made by the universities to create and utilise TikTok as a channel of communication with young people, the latter appear to be entirely disengaged from the content they are presented with. Young people dedicate a considerable amount of time to social networking online, with TikTok being identified as a particularly popular platform. Nevertheless, a mere handful of respondents were aware of the existence of their own university's profile on this particular platform. The vast majority of respondents (91%) indicated that they do not follow their institution's TikTok account, and 93.77% stated that they are not interested in the content it offers.

At this juncture, TikTok is perceived by universities as a conduit for connecting with young people, rather than as a genuine avenue for open communication with them. However, as previously stated, the rapidity with which content is consumed on this social network and the propensity for such content to spread virally make it an intriguing platform for engagement. The disparate treatment of the accounts and the nature of the information provided currently precludes the possibility of a systematic aggregation of engaging content. In any case, six years after its arrival in Spain, TikTok continues to be one of the most attractive social networks for young people and represents a promising avenue for universities to capture their attention and enhance communication with them.

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