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ORIGINAL

Connected but Not Integrated: The Impact of Digital Media on Youth Cultural Practices in Ecuador's Zone 5

Conectados pero no integrados: impacto de los medios digitales en las prácticas culturales juveniles en la Zona 5 del Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of digital media on the cultural practices of young people aged 20 to 24 in Ecuador's Zone 5, which comprises the provinces of Guayas, Los Ríos, Santa Elena, and Galápagos. The research addressed aspects related to the use of digital platforms, the technological skills acquired, and the behaviors derived from access to such tools. A quantitative approach with an exploratory and non-experimental design was adopted, employing structured surveys administered to a randomly selected probabilistic sample of 384 participants. The findings revealed that most respondents accessed the Internet daily, primarily through mobile devices, with intensive use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. A total of 93 % of participants reported having home Internet access, mainly via broadband and fiber-optic services. Furthermore, it was observed that the youth demonstrated technological skills focused on information retrieval, use of educational platforms, social interaction, and entertainment. Youth cultural practices have been significantly transformed by constant exposure to digital environments, fostering new forms of socialization, expression, and symbolic interaction. The study concluded that digital technologies act not only as communication tools but also as catalysts for emerging cultural dynamics. These findings underscore the need for continued research into how information and communication technologies (ICTs) shape the cultural experiences of new generations in specific geographical contexts.

Keywords: Digital Media; Ecuadorian Youth; Cultural Practices; Technological Skills; Zone 5.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio examinó la influencia de los medios digitales en las prácticas culturales de los jóvenes de entre 20 y 24 años en la Zona 5 de Ecuador, conformada por las provincias de Guayas, Los Ríos, Santa Elena y Galápagos. Se abordaron aspectos relacionados con el uso de plataformas digitales, las habilidades tecnológicas adquiridas y los comportamientos derivados del acceso a dichas herramientas. La investigación adoptó un enfoque cuantitativo, con carácter exploratorio y diseño no experimental, y empleó encuestas estructuradas aplicadas a una muestra probabilística aleatoria compuesta por 384 jóvenes. Los resultados evidenciaron que la mayoría de los encuestados accede diariamente a Internet, principalmente mediante dispositivos móviles, destacando el uso intensivo de redes sociales como WhatsApp y Facebook. El 93 % de los participantes indicó contar con conexión a Internet en el hogar, principalmente a través de servicios de banda ancha y fibra óptica. Asimismo, se constató que los jóvenes presentan habilidades tecnológicas orientadas a la búsqueda de información, el uso de plataformas educativas, la interacción social y el entretenimiento. Las prácticas culturales juveniles han sido significativamente transformadas por la constante exposición a

entornos digitales, promoviendo nuevas formas de socialización, expresión e interacción simbólica. El estudio concluye que las tecnologías digitales no solo actúan como herramientas de comunicación, sino como catalizadores de dinámicas culturales emergentes. Estos hallazgos sugieren la necesidad de seguir investigando los modos en que las TIC configuran las experiencias culturales de las nuevas generaciones en contextos geográficos específicos.

Palabras clave: Medios Digitales; Jóvenes Ecuatorianos; Prácticas Culturales; Habilidades Tecnológicas; Zona 5.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital media has generated profound transformations in communication, education, and cultural structures worldwide. In the last two decades, widespread access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) has disrupted traditional modes of socialization, cultural participation, and identity construction, particularly among young people.[1,2,3] This population has been a key player in the adoption of new technologies, which has sparked growing academic interest in analyzing the effects of this digitalization on their daily practices.[4]

Digital media have become structurally integrated into the lives of young people, who use them not only as informational or recreational tools, but also as spaces for symbolic expression, social organization, and cultural participation.[5,6,7] In this sense, digital environments allow young people to generate their own content, interact in virtual communities, and participate in transnational cultural dynamics, even from local or peripheral contexts.[8,9]

In Latin America, the incorporation of ICTs has been more accelerated in urban areas, while rural regions face greater structural barriers, which has generated a persistent gap in terms of access, meaningful use and digital literacy.[10,11] In the case of Ecuador, although connectivity indicators have improved in recent years, inequalities persist between provinces, especially with regard to access to high-capacity devices and broadband infrastructure.[12,13,14]

Livingstone[6] argues that access to technology is not synonymous with meaningful appropriation, and that the cultural and educational benefits of digital environments also depend on the cultural capital, pedagogical mediation, and social conditions of the user. Thus, understanding youth digital practices requires an intersectional approach that recognizes not only the presence of technology, but also its context of use and the resources available for its critical appropriation.[15,16]

In this sense, Buckingham[1] argues that digital media can contribute to the expansion of cultural and educational opportunities for young people, but they can also reproduce dynamics of exclusion if their access is not accompanied by media literacy processes and active participation.[17,18]

This study analyzes how young people in Zone 5 of Ecuador, which includes the provinces of Guayas, Los Ríos, Santa Elena, Bolívar, and Galápagos, use digital media and what types of skills and cultural practices they develop from this interaction. Therefore, it seeks to critically examine the relationship between the use of digital media, acquired technological skills, and participation in digital cultural practices.

The focus of this research is aligned with recent studies that promote a critical view on digitalization, understanding that not all access entails cultural or educational empowerment. [2,4] In this framework, authors such as Jenkins and Ito[16] have defended the need to generate digital ecosystems that promote meaningful participation, collaborative creation and the circulation of diverse knowledge.

Studies such as those by Albornoz[7] have shown that youth cultural participation in digital environments is not homogeneous and that there are marked differences depending on variables such as educational level, geographical environment and social class. These inequalities are also reflected in the quality of use: while some young people generate content, others limit themselves to passive consumption, and others do not even access the network regularly.

Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of the cultural transformations resulting from the use of digital media by young Ecuadorians, as well as to offer empirical evidence to support the design of inclusive public policies capable of reducing the digital divide and strengthening youth cultural citizenship in digital environments.

Theoretical and practical implications

Digital media have substantially changed the ways in which young people access, produce and circulate information and cultural content. This transformation is directly associated with the shift from a culture based on passive media consumption to a participatory culture, where young people not only receive information, but also create, share and reinterpret it.[9] In this context, Buckingham[1] states that digital media enable young people to become active cultural producers, enabled to participate in symbolic spaces through the everyday

use of technological tools.

This phenomenon has been widely addressed by Jenkins[16] , who suggests that participatory cultures involve low thresholds of expression, strong peer support and a sense of belonging to communities that share common interests, all facilitated by digital platforms such as social networks, blogs, collaborative video games or *streaming channels*; consequently, digital technologies have reconfigured the forms of youth cultural citizenship, providing them with greater expressive autonomy and transnational reach.[16,17]

However, this optimistic view must be tempered by evidence showing that access to and participation in digital environments are neither universal nor equitable. Albornoz[7] argues that, in Latin America, access to ICTs is deeply influenced by factors such as poverty, educational level, gender, and geographic location. In this sense, digital divides are not only reflected in access to technology, but also in the skills for its effective use and critical access.[18]

Livingstone[6] introduces the concept of "digital capital" to describe the set of technical, social and symbolic resources that allow users to use ICTs meaningfully. This approach is useful for interpreting the differences in the way young people appropriate digital media, since they do not all have equal access, prior knowledge, or support networks that facilitate the development of complex technological skills.

In Ecuador, the Ministry of Telecommunications has recognized the need to move from a connectivity-centered approach to one that promotes full digital inclusion, understood as the development of skills for the ethical, creative and productive use of technologies.[19] While the study by Pérez[3] shows high rates of poverty, although the technological infrastructure has improved, barriers related to the lack of teacher training in ICT, the absence of relevant content in the curriculum and the poor integration of digital tools into community life persist.

From a pedagogical point of view, authors such as Cobo and Moravec[13] have proposed the concept of "invisible learning", in which digital competences are developed in informal contexts and not necessarily mediated by school institutions, which highlights the educational potential of young people's everyday digital practices. Indeed, platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Twitch or Reddit act as collaborative learning spaces, where young people acquire technical knowledge, communication skills and self-expression skills that are rarely formally recognized.[20,21,22,23,24,25]

In turn, the theories of critical digital literacy propose that it is not enough to know how to use technological tools, but it is essential to understand how they work, who controls them, what implications their algorithms have and how they affect the construction of knowledge and cultural identity.[18] In this sense, authors such as Freire and Giroux[20] have proposed that all educational practice, including digital practice, must be oriented towards emancipation and the training of subjects capable of critically interpreting their reality.

This critical approach is essential for interpreting the digital behavior of young Ecuadorians. The evidence gathered in this study suggests that most of them focus on social and recreational use of ICTs, while their participation in cultural creation processes or educational platforms remains marginal. This is consistent with studies conducted in other countries in the region, such as Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia, where it has also been observed that young people tend to use digital media primarily for entertainment, with little critical or productive appropriation.[18]

From this framework, it is pertinent to understand that technological skills are not neutral, but are mediated by structural, institutional and cultural factors. As Warschauer argues, [14] meaningful access to technology implies having the infrastructure, skills, motivation and opportunities to actively participate in digital environments. Therefore, public policies aimed at reducing the digital divide must consider dimensions such as the design of relevant content, ongoing teacher training, youth participation in cultural processes and intersectoral coordination.

On the other hand, the development of technological skills for cultural purposes must be understood as a way of strengthening active citizenship. Digital cultural practices allow young people to generate their own discourses, connect with like-minded communities, and build alternative worldviews.[29] These practices, when accompanied by cultural and educational institutions, can become spaces of symbolic resistance, social innovation, and community cohesion.

Cultural practices in the digital age

Cultural practices, understood as the ways in which individuals produce, share and redefine symbols, discourses and cultural goods in their daily lives, [19] have been profoundly transformed by digitalization. In the case of young people, this transformation has been particularly accelerated due to their early exposure to information and communication technologies (ICTs), which has reconfigured both their forms of socialization and their modes of symbolic participation.[3]

Todorov [8] points out that youth cultural practices in the digital age arise from the interaction between inherited culture and new forms of expression facilitated by technology. This phenomenon is visible in the Ecuadorian context, where access to digital platforms has allowed young people to develop new forms of belonging, symbolic production and participation in communities that transcend traditional geographical

boundaries. According to ECLAC, young people not only consume digital cultural content, but also actively produce it, generating an ecosystem of symbolic exchanges that impacts cultural industries, youth languages and forms of emerging citizenship.[11]

The expansion of Internet access, including through mobile devices, has facilitated digital cultural participation, although it is not distributed evenly. According to the Ibero-American Report on Digital Culture,[18] while some youth access virtual museums, online concerts or digital festivals, others limit their Internet use to recreational consumption or instant messaging. These differences are due not only to economic access factors, but also to variables such as cultural capital, educational level and territorial context.[10]

Young people not only consume culture, but also constantly produce, distribute, and negotiate it through digital platforms.[9] In this sense, youth culture in the digital age is characterized by active participation, shared creativity, and the appropriation of global repertoires in a local key, a phenomenon that García Canclini has called "cultural hybridization."[10] This is manifested, for example, in the daily use of social networks to share music, graphic humor, fashion, video games, or political speeches, which integrate traditional elements and new expressive codes.

Similarly, as García Canclini argues,[10] digital youth cultures are characterized by a permanent hybridity, in which traditional elements converge with languages from pop culture, activism, visual aesthetics and transmediality.[16] This hybridity is expressed in practices such as remixes, memes, fanfiction , self-publishing, filter aesthetics or the creation of viral content, which articulate creative, technical and social dimensions.[16]

In this sense, digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Discord have become new cultural scenarios, where young people display performances, narratives, lifestyles, and forms of humor that build their own generational codes.[7] These platforms allow users to participate as prosumers, that is, simultaneous producers and consumers of digital content, which represents a paradigm shift from the traditional model of unidirectional mass media.[14]

In the context of Zone 5 of Ecuador, characterized by a disparity in access to technology according to the 2023 digital report,[22] these dynamics are visible in the ways in which young people use digital media to create visual content, share opinions on music or politics, participate in viral challenges, or interact with local cultural groups through social networks. However, as indicated by Castells' study[19] on the cultural digital divide, these practices can be severely limited by factors of connectivity, digital literacy, and access to appropriate devices.

The UNESCO report on youth and digital culture highlights that digital cultural participation should not be understood exclusively as the use of technological tools, but rather as the capacity of individuals to critically appropriate these tools, intervene in the digital public space, and contribute to cultural diversity. From this perspective, the development of advanced digital skills is key for young people not only to access culture, but also to produce, manage, and distribute it autonomously and meaningfully.[17]

However, youth cultural participation in digital environments also faces risks, as Livingstone argues,[18] overexposure to digital platforms can generate dependency, digital fatigue, misinformation or reproduction of stereotypes, especially in contexts where there are no parallel educational processes that promote critical thinking and digital ethics. Therefore, it is necessary that digital cultural practices be accompanied by media literacy programs that encourage reflection on technological uses, online security and respect for diversity. [19]

In Latin America, according to Torres,[29] various initiatives have been developed that have promoted the recognition of digital youth cultural expressions as legitimate manifestations of identity and citizenship. An example of this are the experiences of transmedia collectives, indigenous narrative projects on virtual platforms, feminist digital activism and digital urban art networks,[28] these expressions reconfigure the cultural space from below, giving rise to a grassroots, participatory and decentralized digital culture.

In this sense, it can be said that youth cultural practices in the digital age are multidimensional, simultaneously global and local, ephemeral and documented, collective and individual. These practices shape new ways of inhabiting the symbolic, which demand to be understood not only as technological trends, but as cultural processes deeply rooted in the material, social, and subjective conditions of contemporary youth.

METHOD

The study uses a quantitative approach with an exploratory scope, suitable for investigating emerging social phenomena in poorly documented contexts, such as the use of digital media and its influence on the cultural practices of young Ecuadorians. Since the main objective is to identify patterns of behavior, technological skills, and forms of cultural participation mediated by digital technologies, a non-experimental cross-sectional design was chosen, which allows for observing the variables in their natural state without direct manipulation.[2]

The study seeks to establish correlations between variables, construct empirical generalizations, and analyze statistical relationships on a representative sample. According to Creswell[24], this methodology facilitates comparison between groups and the detection of trends that cannot always be identified using qualitative techniques. Furthermore, its structured nature allows for greater replicability of the study and the validation of hypotheses derived from the statistical analysis.

The study was conducted in the five provinces that make up Zone 5 of Ecuador, considering the geographical area of high economic, educational, and technological diversity. This heterogeneity is useful for analyzing the impact of ICTs on a representative sample of young people between the ages of 20 and 24, taking into account contextual variables such as internet access, educational level, urban or rural environment, and availability of digital devices.

The primary data collection instrument was a structured survey designed based on the scientific literature on youth, digital culture, and technological literacy.[8] The questionnaire was validated by experts in communication, sociology, and digital education, who reviewed its conceptual relevance, linguistic clarity, and contextual relevance. A pilot test was also conducted with 30 young people with similar characteristics to the final sample, which allowed for the refinement of the item wording and response scale.

The survey included four sections: 1. sociodemographic characteristics based on age, gender, province, educational level, and occupation; 2. access to and use of digital media such as devices, connection type, frequency of use, and social media used; 3. technological skills, based on the ability to search for information, create content, navigate educational platforms, or participate in collaborative virtual environments; and 4. digital cultural participation, based on the type of online cultural activities, frequency of participation, level of interest, and perceived usefulness.

Simple random sampling was used, considering a total estimated population of 240 135 university students in the defined age range, according to data from the National Secretariat of Planning and Development. For a 95 % confidence level and a 5 % margin of error, a sample size of 384 participants was determined. This sample was distributed proportionally among the five provinces of Zone 5, taking into account geographic dispersion variables, with the aim of ensuring territorial representativeness.

Data collection was carried out using two methods: in person, primarily at university educational institutions, community spaces, and urban areas; and online through digital forms distributed primarily via email and social media. This strategy allowed for coverage of segments with different technological access and ensured diverse participation. In all cases, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality were guaranteed, in accordance with the ethical principles of social research.

To assess the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was applied, obtaining a value of 0,82; this indicates a high internal consistency of the questionnaire and confirms the empirical validity of the instrument applied.[12] In addition, the construct validity was analyzed by reviewing internal correlations between items in each thematic block, which reinforced the coherence of the instrument with respect to the study objectives.

From a methodological perspective, this strategy allowed for the generation of reliable quantitative data, capable of capturing the complexity of youth digital practices without losing statistical rigor. As Bryman[27] highlights, quantitative methods are useful for establishing general patterns in large populations, provided they are combined with a critical theoretical interpretation and a contextualized design of the instrument.

Therefore, the methodology adopted in this study provides a solid foundation for understanding the phenomenon under investigation, contributing to the academic debate on youth, culture, and technology from an empirical perspective situated in a specific territory of Ecuador.

RESULTS

The results obtained from this research are presented below, offering a detailed look at the dynamics of access, use, and appropriation of digital media among young people aged 20 to 24 in Zone 5 of Ecuador.

According to the data observed in table 1, there is a high access to connectivity through mobile phones (80 %), followed by laptops (14 %), while tablets (4 %) and consoles Video games (2 %) are marginally used. These data confirm the prevalence of portable devices compared to desktop technologies.

Table 1. Internet access and device use

Device	Percentage (%)
Mobile phone	80
Laptop	14
Tablet	4
Video game console	2

This trend has been observed in other Latin American contexts, where the cell phone becomes the only point of contact with the Internet for young populations with fewer resources.[4]

Regarding the use of digital platforms, according to table 2, 64 % of young people use social networks daily, with WhatsApp being the most common. the most used (64 %), followed by Facebook (13,7 %), TikTok (11,5 %) and Instagram (10,8 %). These percentages coincide with the reports of We Are Social and DataReportal (22), which position these networks as key spaces for communication, entertainment and the circulation of content

among young people in Latin America and Ecuador is not far from this reality in the region.

Table 2. Frequency of use of social networks

Social network	Percentage of daily use (%)
WhatsApp	64
Facebook	13,7
TikTok	11,5
Instagram	10,8

Regarding the results in table 3, regarding technological skills, the results show a concentration on recreational and communication uses. Twenty-five percent of young people report that their main technological activity is using social media, while 22 % prefer instant messaging. Activities such as searching for information (18 %) or the Streaming content consumption (15 %) also represents considerable use. However, content creation (10 %) use of educational platforms (5 %), and e-commerce (5 %) have a more limited share. These data suggest an underutilized potential of ICTs in areas of academic or professional development.

Table 3. Technological skills among young people in Zone 5

Technological activity	Percentage (%)
Use of social networks	25
Instant messaging	22
Search for information	18
Streaming consumption	15
Content creation	10
Use of e-learning platforms	5
Online commerce and transactions	5

This pattern is consistent with previous research that warns that, despite high technological access, young people do not necessarily develop higher-order skills, such as critical content curation, multimedia production, or self-regulated learning in virtual environments.[7] The causes may be multiple: lack of educational guidance, institutional weakness, limited provision of specialized training, or lack of awareness of emerging digital opportunities.[21]

Regarding the results in table 4, on participation in digital cultural activities, the results show that 38 % of young people reported having participated in at least one virtual cultural activity in the last three months. The most common practices were virtual concerts or live music (25 %), live streaming events (23 %), and visits to virtual museums or galleries (17 %), while other activities such as online art or film festivals (15 %), cultural talks (10 %), or digital workshops (10 %) had a lower incidence.

Table 4. Participation in digital cultural activities

Type of activity	Percentage (%)
Virtual concerts (live music)	25
Live streaming events	23
Virtual visits to events	17
Online art or film festivals	15
Cultural talks or conferences	10
Workshops and online learning	10

The gap between connectivity and cultural participation has been documented by various international organizations, which warn of the need to promote digital environments that are not only accessible, but also culturally relevant and pedagogically supported.[9] The participation deficit could be related to the poor promotion of local digital culture, the lack of mediation strategies, and the invisibility of youth expressions as legitimate cultural practices.[10]

Statistical analysis identified a strong and significant correlation between internet access and technological skills ($r=0,65$; $p<0,01$), confirming that greater availability of internet access directly impacts the development of digital skills. Likewise, a moderate correlation was found between social media use and online cultural participation ($r=0,47$; $p<0,05$), suggesting that these platforms can act as cultural mediators, depending on the content and type of interaction promoted.

		AI	HT	URS	PCL	NE	UMD
AI	(AI)	1.00	0.65	0.38	0.40	0.10	0.45
HT	(HT)	0.65	1.00	0.42	0.36	0.15	0.50
URS	(URS)	0.38	0.42	1.00	0.47	0.18	0.55
PCL	(PCL)	0.40	0.36	0.47	1.00	0.20	0.50
NE	(NE)	0.10	0.15	0.18	0.20	1.00	0.22
UMD	(UMD)	0.45	0.50	0.55	0.50	0.22	1.00

Figure 1. Correlations between technological use and socio-educational variables

In contrast, no statistically significant relationship was identified between educational level and digital media use (r=0,22; p>0,05), indicating that formal schooling is not, in itself, a strong predictor of the degree or type of use of digital technologies in this sample. This situation reinforces Warschauer's argument that digital competencies depend not only on educational level, but also on the social environment, cultural capital, and opportunities for meaningful participation.[11]

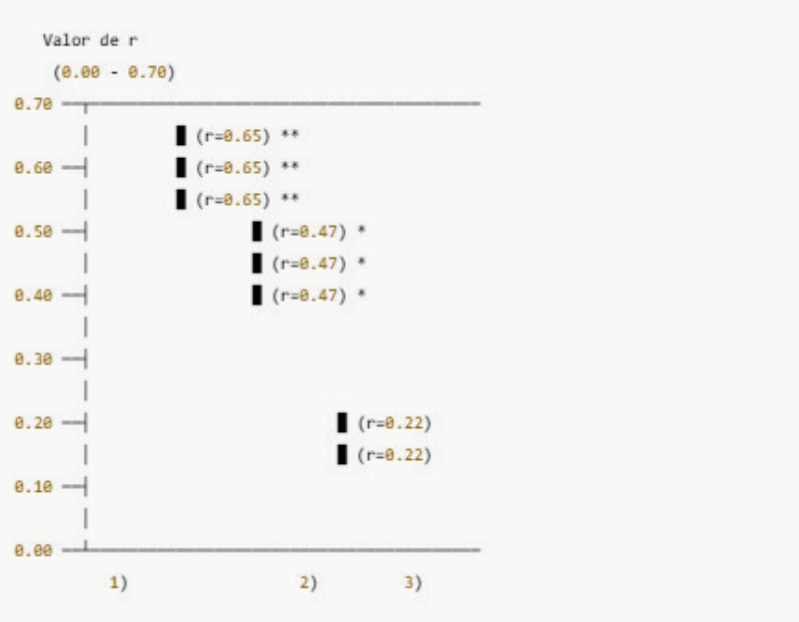

Figure 2. Relationship between internet access and technological skills

The results in figure 2 show the difference in magnitude in the correlation values between the variables studied. The Internet Access–Technological Skills pair , with a coefficient of r=0,65 (p<0,01), stands out as the strongest and most statistically significant relationship within the group. This finding suggests that the more available and frequent the Internet connection, the more noticeably young people tend to develop and improve their technological skills.

Second, the relationship between Social Media Use and Participation in Online Cultural Activities reached a value of r=0,47 (p<0,05), considered moderate but still significant. This result indicates that young people who make more intensive use of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok tend to be more willing to engage in digital cultural events (virtual concerts, online museums, or streamed conferences).

The results show that, although technological access is high among young people in Zone 5, significant challenges persist in terms of meaningful use, cultural creation, and educational participation in digital environments. These gaps raise the need for public policies that integrate digital inclusion, critical education, and the promotion of youth culture as interconnected dimensions of development.

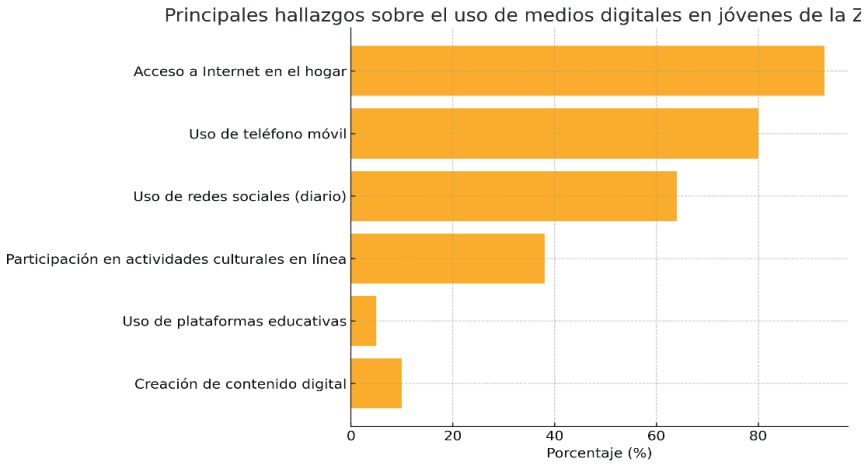

Figure 3. Main findings on the use of digital media

DISCUSSION

The results of this research show that access to digital media among young people in Zone 5 of Ecuador is high, but their cultural and educational appropriation has significant limitations. This situation coincides with previous studies in Latin America showing that, although connectivity rates have increased in recent years, a gap persists between technological access and meaningful use of ICTs.[4]

First, it is highlighted that the significant correlation between Internet access and technological skills ($r=0,65$; $p<0,01$) reinforces what Vasanth et al.[2] stated, who claim that connectivity is an essential enabler for the acquisition of digital skills. However, as Pérez[3] and Warschauer[14] warn, the availability of connection does not guarantee in itself a critical appropriation or the development of advanced skills, especially in contexts marked by structural inequalities.

On the other hand, the moderate correlation between social media use and digital cultural participation ($r=0,47$; $p<0,05$) suggests that digital platforms can be effective vehicles for accessing cultural content, provided that appropriate cultural mediation strategies are implemented. Jenkins[9] has argued that social media, when linked to creative or community projects, can generate participatory cultures with high pedagogical and expressive value.

The variable "Education Level" correlated with Digital Media Use had a coefficient of $r=0,22$; which was not statistically significant ($p>0,05$). This suggests that, in this sample of young people, educational attainment is not a determining factor in the adoption or intensity of use of digital tools. Therefore, other factors such as availability of financial resources, personal interests, and social environment may have a more direct influence on technology consumption patterns.

However, the low participation of young people in digital cultural activities (only 38 %), despite the high access to devices and platforms, indicates a disconnect between the digital ecosystem and cultural policies. This gap has already been noted by organizations such as UNESCO[17] and ECLAC[11], which have pointed out that the challenge of digital transformation is not limited to guaranteeing infrastructure, but to ensuring that said infrastructure is used to expand cultural and educational rights.

The lack of a statistically significant relationship between educational level and the use of digital media ($r=0,22$; $p>0,05$) reinforces what Livingstone[1] suggested, that the level of schooling is not a direct predictor of the advanced use of technologies, since other factors intervene, such as cultural capital, opportunities for digital socialization and the institutional offer of technological support.[29] In this sense, educational institutions must assume a more active role in the promotion of critical digital skills, beyond the simple incorporation of technological tools in the classroom.[11]

Likewise, the low incidence of activities such as content creation (10 %) and the use of educational platforms (5 %) reflects an underutilized potential of digital technologies in areas of symbolic production and autonomous learning. This trend has also been documented by authors such as Selwyn[12] and Cobo[13], who argue that much of youth use of ICTs is concentrated on consumer activities and not necessarily on creative or reflective processes.

These findings align with the concept of "differentiated participation," proposed by Jenkins and Ito[16], which suggests that not all young people access or participate in the same way in digital environments, due to economic, cultural or institutional gaps. Therefore, it is necessary to design public policies that recognize these differences and promote equitable conditions for digital cultural participation, with a territorial, generational and community focus.

In terms of public policy, this study reinforces the need to move towards full digital inclusion, understood not only as access, but also as an effective capacity for participation, production and critical appropriation of

technology. As Buckingham[1] indicates, digital literacy cannot be reduced to a set of technical skills, but must integrate ethical, social, aesthetic and political dimensions of ICT use.

Furthermore, the visibility of emerging youth cultural practices, such as the use of social networks, participation in virtual concerts or the creation of memes with a political meaning, requires a rethinking of traditional cultural policies, which have historically made invisible or underestimated the symbolic expressions of young people in digital environments.[21]

In this regard, it is acknowledged that this study presents certain limitations inherent to its cross-sectional and quantitative design, which impedes the establishment of causal relationships or the in-depth interpretation of the meanings that young people attribute to their digital practices. As part of a scientific research project being conducted at the State University of Milagro, Ecuador, this study was based on quantitative methodologies according to the defined approach. However, other parallel studies could incorporate qualitative methodologies such as digital ethnographies to understand the cultural trajectories, emotions, tensions, and aspirations associated with the digital lives of young people in Ecuador.

CONCLUSIONS

From a cultural perspective, the results indicate that young people's symbolic practices in the digital sphere respond more to the logic of rapid consumption and superficial interaction than to the critical and expressive appropriation of digital resources. This raises the need to strengthen public cultural policies, with an inclusive approach to new forms of youth expression, often relegated or stigmatized due to their ephemeral, informal, or decentralized nature.

In terms of public policy, a comprehensive approach to digital inclusion is proposed that integrates infrastructure, education, and culture. This approach should include the development of critical digital skills, the promotion of local digital culture, funding for youth initiatives in virtual environments, and the coordination of institutional actors (schools, local governments, cultural groups, and technology platforms).

The significant correlation between internet access and the development of technological skills confirms that digital infrastructure remains a necessary condition for fostering digital competencies. However, the limited incidence of practices such as content creation, the use of educational platforms, or participation in virtual cultural events suggests that access alone does not guarantee full integration into global digital culture.

Furthermore, the lack of association between educational level and digital media use underscores the need to rethink school and pedagogical frameworks from a critical digital literacy perspective. Schools must become spaces for technological mediation, not only in technical terms but also in symbolic and cultural terms, where young people can interpret, create, and transform their digital environments from a reflective, ethical, and participatory perspective.

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None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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