Understanding the Reasons That Lead Young People in Bogota to Identify as Atheist and Agnostic

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Abstract: This article uses the frameworks provided by Max Weber’s comprehensive theory to offer insights into why a growing sector of young people residing in Bogota now identifies as either atheist or agnostic. This research attempts to understand why this subgroup rejects or has distanced itself from the Catholic tradition, which is still dominant in Colombia. Quantitative and qualitative data from a survey, along with a series of in-depth interviews of young people aged between 14 and 21 years, is analyzed and interpreted to achieve this purpose.

Keywords: youth; secularization; agnostic; atheist; Bogota

1. Introduction

In Colombia, as in most Latin American countries, the population that identifies as atheist or agnostic is growing, especially among young people and those living in large cities (Beltrán and Larotta 2020; Beltrán and Rodríguez-Vargas 2022). This article aims to offer insights to understand them better, since this subgroup has not been studied extensively.

The research is guided by the following questions, among others: What motivates young people in Bogota to choose an identity of atheism and agnosticism? What distinguishes atheists from agnostics? What does it mean to them to be atheist or agnostic? How do atheists and agnostics orient themselves in relation to the values and beliefs of a traditionally Catholic society? Are atheists and agnostics interested in the religious or the spiritual realm?

In methodological terms, the research follows the frameworks provided by Max Weber’s comprehensive theory (Weber 2001). In other words, it interprets the information provided by the actors, in this case, those interviewed, with an end goal of capturing the motivations, values, and connections of meaning that guide their actions. This research attempts to understand the reasons that lead more and more young people in Bogota to identify as atheists and agnostics and to understand what meaning they give these identities. In addition, the study attempts to understand the way in which this population positions itself in relation to certain ideas or themes that are considered inherent to religion, such as values, beliefs, and religious practices.

In empirical terms, the research presents and interprets quantitative and qualitative information provided by the surveyed sample of young people (between the ages of 14 and 21) living in Bogota. The research focuses on this group since previous surveys have shown that the increase in atheism and agnosticism in Colombia is associated with sociodemographic variables, especially with age and gender (Beltrán 2013; Latinobarómetro 2014; Beltrán and Larotta 2020). These investigations are consistent in that among the subgroup of young people (e.g., aged between 18 and 25 years), the frequency of those identifying as atheists and agnostics increases notoriously. However, for various reasons (which may be both methodological and legal), these studies do not include a sample size of people under 18 years of age. In addition, they do not investigate in detail why young people are attracted to atheism and agnosticism more than any other age group. The quantitative
information is the result of a survey that consulted 710 young people of different socioeconomic statuses living in the urban area of Bogota. The sample design was randomized and simple and was measured on a total population of 573,130 young people aged between 14 and 21 years living in Bogota (according to Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística 2018). The data sets are equal for men and women of all socioeconomic levels and from all locations in the city. The results offer a reliability of 95.5% and a margin of error of 3% for males and females. The data collection was conducted between November 2020 and March 2021.

In terms of religious identity, 41.8% of the young people consulted identified as Catholic, 23.1% as believers not affiliated with any religion; 16.1% identified as Protestant (predominantly within the Evangelical Pentecostal movement), 1.7% identified with other religious identities; 8.7% as agnostic; and 8.6% as an atheist. These last two groups make up a total of 17.3%, corresponding to 123 respondents. This article presents data on those who identified themselves in these last two groups: atheist or agnostic.

The qualitative information was obtained from semistructured interviews with 16 young people (8 men and 8 women) between the ages of 14 and 21 who identified as atheists or agnostics. The sample was chosen at random, and the interviewees came from varying socioeconomic levels in Bogota.

The requirements established by Colombian law were considered when conducting the surveys and interviews. Therefore, informed consent was obtained from the respondents and their parents or guardians. All the information was collected and analyzed with respect for their privacy. Therefore, their names have been modified in the presentation of the data.

We do not offer a definition of “atheism” or “agnosticism” in this article. As already mentioned, this research, among other things, aims to highlight the meaning of these identities for young people in Bogota. Thus, based on the responses of those consulted, the reader will find insights for understanding how young atheists and agnostics in Bogota define and give meaning to these identities. Nevertheless, in the conclusions, we will return to this issue and summarize certain ideas about the atheist–agnostic distinction. This analysis is firmly based on the results and interpretation of the information gathered. Similarly, as already mentioned, we are guided by the frameworks of comprehensive theory and the orientations offered by Max Weber in his studies on the sociology of religion (Weber 2014).

2. Theoretical Frameworks

This research was guided by some theoretical frameworks that allow us to support the main working hypotheses. As already mentioned, the main theories used are drawn from Max Weber and his comprehensive sociology theory (Weber 2001, 2014), as well as some of its later developments. In the case of Weber’s types of action, the set of actions related to assuming atheistic and agnostic identities can be considered rational actions with subjective meaning. In other words, voluntary and reflexive actions are sustained by motives intelligible to the actor who assumes them. For this reason, the meaning of these actions can be understood and explained by the researcher if he assumes the appropriate attitude and perspective.

According to Weber (2014), in societies in the process of industrialization and increasing levels of bureaucratization, rational action tends to become dominant (over traditional or emotional actions) and affects all dimensions of life. In other words, acting rationally constitutes a value. This idea was adopted by some secularization theorists, who included the process of rationalization as one of the dimensions or facets of secularization (Wilson 1976a, 1976b; Tschannen 1992). The rise of rationalization as a value allows for those aspects that actors took for granted in traditional societies (e.g., the hereditary character of religious identity) to acquire a subjective and reflexive nature (Luckmann 1967; Giddens 1991). For some secularization scholars, rationalization includes the process of scientization, a process that allows religion as the dominant form of knowledge to be displaced by science (Tschannen 1992). In the West, one of the most recurrent debates in this regard has been
around Darwin’s theory of evolution. Insofar as, for various Christian sectors, this theory questions the biblical account of creation and, in this way, also questions the existence of the created God, it has been the subject of debate.

To the extent to which the educational system in each society differentiates itself and gains autonomy with respect to the religious sphere, the process of rationalization and scientization is favored. An autonomous educational system facilitates the circulation of ideas that occasionally question or come into conflict with traditional religious beliefs (Wilson 1966; Tschannen 1992). More recently, the complete liberalization of the market of ideas (of their production, distribution, and consumption) associated with the widespread use of new communication technologies, especially the Internet, has contributed to undermining the solidity of religious traditions as socially constructed realities (on reality as a social construction see: Berger and Luckmann 1966).

This process of rationalization is accompanied by the growth in modern societies (or societies in the process of modernization) of a so-called culture of individualism, in which the actor orients many of his or her actions towards a search for “authenticity” (Taylor 1991). In other words, in an individualistic culture, freedom and the right to express opinions and make choices in matters that relate to practically all dimensions of life (e.g., what can be considered moral or ethical, what is the meaning of life, or what goals are worth pursuing) gain legitimacy. Even matters that were once considered sacred (and therefore unquestionable), such as the meaning and veracity of religious beliefs, are subject to scrutiny, opinion, and subjective tastes. To the extent that societies undergoing these processes also experience, in general, a process of social pluralization, that is, a multiplication of offers of meaning (Berger 1967; Berger and Luckmann 1997), the possibility of preferring and choosing certain religious beliefs and practices based on subjective criteria gains legitimacy. These choices occur within the framework of a growing menu of options that include beliefs from diverse religious traditions that the actor feels empowered to blend at his or her convenience. Moreover, this menu also includes the option of not believing (Berger 1967; Hervieu-Léger 1999; Stolz et al. 2013).

During these processes, religious identities cease to be a family heritage that individuals strives to preserve and pass on; and they are increasingly associated with a subjective quest or a personal project. In this sense, religious identities tend to be not only reflexive but also provisional. That is, susceptible to reconsideration as the needs, tastes, and expectations of the individual actor change (Giddens 1991; Hervieu-Léger 1999; Stolz et al. 2013).

Rationalization (including scientization) and the consolidation of an individualistic culture facilitate a process of “worldliness”, which has obvious ethical implications (Tschannen 1992). To the extent that science displaces religion as the dominant form of knowledge and technical developments demonstrate their efficiency in mastering nature and solving practical problems, social actors increasingly assume an intraworldly ethical orientation (Weber 1998, 2014; Tschannen 1992). Broad sectors of society withdraw their interest in matters related to the afterlife (such as the salvation of the soul and eternal life) while investing more and more energy and time in the affairs of this life and this world (such as professional fulfillment, health care, and the pursuit of well-being) (Wilson 1966, 1976a, 1976b).

Finally, all the processes mentioned above, which are usually related to secularization and modernization (rationalization, differentiation and autonomy of the various social spheres, the pluralization of offers of meaning, the strengthening of an individualistic culture, and the increased legitimacy of an intraworldly ethical orientation), in our opinion, favor the social plausibility of atheist and agnostic identities. At the same time, they weaken the plausibility of tradition as a monolithic, solid, and unquestionable social reality. By social plausibility, we refer to the social conditions or requirements that make it possible and legitimate to maintain certain beliefs, values, and actions within a society (Berger 1967; Berger and Luckmann 1966, 1997).
3. Literature Review

In using the identifier “atheist” and “agnostic”, there should be no confusion with those who are “unaffiliated” or “nonreligious”. The latter categories, although they include atheists and agnostics, are broader insofar as they also include people who hold religious beliefs and practices but who do not identify with or maintain membership in any church, religious denomination, or faith community (Mallimaci 2013; Mora Duro 2017; Rabbia 2017; Esquivel et al. 2020).

In Colombia, the percentage of people who identify as atheists and agnostics is increasing, especially among young people, and more noticeably in large cities. This is happening even though more of these individuals were raised in families within the Catholic tradition (Beltrán and Larotta 2020; Beltrán 2019). Similar trends can be traced in other Latin American countries, such as Argentina (Mallimaci 2013; Esquivel et al. 2020) and Mexico (Mora Duro 2017; Ariel Corpus 2019).

In a survey conducted in 2019 among a sample of young people in eleventh grade attending public schools in Bogota, 13.6% of respondents identified as atheist or agnostic (Beltrán and Rodríguez-Vargas 2022). Another study that consulted the opinion of eleventh graders at an educational institution in Bogota offers a similar percentage of atheists and agnostics: 11% (7% atheist and 4% agnostic) (Roncancio Salinas 2014). Comparable trends can be observed in research conducted in other Colombian cities. In a survey of college students in Cali, 5.1% identified as atheists and 10.4% as agnostic (Torres Bryon 2018). In a national survey of young people aged between 15 and 29 years, which did not include the categories atheist or agnostic, 73% identified as believers and 27% as nonbelievers (Gutiérrez Bonilla et al. 2021).

Similarly, the World Values Survey presents the evolution of the percentages of non-religious people in Colombia, although it does not specify the percentage of atheists or agnostics. According to this source, those who identify as nonreligious have increased steadily since 1998, when they constituted 6.8% of the population; in 2005, they were already 13.2%; in 2012, 21.4%; and in 2018, 46.5% (Inglehart et al. 2022). It should be reiterated that although this figure includes those who identify as both atheists and agnostics, it also includes believers not affiliated with a religion, that is, people who, although they believe in the Christian God (or in some other deity), or maintain religious practices and beliefs, do not identify with a religious tradition or do not maintain membership in a community of believers.

Atheist and agnostic identities are not free of ambiguities. To some extent, this seems to be related to the fact that these identities are just gaining recognition in Colombian society. For example, Beltrán and Rodriguez-Vargas (2022) point out that some young people who identify as atheists and agnostics hold certain religious beliefs, for example, the belief in reincarnation. Furthermore, although most atheists and agnostics deny or question the existence of a deity, they mostly reject the existence of the Christian God (or the God of the Bible). Rather than denying the existence of a deity, some seem to adopt these identities as a way of questioning or distancing themselves from organized religion, especially the Christian tradition and churches (Beltrán and Rodriguez-Vargas 2022; Beltrán 2019).

There are many causes for the increase of self-identified atheists and agnostics in Colombia. As previously mentioned, in pluralist societies or societies in the process of pluralization, these identities become more plausible (Berger 1967). In other words, the social conditions exist for it to be legal and legitimate to identify as an atheist or agnostic. In the case of Colombia, this tolerability is related to various macrosocial phenomena such as the urbanization of the country, increased access to formal education, the globalization of communications, the growth of secular social spaces (such as liberal schools and public universities), the rise of new technologies and spread of information, and the Colombian Constitution that has governed the country since 1991 (Beltrán 2013).

These changes have allowed a growing portion of the Colombian population to access ideas that do not align with the Catholic tradition and imagination, and in turn, they have favored the growth of an individualistic culture in which the autonomy of the individual
is valued. Thus, in Colombia, as in most countries linked to the Christian tradition, it is increasingly legitimate to consider religious identity as a choice to be made based on one’s personal preferences, just as the percentage of the population that considers inherited religious identity as something to be preserved is decreasing (Beltrán et al. 2022). In Latin America, between the various religious identities to choose from, atheism and agnosticism seem to be gaining legitimacy (Da Costa 2017; Fuentes Belgrave et al. 2021; Beltrán et al. 2022).

Recent changes in the structure of Latin American families seem to favor an increase in the number of people who identify as atheists and agnostics. Research in Chile and Argentina has shown that the increase in family models (single-parent, blended, same-parent, which in turn are accompanied by changes in gender roles, the definition of authority figures, and norms) make it easier for new generations to experience early childhood development in less religious family contexts, which in turn increases the likelihood that they will opt for atheism, agnosticism, or indifference to religion (Bahamondes González et al. 2020; Giménez Béliveau and Mosqueira 2011). A similar trend can be observed in Europe or North America (Zuckerman 2014). On the other hand, Fuentes Belgrave et al. (2021) in Costa Rica offer data indicating that the probability of opting for “nonbelief” increases among those who have suffered conflicts or ruptures in the family environment (for example, a divorce or separation of their parents).

In general, the increase of atheists and agnostics seems to be encouraged by recent changes in the institutions responsible for ensuring the transfer (or reproduction) of the faith, such as the traditional family and Catholic parishes (Fuentes Belgrave et al. 2021). Among the younger generations, questioning the legitimacy and authority of the Catholic Church and other Christian churches as sources of guidance in religious and moral matters is also more frequent. These doubts, it seems, increase due to the numerous scandals involving Catholic priests and other religious leaders, especially those related to sexual abuse (Bahamondes González et al. 2020).

On the other hand, research conducted in Uruguay shows that the unrestricted access to information made available by new technology, as well as the possibility of establishing networks and new ways of socializing through the Internet, encourage the legitimacy of atheism and agnosticism. Now, in addition to establishing themselves as collective identities, many constitute nuclei for new forms of associating and creating new communities (Rabbia 2017), a phenomenon that has also been observed in the United States (McClure 2017).

Studies in Peru and Uruguay offer evidence suggesting that a good portion of people who identify as atheists do so after a process of reflection that includes philosophical considerations (Romero and Lecaros 2017; Da Costa et al. 2019). For these individuals, reasoning plays an important role in choosing atheism or agnosticism. Their arguments usually include specific criticisms of religious institutions. However, this same research indicates that some people choose atheism and agnosticism because of a feeling of disillusionment or frustration with religion at some point in their lives. In this case, the motivations for abandoning religious beliefs and practices also include emotional dimensions.

In Colombia, as in other Latin American countries, atheists and agnostics do not constitute a homogeneous group, and those who choose these identities do not necessarily adhere to one group or community. However, very often, those who adopt these identities must face conflicts with their families, insofar as this decision implies assuming a break with traditions (Romero and Lecaros 2017; Beltrán 2019; Esquivel et al. 2020). This situation can also be observed in Europe or North America (Zuckerman 2014).

Although most atheists and agnostics deny or question the existence of a deity, some maintain practices that could be considered spiritual or religious such as yoga and meditation. In other words, many find themselves embracing practices that involve self-awareness and introspection or that are associated with the pursuit of physical or emotional health, or, in general, searching for well-being (Rabbia 2017; Beltrán and Larotta 2020; Beltrán and Rodriguez-Vargas 2022).

Although Christian values still dominate Colombian culture in matters such as family and sexuality, atheists and agnostics are more likely to question these values. Therefore,
among them, there is a greater acceptance of legal and social initiatives aimed at the
decriminalization of abortion, the legalization of euthanasia, the promotion of gender
equality, and the recognition of LGBTIQ+ rights (Torres Bryon 2018; Beltrán 2019; Beltrán
and Larotta 2020). These trends can also be observed in other Latin American countries
(Mallimaci 2013; Esquivel et al. 2020; Rabbia 2017).

4. Results

As already mentioned, 8.7% of the young people surveyed identified as agnostic, and
8.6% as atheist; a total of 17.3%. Using a survey conducted in Bogotá among ninth-grade
high school students in 2006 as a point of comparison (Beltrán 2008), the percentage of
atheists and agnostics among young people went from 5.3% in 2006 to 17.3% in 2020. In
other words, it grew 12 percentage points in 14 years.

When distinguished by sex, it was found that 60.7% of the atheists and 56.5% of the
agnostics were men, which decreased to 39.3% and 43.5%, respectively, among women.
In relation to their socioeconomic status, 19.4% of agnostics came from a lower socioeconomic
status, 71% from the mid-level status, and 4.8% from the upper status. Of atheists, 39.3%
came from a lower socioeconomic status, 52.5% from a mid-level status, and 8.2% from the
upper status. A total of 73.8% of the atheists and 75.8% of the agnostics had abandoned the
Catholic religion. In addition, 75.4% of atheists and 82.3% of agnostics stated that the rest
of their family did not share their position on religion.

Of the 16 respondents, 9 identified as agnostics and 7 as atheists. Among those identi-
fying as atheists, all of them come from families with a Catholic background, but, in general,
their parents were not practicing Catholics. Among those identifying as agnostics, 4 came
from Catholic families, 1 from an evangelical family, and 4 from multi-faith households
(2 had a Catholic mother and an evangelical father, 1 had a Catholic mother and an atheist
father, and 1 had an agnostic mother and an atheist grandfather).

Among the interviewees, the decision to identify as atheists or agnostics was part
of a process spanning years and often began in childhood. During the interviews, it was
also found that this process was accompanied by a feeling of nonconformity regarding
inherited religious teachings, fueled by either personal experiences that, in their opinion,
contradicted these traditions or accessing information that questioned these traditions.

…around when I started ninth [or] tenth grade, […] you know] you’re at that
age, and the philosophy teacher comes and brings Nietzsche and it’s like wow!
[…] ’God is dead and doesn’t exist.’ And then […] after that there was] an abrupt
change […]. I started to inform [myself] a little more, and […] well […] I realized
then and there that], there are things that don’t make sense to me…(Javier,
19 years old, agnostic).

…I was very young […] but […] I started to question a lot of things. In my
group of friends at school, most of them were Christians, and […] I remember
talking to them [and] they told me that things…like, paranormal things that had
happened to them. And I always thought about my experiences—nothing had
happened to me. And I started to think: ‘I am not going to believe anything until
I can see it.’ (Lina, 20 years old, agnostic).

If we look at these data using Weber’s (2014) theory, during this process of moving
towards atheism and agnosticism, the rational dimension is important. These young people
do not find evidence that allows them to confirm the existence of the Christian God or the
existence of other deities. Nor do they find reasons to trust the Bible as a revealed book.
On the contrary, they often find Christian doctrine and biblical accounts contradictory
and incoherent.

Why does evil exist if God is supposed to be good and omnipotent? Well, then,
he can do away with evil. But if he didn’t put an end to evil, is it because he’s not
all that good? That was one of [my] main conflicts: to think […] that] God might
not be all that good. And in the Bible, [...] there are] very vengeful [...] events [...] and], very bloody ones. (Diego, 19 years old, agnostic).

Sometimes I have discussions [...] about] these issues with adults. And these conversations were the ones that led me to think that this deity [the God of the Bible] doesn’t make sense. Because this deity is supposed to be merciful, but these people say that, if you don’t believe, he is going to [...] send you to hell to be tortured. (Daniela, 16 years old, agnostic).

I understand that the Bible is an important book, and besides being a religious book, it is a historical book. But I find it very inconsistent. For [certain people] to base their beliefs on [this] book that had many authors, and was written a long time ago, with various values, many years ago [...] I think we must understand that this was another culture and another society…(Mariana, 18 years old, atheist).

For some interviewees, a particular event triggered a crisis concerning inherited religious beliefs. Several mentioned that being confined due to the COVID-19 pandemic was the event that triggered this crisis.

There was a time when my sister got very sick. And one night my mother arrived [...] very sad, because my sister had undergone an operation, and the operation was very invasive. [...] I remember [that...] I was sitting on the bed, stunned. And my mom told me [...] ‘You have to pray.’ And my first thought was: ‘And why [...] hell is [God] doing these things [...] if my mom is so devout, so attached to religion’ [...]? I couldn’t find [...] a logical explanation. And that’s when I think I started to be an atheist. But it was more atheist by fashion, until [...] I was able to say, ‘I am agnostic.’ (Miguel, 19 years old, agnostic).

...I went [to a] Catholic school. So, at the time, I became a Catholic too. Up until a year ago, I stopped being Catholic. And basically [...] it was [...] in] the pandemic, [which] was [...] a very long time to think, because I was alone. Then, [...] I began to doubt religion, [...] it wasn’t only [about] the God of Christianity, [...] but about] religion in general. [...] I saw [religion...] as a form of self-motivation, so to speak, that people create to deal with their reality, rather than [seeing it as] something real…(Javier, 19 years old, agnostic).

According to the survey data, 48% of those who were agnostic and 44% of those who were atheists mentioned “no religion that satisfied them” as a reason for abandoning their religious tradition. Furthermore, 41% of agnostics and 39% of atheists said they left their religious tradition as an expression of their “rejection of the dogmas and impositions of the churches.” Among the reasons for abandoning religious tradition, the difficulties in making sense of Catholic rituals and dogmas were the most important.

I remember my grandmother used to take me to mass when I was about six or four years old, and I thought it was the most boring thing in the world. Although I was very respectful then. I never felt very committed to Catholicism. (Mariana, 18 years old, atheist).

My mother even forced me to go to catechism classes. ...I remember [...] I went, and I was bored out of my mind. I didn’t like what I saw. They said that we were already sinners because of our original sin, practically just for being born. And that began to annoy me. [That and] also because of some [philosophy] reading I had done because I really like philosophy. (Laura, 18 years old, agnostic).

...When I was about eight years old, [...] they] told me that you couldn’t move around during mass [...]. I started to see [God] as a very punitive God: [...] ‘If you don’t do this you are bad and you have to ask me for forgiveness.’ So, I feel that was something [that was] boring. (Carlos, 18 years old, atheist).
For other interviewees, the reasons that triggered the process of moving away from the Catholic religion included their reflections on the behavior of believers, particularly practicing Catholics. For them, the behavior they witnessed was not consistent with what they said they believed. They find the sexual abuses and scandals involving Catholic priests particularly serious.

When I was a little girl [...] someone [...] molested me and [...] groped me. [...] I saw that this person [...] knew very clearly that there was a God, [...] and he went to church on Sundays because he was Catholic. And I said [...] ‘That doesn’t make any sense if you are hurting someone else.’ (Laura, 18 years old, agnostic).

And in the Catholic Church it also seems to me that some priests do not do what they are supposed to do. Because how is it possible for a priest to go and rape children? And another thing that bothers me a lot is that I can do a lot of bad things and then go to confession with a priest, pray, and do the bad things again, and go to confession again. And [...] I’m going to go to heaven because [...] I went to confession and did my time of penance, even though I’ve been a piece of garbage my whole life. (Mariana, 18 years old, atheist).

In the process of moving away from their inherited religious tradition, young people seek answers to their concerns from sources they consider reliable. The following reasons are worth mentioning: (1) philosophy classes at school, (2) various readings, and (3) the information they can freely access on social media.

1. Philosophy Classes at School

Well, we have philosophy classes at school. And I started to read about existentialism, and I found it very interesting. [...] I realized that one can live without being so dependent on the existence of a god, and still live a good life... (Natalia, 18 years old, agnostic).

When I was in school my favorite class was philosophy. There was a time when we read Albert Camus and all about this absurd... myth of Sisyphus, and for me [...] it was a super abrupt shock. [...] I went into depression when I read it, because I never made sense of the actions I was doing, and I couldn’t make sense of life. The fact that I feel this emptiness and that I couldn’t fill it with a superior being, and then to get involved in this whole philosophical world and to see that there is no meaning, that it’s all absurd. That was very hard for me... (Laura, 18 years old, agnostic).

2. Various Readings

It was in the context of the pandemic that I began to think about life itself, which has [...] no meaning...[...] I was driven by [...] Nietzsche, [...] Freud, those kinds of philosophers. [For them] religiosity [...] is] that more mental dimension and I quite identified with that. (Camilo, 17 years old, atheist).

I read a book called “Existentialism is a Humanism” by [Jean-Paul] Sartre, which talked a lot [...] about existence, and that many people believe in a superior being simply to give themselves inner peace, and [...] assume responsibility for their own actions. So, well, that’s always ringing in my ears [...] (Alex, 17 years old, agnostic).

3. Freely Accessible Information on social media

I grew up watching a lot of Discovery Channel and all the science shows [...] and I would always [...] watch astronomy documentaries, and I would also watch Stephen Hawking documentaries. And I was like, ‘I don’t understand how all this can exist, and in the Bible, it says that there is only [...] what [that] God created’ [...] So, I began to have conflicts until I realized that it
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is not necessary for there to be a god to create everything. I prefer to believe [in] the Big Bang... (Mariana, 18 years old, atheist).

When I was a child, I followed my family’s beliefs. But I saw some videos where they explained certain things about the Bible, and [it] didn’t make much sense. For example, when you pray to God and you ask him for a lot of things, but sometimes [he] doesn’t respond. That video came from a YouTuber that I followed, and he doesn’t believe in any of that, and he believes [...] in science, and he made a video of ‘50 [Reasons] Why God Doesn’t Exist.’ And so, I watched the whole thing, and he was pretty much right! ... [So, from] then on I stopped believing. His name is Dallas Review, he’s from Spain. (Sofia, 16, atheist).

Based on the theoretical orientations of Berger and Luckmann (1966, 1997), we can affirm that access to all this information weakens young people’s trust in tradition. Moreover, this erodes the strength and validity of the Catholic tradition as a socially constructed reality. On the other hand, this new situation of complete liberalization in the exchange of ideas invites young people to take sides to decide which source of knowledge seems more trustworthy to them: on the one hand, science and, on the other, religion.

According to the survey results, 40.7% of identifying atheists and agnostics mentioned “disinterest in religion” among the reasons for abandoning religious beliefs; 28.5% stated that this decision was related to “scientific arguments,” and 26% said that it was due to “philosophical arguments.” When asked about the origin of the human being, 87.1% of those who identified as agnostics and 82% of those who identified as atheists considered that the human being is “a product of evolution and owes his existence to the natural selection of the species.” On the contrary, most Catholics surveyed (84.2%) believed that they owe their existence to “God’s creation”. These tendencies were confirmed by those who partook in the interviews.

... both things, science and religion, kind of clash. [...] When reading about how life was created, about the evolution [of species], let’s [just]say that [the Bible’s account] didn’t make much sense... (Carlos, 18 years old, atheist).

Science is incompatible with faith. Because science looks for facts, things that can be proven. [...] If it were possible to prove the existence of God it would be very interesting, but as it is not... (Mariana, 18 years old, atheist).

... The Big Bang is a theory; it is still a theory. But it makes much more sense to me [...] We already found the predecessors of the human being, that is, [...] the chain of evolution. And then the Adam and Eve thing, I don’t think so [...]. (Julián, 18 years old, atheist).

These data lead us to assess the role of rationalization and particularly of scientification as one of the dimensions of secularization (Tschannen 1992). It seems that free access to scientific ideas and, in general, to information that questions the Catholic worldview contributes to the social plausibility of atheist and agnostic identities (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 1997).

4.1. Awareness of a New Identity

At some point in their process of questioning and discovery, young atheists and agnostics make the decision to no longer identify as Catholics or as believers. Others simply realize that they no longer believe. Some admit that this was not easy for them to accept. Some seem to be able to grasp what it means to break with tradition. Or rather, what it means to break with the “chain of memory” within the community (especially with their families and friends), particularly in emotional and ethical terms (Hervieu-Léger 1993). In addition, they then face the fact that, in the context of a society with a Catholic tradition, being an atheist or agnostic has a negative, “stigmatized” connotation (Zuckerman 2014).
Actually, I would ask my friends when we would have conversations […] ‘What happened when you stopped [believing]?’ And there’s like fear. […] Also, in my case, I was afraid to say that I didn’t believe in God. Because I thought that [something] was going to happen to me. (Emma, 18, atheist).

…So, criticisms from my family […]. They are always refuting everything I say. That this what I believe is wrong. ‘Why don’t you believe in God?’ […] They tell me that everything is going to turn out badly because [to them] I need God’s help [to prevent bad things from happening]. (Laura, 18 years old, agnostic).

At first, it came as quite a shock, especially to my mother, who is quite religious. […] She had some sort of fear. […] That […] as important to her as her son would turn away from God, was something quite difficult. However, I sat down and talked with her. We reached certain agreements, and, in the end, she was able to accept [the reality] … (Javier, 19 years old, agnostic).

Furthermore, in a city where it is common for Catholic ceremonies to be celebrated in schools and colleges, even in state schools (Beltrán 2020), young people who identify as atheists or agnostics may face intolerance or discrimination in school. This situation is particularly accentuated in Catholic schools.

When I was in elementary school […] all the people in the classroom were believers and of the same religion. So, the whole class would discriminate against me for being an atheist. When I gave my rationale, or simply didn’t stop to pray, everyone looked at me and said, ‘Why don’t you believe in God?’ But in a derogatory way, that made me feel bad. (Daniela, 16 years old, agnostic).

There were also the [problems around…] celebrating […] Ash Wednesday and all that. […] Well, if you didn’t participate, they called your house to say […] ‘Your daughter is rebellious.’… (Natalia, 18 years old, agnostic).

Others recognized that to this day, in certain situations, affirming their identity as atheist or agnostic is difficult as it triggers uncomfortable or confrontational situations. Often, it also carries some form of social ban or ostracization.

I remember [one time] we were with my boyfriend’s family at the table eating, and his grandmother asked me: Hi, what an embarrassing question but, are you Catholic?’ And of course, […] it’s not because I feel ashamed for being an atheist. But […] with older people, one understands that they can be very stubborn. So, the truth is that I was not able to answer truthfully […]. Well, I said […] ‘Yes, my whole family is Catholic’ […] I thought it was horrible […] that I was not able to say [that…I am an atheist]. (Paula, 21 years old, Atheist).

4.2. What Does It Mean to Be an Atheist or an Agnostic?

Atheists define their new identity around a denial of the existence of any deity, especially the Christian God or the God of the Bible. According to the results of the survey, 45.2% of agnostics do not know if God exists, 29% consider that the existence of God is not important to them, and 9.7% are convinced that God does not exist. On the other hand, slightly more than half of the atheists (52.5%) do not consider the existence of God to be important, 26.2% do not know if God exists, and 13.1% are sure that God does not exist.

These tendencies were also confirmed throughout the interviews. While all atheists denied the existence of any deity, agnostics often argued that they did not know if God exists or that they had no evidence that would allow them to affirm or deny the existence of any deity. Some agnostics even stated that they were open to accepting the existence of “something” resembling a deity, but some of them stated that the word “god” is not adequate to name that thing.

Atheists and agnostics frequently coincide in rejecting the existence of a creator god (who orders and controls the universe) and of a personal god (concerned with human events or willing to intervene in history).
For me, being an atheist means not believing in the existence of a god of any religion. (Paula, 21 years old, atheist).

I consider myself a person who does not believe that there is a superior entity managing the world and the universe, or anything like that. [...] I simply believe that there is no superior being controlling anything. (Camilo, 17 years old, atheist).

Well, I have my principles [...]. I want to follow the scientific method. [...] I have no proof that [...] a deity] exists. But neither do I have proof that it does not exist [...] So, for me [...] to be] agnostic is simply to say: 'I don’t know, I’m not sure’. But as soon as I get some proof, I will be ready to change my position. (Javier, 19 years old, agnostic).

I don’t really believe in any deity. [...] But I consider myself an agnostic person because I don’t totally deny the idea of God. Although it seems a little impossible to me that there is a supreme god, [...] father, creator of everything. That seems to me [...] not very credible. (Laura, 18 years old, agnostic).

For me, being agnostic means that something exists. It doesn’t necessarily have to be God, it can be an energy... (Lina, 20 years old, agnostic).

Young atheists and agnostics often relate their new identity to greater freedom and the possibility of exploring other realms of meaning. For them, even as important as it is to deny or question the existence of a deity, their new identity implies that they are no longer defined by a specific tradition. To some extent, being an atheist or agnostic allows them to reclaim their autonomy to believe what they want to or what seems more rational, more relevant, or more coherent to them. In a social context in which the culture of individualism is becoming dominant, it is possible that these decisions allow young people to reclaim their own authenticity (Taylor 1991). On the other hand, none of the interviewees regretted the rupture of communion with the Catholic community. Rather, some celebrated it as an achievement, a form of freedom. Moreover, they referred to the atheist community as a better community, perhaps meaning more authentic.

What I like most [about being agnostic] is that there are many possibilities. [...] Later on, [...] I would like to take time to study each religion [...] very carefully and meticulously [...]. For example, the culture [and religion of those who practice] [...] Buddhism. I would really like to learn about them. I feel like you can choose what you like the most. (Laura, 18 years old, agnostic).

I like [...] the fact that I don’t have to go to any church and the fact that I can be clear in my thinking, even if it’s not the same as other atheists. Because I feel that every atheist has their own way of thinking. I think it’s a nicer community than [that of] the Catholics or [the] Christians. [...] I feel that Catholicism is more imposed and harsher. Also, they are very reluctant to listen [to] other people and to question their own beliefs. (Mariana, 18 years old, atheist).

Agnostics, especially, often associate this perceived freedom with the possibility of freeing themselves from religious rituals that they find meaningless. They now have more time to do the things they like or things that they find meaningful. Moreover, they feel that their range of activities has broadened to the extent that they no longer base their actions on religious values.

What I like most [about being agnostic] is that I don’t invest my time in unnecessary things, like going to church and being there praising a god. Now, I can do other things that make me a better person [...] I do research on the subjects I like; I exercise and practice basketball [...]. I have a lot of time to do the things I like. (Leonardo, 16 years old, agnostic).

[...] no longer must practice the things that were done in religion, [which] I was not comfortable with. So, [...] being agnostic [...] freed me from [...] those
kinds of things. [Now...] I have [greater] ease in expressing my thoughts, [...] I’m not afraid that someone [...] from my religion is going to say [...] ‘But that’s not right!’ (Natalia, 18 years old, agnostic).

What I like most about being agnostic is that I don’t have any pressure to believe in something, or that I must go somewhere. Clearly there are criticisms [...] towards people who don’t want to belong to any religion. But really [being agnostic] makes me feel free, and good. (Lina, 20 years old, agnostic).

4.3. Ethical and Moral Guidelines

After atheists and agnostics have renounced belief in any deity and the ethical and moral prescriptions of their church and tradition, what criteria do they use as a basis for their actions and decisions? Some, although they have renounced God and the Christian doctrine, still consider certain Christian values legitimate. Others insist that belief in some sort of deity or in Christian doctrines is not necessary to maintain an ethical life. Additionally, there are those who—as soon as they no longer depend on a god and his goodwill to help them or on possible punishments for their sins in this life or the afterlife—now assume themselves to be more autonomous, more conscious, and more responsible for the consequences of their actions.

Concerning the last idea, 93.5% of the agnostics and 82% of the atheists surveyed consider that success or failure in their lives depends exclusively on their personal effort, while for most Catholics (69.7%), success depends on the will of God. These ideas also emerged among those interviewed.

It bothers me to think that people say they are believers in God or [that they are] Catholic because they need a God to tell them [...] how to behave. [...] I don’t think so. [...] I think that one [...] can have certain values, [...] and not believe in a god. [...] I can be a good person without thinking that if I don’t do this or that, I’m going to be punished [or rewarded] in heaven. [...] I am very conscious and respectful of human beings and nature. (Mariana, 18 years old, atheist).

I feel that when I stopped believing, it took a lot of pressure off me. [...] Generally, it was like if you didn’t go to confession then this [bad thing] would happen to you, [...] and if you didn’t pray then you wouldn’t do well [in life]. That kind of thing [...] you know, it really took a lot of pressure off me [...] I don’t have to pray, I can sleep [...]. I feel good because when something happens in my life that [...] is good, I know that I did it [...] myself [...]. Like when I passed a midterm, which I was really scared to fail. I know that I did it for me, and [...] because God wanted it to happen [...]. (Emma, 18 years old, atheist).

... A friend of mine is quite Christian and she tells me everything she does, and that she talks to God. [...] I feel that I don’t have to have that commitment, that I’m fine with my life knowing that I’m doing things right. And [...] if at some point I die and I meet God, I would tell him that [...] I lived my life well, that [...] I didn’t do anything wrong, and I wasn’t a bad person. And [...] if I cannot enter heaven because I do not believe in [...] him, I do not regret anything. Because [...] I lived as I wanted to live, and I don’t have to [...] give [him] any explanation. [...] (Mariana, 18 years old, atheist).

In aspects related to sexuality, reproduction, and abortion, young atheists and agnostics are no longer guided by Catholic morals and values. According to the survey data, 95.2% of agnostics and 83.6% of atheists approve of marriage between same-sex couples. Likewise, 88.7% of agnostics and 86.9% of atheists approve of the adoption of children by same-sex couples. Regarding the decriminalization of abortion, 87.1% of agnostics and 82% of atheists consider that a woman should not be punished for having an abortion. When asked whether for them the purpose of sex is only reproduction, 88.7% of agnostics and 88.5% of atheists disagreed.
These tendencies were confirmed by the interviewees, who almost unanimously expressed freedom to live out their sexuality separate from the Catholic ideals of marriage and reproduction. They also expressed their approval of homosexual relationships and rejection of the criminalization that Christian communities impose on women who have abortions.

1. **Sexuality and Virginity**

   I just think that virginity is [...] a social construct, and a social construct that comes from religion [...]. I don’t think one has to [wait to] have sex until marriage. (Emma, 18, atheist).

   I do not share the Christian way of looking at sexuality. Christianity has an aversion to pleasure [...]. We are here to reproduce, but I don’t share my parents’ way of saying that sexuality is only [...] for that [...] and only for marriage. I am more open [...]. But I don’t really exploit sexuality either [...]. In fact, I think that sexuality today is also overrated. (Diego, 19 years old, agnostic).

2. **Homosexuality**

   I like people of the same sex and I see it as something very natural. Of course, [...] there are more obstacles with my family because they tell me: ‘Apart from being agnostic [...] now you are also a lesbian’, and I also like rock music. I once started to investigate whether the Bible really made a direct criticism against homosexuals, and I realized that, yes, there are little things, but not as much as people think. So, it is not only a question [of] religion but also of the people who believe in it and who exclude you [...], mostly because of an interpretation they give to the Bible. (Laura, 18 years old, agnostic).

   In fact, I have family members who have a same-sex partner and it’s fine. The truth is, I think that everyone must respect each other. And of course, if a person of the same sex comes to me and tries to [hit on] me, well, that’s bad. But I am respectful [of] the fact that they are homosexual and I agree with them. (Carlos, 18 years old, atheist).

3. **Abortion**

   I agree with abortion. [...] Ideally, abortions should not have to be performed and there should be sex education in the country so that everyone takes care of themselves. There are also three grounds for [legal] abortion, and I am totally in agreement with them. [...] If a woman gets pregnant and ultimately wants an abortion, it seems to me that [...] her decision [...] is the one that should be considered, because in the end it is her body and it is her decision. (Carlos, 18 years old, atheist).

   Regarding abortion, I have always considered that, if I get pregnant at a time in my life when I don’t want to be a mother, I will consider abortion. Probably what would limit me from doing it would be the psychological burden, but not so much for the baby, but for myself, [...] because it really is not something easy. (Lina, 20 years old, agnostic).

In general, with regard to the ethical dimension, young people’s responses also denote the assertion of their autonomy and authenticity (Taylor 1991). They alone can decide what is right and appropriate. In this sense, they seem to underestimate the ethical orientations that come from traditional authorities, such as their parents or the Church. Likewise, the intraworldly character of their ethics is emphasized (Weber 1998, 2014; Tschannen 1992). They consider that their actions only have consequences or benefits in this life. None of them mentioned the search for possible rewards or the fear of possible punishments in the afterlife as a motivation for their actions. On the contrary, in general, they consider
inappropriate (even immoral) an ethic that assumes as a guiding criterion the consequences of actions in the (hypothetical) afterlife.

4.4. The Religious and Spiritual Dimensions

As might be expected, many atheists and agnostics express little or no interest in religion or religious matters. According to the data from the survey, for 92% of agnostics, religion is not very important in their lives or does not matter at all, a figure that reaches 94% among atheists. However, some differences are observed in the way atheists and agnostics relate to certain practices that can be viewed as expressions of “spirituality”. For example, 21% of agnostics practice some form of “meditation” compared to 14.8% of atheists.

The interviews confirm this trend. More frequently, agnostics cultivate practices that allow them to access states of serenity, inner peace, or introspection. For example, some agnostics interviewed practice some form of meditation, others have taken up yoga, and some are sympathetic to Buddhist or Taoist beliefs and practices. In general, these practices do not imply belief in a deity.

I became interested in Buddhism. It was the first year of the pandemic and I felt very overwhelmed by so many things. So, I started looking for ways to feel better. I found these meditations and I started doing them. First, they were daily meditations. [There was] a point when I started to look for more information [about them] and I saw that they came […] from Buddhism. […] Basically, it is being able to feel at peace for a moment while doing meditation. (Lina, 20 years old, agnostic).

Sometimes I meditate because it has helped me […] to control my anxiety […] , it calms me down a lot. Well, I used to do yoga but before the pandemic, and I haven’t taken it up again. I should take it up again… (Natalia, 18 years old, agnostic).

I do meditation about twice a week […] . Meditation is what helps me the most. […] First of all, it is the silence. […] I also do physical exercises to get all the tension out of my body… (Alex, 17 years old, agnostic).

On the other hand, most of the atheists interviewed, although they do not fully rule out the existence of a spiritual dimension in the human being, in general, they do not consider themselves to be spiritual or simply do not attach much importance to it. Others consider that there is nothing that can be called spiritual. They assume that the human being is a body and nothing more. They rather express concerns related to their mental and emotional health.

…I’m a little bit different than [most] people. Because everybody says we have a soul and there’s spirituality. But I’ve never really done anything for spirituality and stuff […] . What I usually do the most when I’m sad, angry, or anxious is to vent to someone else. I always do that. (Carlos, 18, atheist).

I consider the emotional dimension as part of the body’s functioning […] . I do not […] believe] that there is a soul and then there is the body, but that the body is one […] . Everything is in the body […] . (Camilo, 17 years old, atheist).

With regard to the interest of those identifying as atheists and agnostics in a spiritual dimension, the intramundane orientation of their actions stands out again (Weber 1998, 2014; Tschannen 1992). None of the interviewees (atheists or agnostics) expressed concern about issues such as salvation, the next life, or the afterlife. Generally speaking, in this regard, their answers address the concerns of this life, especially health care (physical and mental), body care, and the search for well-being.
5. Conclusions

For a large sector of Bogota’s youth, the Catholic tradition (its rites and beliefs) is no longer a source of orientation and meaning. On the contrary, for these young people, it is increasingly difficult to understand the meaning and usefulness of Catholic doctrine and rites. Following Berger (1967), we can say that for them, the Catholic tradition no longer fulfills the function of being a matrix of meaning (a nomos) that gives them security and orientation. Tradition is no longer the sacred canopy that protects them from anomie.

In most cases, the rational dimension is important in rethinking their religious identity. This can be observed in the degree to which young atheists and agnostics elaborate on the decision to adopt these identities, which also confirms that this decision was not taken lightly (Weber 2014; Giddens 1991). As other research in Latin America has shown (Da Costa 2017; Romero and Lecaros 2017; Rabbia 2017), a large portion of young people in Bogota who identify as atheists and agnostics do so after a process of inquiry (some of them called it research) in the search for arguments or evidence that help them confirm or renounce their beliefs in the existence of some deity, particularly in the God of Christians. According to our data, nowadays, this process often begins at an early age.

Although the reasons why young atheists and agnostics decided to rethink their religious identity are diverse, some recurring themes can be highlighted. Most young atheists and agnostics express a lack of experiences that would serve as evidence of the existence of a deity. It does not seem to them that (any) God listens to them, answers their prayers, or allows them to feel his presence. Even as children, various aspects of the Christian doctrine seemed contradictory to them. Moreover, as Bahamondes González et al. (2020) point out, various experiences often led them to question the discourse and ethics of religious leaders.

A good portion of both atheists and agnostics also see the tensions between science and religion as a reason to question inherited religious beliefs, an aspect that has also been pointed out by previous research in Colombia (Beltrán 2019; Beltrán and Larotta 2020; Beltrán and Rodríguez-Vargas 2022). In general, those who have embraced the identity of atheism and agnosticism consider science a more reliable source of knowledge than religion. In this last aspect, they frequently mention their confidence in scientific theories on the origin and evolution of the human being and the origin of the universe. These theories, in their opinion, contradict and are incompatible with biblical accounts and Christian doctrines. This data seems to confirm the importance of scientification as one of the dimensions of secularization (Tschannen 1992).

For others, the process of rethinking their religious identity was triggered by what might be called a crisis of faith or crisis of meaning (Berger and Luckmann 1997). A particular situation (e.g., the illness of a loved one or the various difficulties or contradictions unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic) led them to doubt the existence of a deity and the meaning of their inherited religious convictions, which is an aspect that has been found in other research in Latin America (Da Costa et al. 2019; Romero and Lecaros 2017).

To the extent that identifying as atheists or agnostics implies renouncing their inherited religious identity, usually Catholic, this new identity implies the rupture or weakening of community ties that allow the satisfaction of emotional needs and facilitate the sharing of a collective memory (Hervieu-Léger 1993). We are not only referring to the abandonment of the Church, a rupture that none of the interviewees regretted, but above all, the conflict that came with assuming atheist and agnostic identities with their close relatives, especially with their parents. This aspect confirms the findings of other research in Latin America (Da Costa et al. 2019; Romero and Lecaros 2017).

Moreover, in a largely Catholic society, their new identity is associated with stigmas that discredit them (Zuckerman 2014). Despite this, none of the interviewees regretted having decided to adopt their new identity. On the contrary, most emphasized the advantages of this decision. They mentioned, for example, that being atheist or agnostic was a means of liberation from traditions, routines, and norms that, for them, were boring and meaningless. Moreover, for the interviewees, this decision constituted the gateway to a
new lifestyle that seemed more in line with their needs and expectations, allowing them to affirm their autonomy and authenticity (Taylor 1991).

As other research in Latin America has shown, the ethics and morals that guide the actions of atheists and agnostics are not related to religious precepts or doctrines (Rabia 2017; Torres Bryon 2018; Beltrán 2019; Beltrán and Larotta 2020; Esquivel et al. 2020). Thus, they frequently reject the Bible and the provisions of the Catholic Church as a source of guidance for their actions. Rather, they are oriented by what Weber called an intramundane ethic (Weber 1998, 2014; Tschannen 1992), in which they assume sole responsibility for the consequences (positive or negative) of their actions (Zuckerman 2014), and where any expectation of salvation, that is, of rewards or punishments in the afterlife, disappears.

Despite this finding, some differences between atheists and agnostics seem typical and are worth mentioning for future research to address. For example, atheists are more often inclined to deny the existence of any deity altogether. On the contrary, agnostics, rather than denying the existence of a deity, prefer to opt for doubt or to omit a judgment on this matter. They claim a lack of evidence to support a position on the matter. However, even to most agnostics, the existence of the God of Christians (creator, personal, all-powerful, and in control of history) seems unlikely and problematic.

On the other hand, while it is generally difficult to identify the notion of spirituality among atheists and agnostics, it is rarer among atheists than among agnostics. Both the survey and the interviews show that agnostics maintain practices that relate to spirituality more frequently than atheists. In any case, both atheists and agnostics are more attracted to finding practices that help them maintain physical and mental health and overall general well-being, especially practices that allow them to access calm and serene states of mind rather than spirituality.

Finally, the shift to identifying as atheist or agnostic at the young ages being studied can be understood as another decision that allows young people to shape their personalities and distance themselves from their parents. Therefore, questions remain about the percentage of young atheists and agnostics who, upon reaching adulthood, will return to identifying as believers. In a similar vein, more questions remain on whether they will return to a church or religious community or whether they will assume forms of practicing religion or spirituality individually, that is, without identifying with a religious denomination or community.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, W.M.B.; methodology, W.M.B. and L.P.R.; software, L.P.R.; validation, L.P.R.; formal analysis, W.M.B. and L.P.R.; investigation, W.M.B. and L.P.R.; resources, W.M.B. and L.P.R.; data curation, W.M.B. and L.P.R.; writing—original draft preparation, W.M.B. and L.P.R.; writing—review and editing, W.M.B. and L.P.R.; visualization, W.M.B. and L.P.R.; supervision, W.M.B.; project administration, W.M.B.; funding acquisition, W.M.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by Universidad Nacional de Colombia, grant number [55460-HERMES].

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors show their gratefulness to the young people who voluntarily provided the information on which the study is based. Also, special thanks to Rebekah York for her support in text translation.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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