

Article

Emotional Well-Being and Academic Life Balance: University Students' Narratives on the Effects of Digital Hyperconnection

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Abstract

This qualitative study, grounded in a phenomenological-interpretive design, aimed to explore university students' experiences regarding digital hyperconnectivity, emotional well-being, and the balance between academic and personal life at a private university in Viña del Mar, Chile. The sample consisted of 18 Occupational Therapy students (mean age: 22.4 years; 61.1% female, 27.8% male, 5.6% non-binary; representing a diverse range of undergraduate academic years from second to fifth). Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding following grounded theory guidelines, with the assistance of Atlas.ti v25 software, to identify emerging categories and establish conceptual relationships. Findings were organized into two analytical categories. The first, Experiences and perceptions of digital hyperconnectivity, portrays hyperconnectivity as a taken-for-granted everyday condition shaped by intensive device use and the predominance of social media, streaming platforms, and artificial intelligence tools; within this category, a tension emerges between recognized practical/pedagogical usefulness and distracting or compulsive patterns of use. The second, Emotional well-being and balance in academic life, highlights the impact on emotions, time management, sleep, and relationships, as well as disconnection strategies to restore balance (time limits, mental breaks, and offline activities). In conclusion, digital hyperconnectivity is significantly associated with emotional well-being and the academic-personal life balance. Students' narratives suggest that technology can enrich learning when accompanied by regulation, media literacy, and deliberate disconnection practices. Therefore, context-sensitive institutional interventions are needed to promote conscious disconnection, digital identity education, and a pedagogical design that integrates digital tools through a critical and ethical approach.



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1. Introduction

The digitization associated with globalization processes has significantly transformed global communication patterns, access to information, and the construction of social bonds (UNESCO, 2024). While this process has expanded access to resources and opportunities, it has also generated less-visible effects on the configuration of identities, habits, and relational forms, whose impacts require greater empirical and context-specific analysis (Cifuentes, 2025). In this scenario, digital technologies not only mediate academic and leisure

activities but also express inequalities in access, use, and appropriation, configuring a gap that transcends the technical realm and extends to participation and content production (UNESCO, 2024; Robles & Granja, 2024).

1.1. Digital Ecosystem Features

The contemporary digital ecosystem is characterized by a strong centrality of social networks and the consumption of personalized content, particularly among young populations (Montag et al., 2019; Lipatova, 2024). However, mass connectivity entails psychosocial risks, especially when accompanied by intensive usage patterns and problematic relationships with platforms (Ruiz-Palmero et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2022). From a sociocultural perspective, the virtual environment can foster the dilution of personal boundaries and identity processes mediated by social comparison and constant exposure to idealized narratives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Martínez et al., 2022), while also contributing to cultural homogenization dynamics that strain local narratives and community belongings (De la Torre, 2017; Koff & Mejía Idárraga, 2021).

1.2. Psychosocial Impacts

Available evidence associates intensive use of digital technologies with sleep disturbances, concentration difficulties, and reduced in-person activities, particularly among young adults—a stage in which social network consumption tends to intensify (AOTA, 2020; Armaza, 2023; P. Hernández & Gaete, 2017; Lacunza et al., 2019; Statista, 2023). Within this framework, FoMO (Fear of Missing Out), coined by Przybylski et al. (2013) and widely established in the literature since then, has been described as a relevant mechanism that increases online persistence and is linked to risks of anxiety and self-esteem impairment (Linares Pinto, 2023). These dynamics are reinforced by algorithmic architectures that shape the digital experience, influencing the organization of attention, the interpretation of reality, and the construction of social interaction, with effects on the quality of bonds and the ethical frameworks of contemporary sociability (Galende, 2008; Gillespie, 2018).

1.3. Identity and Regulation Debates

In parallel, the consolidation of follower culture and the transition toward increasingly immersive digital ecosystems have foregrounded discussions of digital identity, trust, and regulation (Galende, 2024). Recent research proposes digital identity management frameworks to address legal, security, and data protection demands, with direct implications for rights and ethical standards (Ben Ayed, 2014; Beduschi, 2018, 2021; Giannopoulou, 2023). In the educational realm, mobile device use has been described as a polarizing issue: it can enable learning and socialization but also promote immediacy, rapid responses, and distractibility in the absence of clear pedagogical regulation (Lozano-Mulet et al., 2025). Consequently, various proposals emphasize media literacy and the design of context-specific regulations as prerequisites for the critical integration of digital technologies, thereby balancing benefits and risks (Cancio-Méndez et al., 2024).

1.4. Relevance in Higher Education

These processes are particularly relevant in higher education, as the university stage is a key period for the formation of habits, routines, occupational roles, and social participation (Prieto Quezada et al., 2015; Poblete-Godoy et al., 2024). The transition from school to Higher Education has been identified as a critical stage, traversed by academic demands and adaptive challenges that can impact well-being and performance (López et al., 2018). In Chile, high prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms is reported among university populations, underscoring the need for situated interventions and studies that address these experiences in hyperconnected contexts (Pinto-Cortez et al., 2024).

Internationally, organizations warn of the high prevalence of mental health problems in higher education, highlighting the importance of addressing the phenomenon through an integrated perspective that articulates institutional conditions, daily practices, and digital environments (UNESCO, 2024). In Latin America, local research has reported psychological distress indicators among university students, indicating a regional issue with diverse contextual expressions (Campo-Arias & Herazo, 2015). In Chile, beyond mental health concerns, patterns associated with youth sedentarism have been described, complicating the well-being landscape and reinforcing the need for preventive approaches that consider daily habits and lifestyles (Instituto Nacional de la Juventud [INJUV], 2019; Liras Pinto, 2025). Although public initiatives and international frameworks exist to promote well-being, the challenge persists and requires research that connects subjective experiences with sociotechnical and institutional conditions (OMS, 2024).

1.5. Research Gap and Study Contribution

The theoretical coherence of this manuscript is firmly rooted in the occupational science framework, which conceptualizes daily human activities not merely as isolated behaviors but as situated ‘occupations’ that dictate health, identity, and academic-personal life balance. Within this paradigm, digital hyperconnection is understood not as a mere behavioral excess but as a pervasive occupational environment that continuously redistributes time, attention, and cognitive energy. Furthermore, the specific rationale for centering this study on Occupational Therapy students lies in their unique disciplinary configuration. The university training of OT students is inherently centered around the critical analysis of human routines, environmental adaptations, and disruptions to occupational performance (AOTA, 2020). Consequently, their disciplinary background profoundly shapes their lived experiences and interpretations of hyperconnectivity; they are academically equipped to recognize when a ‘background occupation (such as doom scrolling) overlays self-care and reduces spaces for contemplation. By capturing the voices of OT students, this study bridges a critical gap by drawing on a population whose professional reflection provides a highly articulated, specialized vocabulary for describing how algorithmic environments configure identities and relational forms (Cifuentes, 2025; UNESCO, 2024).

Despite growing research on hyperconnectivity and well-being among youth, available studies predominantly focus on secondary school adolescents or general university samples, lacking disciplinary specificity. Research situated in Latin American contexts, and specifically in health careers such as Occupational Therapy (where reflection on occupational balance is integral to the disciplinary framework), remains scarce (Taylor, 2025). Quantitative approaches that measure frequency and usage time predominate, while qualitative studies exploring the lived meaning of hyperconnectivity through students’ own voices are in the minority. The present study aims to address this gap by exploring, through in-depth individual narratives, how digital hyperconnectivity reorganizes time, attention, and emotional well-being in a specific university context.

The differential value of this study lies in three elements: (a) the use of individual narratives from the occupational science framework, which allows analyzing hyperconnectivity as a reorganization of repertoires and roles rather than merely “excessive use”; (b) the disciplinary specificity of the sample (Occupational Therapy students), which positions the phenomenon as both lived experience and professional reflection; and (c) its anchoring in Chile, a context with high university stress indices and elevated digital penetration, scarcely addressed in articulated form in international literature (Pinto-Cortez et al., 2024).

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to analyze narratives on the implications of digital hyperconnectivity regarding emotional well-being and academic life balance among Occupational Therapy students at a private university in Chile. It addresses lived

experiences and perceptions of hyperconnectivity's effects on well-being and academic-personal life balance, considering strategies for disconnection, the role of social networks and educational platforms in identity processes, and adaptation mechanisms in response to digital exhaustion.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Approach and Design

This research was conducted under a qualitative approach, consistent with Cueto Urbina (2020), who notes that this type of investigation is oriented toward producing data expressed by the individuals themselves through words, narratives, and discourses. This approach is characterized by seeking a deep understanding of social phenomena from the experiences and meanings constructed by participants, without focusing on numerical measurement or large-scale statistical analysis (R. Hernández, 2014).

To resolve paradigmatic tensions, it is imperative to clarify that this study is fundamentally phenomenological-interpretative in purpose—aiming to describe the participants' lived, subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, the analytical execution drew exclusively upon grounded theory procedures (open, axial, and selective coding via Atlas.ti v25) as a systematic, inductive strategy to organize empirical data into conceptual categories, rather than with the objective of formal theory generation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

2.2. Participants and Sampling

The sample was intentional and comprised 18 participants, with whom individual interviews were conducted sequentially between June and September 2025. The selection of Occupational Therapy students was deliberate and based on their specific academic profile. Unlike other populations, these students are trained to analyze the relationship among human occupation, health, and well-being, providing them with a unique lens for reflecting on their own "occupational balance" and the nuances of digital engagement. Furthermore, their high levels of academic and personal digital device usage place them in a prime position to report on the tensions between hyperconnectivity and their daily occupational performance. Inclusion criteria were: (a) being an active student in the Occupational Therapy program in the participating institution; (b) reporting common use of digital devices for academic and leisure purposes; and (c) availability and willingness to participate in an individual interview. Students with an active diagnosis of a mental disorder that could condition participation or comprehension of questions were excluded. These criteria aimed to ensure the relevance and depth of narratives regarding the phenomenon under study, without seeking statistical representativeness.

Intentional sampling was used because in qualitative research, the primary interest is not statistical representativeness, but the richness and relevance of the experiences and meanings contributed by participants (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this regard, individuals who met the inclusion criteria and had the disposition and lived experience related to the phenomenon were deliberately selected, facilitating the collection of detailed and meaningful narratives to understand the problem.

2.2.1. Recruitment

Regarding recruitment and voluntariness, participants were contacted by direct invitation during class sessions at the School of Occupational Therapy. To ensure transparency, the participant flow was systematically recorded: a total of 330 students were initially contacted. Of these, 48 explicitly declined to participate, and 243 did not respond to the initial invitation. Among the 39 students who expressed interest, 21 withdrew from the

study prior to the interviews due to scheduling conflicts, resulting in a final sample of 18 interviewed participants.

While this voluntary approach inherently introduces an element of self-selection, in qualitative phenomenology this is recognized as a methodological asset rather than a statistical bias; the willingness of participants to share their lived experiences is a necessary condition for achieving information-rich narratives (Patton, 2015). To minimize potential power dynamics and eliminate any perception of academic coercion, recruitment followed a strict ethical protocol: (a) invitations were extended using standardized written information; (b) the researchers responsible for interviewing and coding did not hold direct evaluative or grading authority over the participants' concurrent academic courses; and (c) participants were explicitly guaranteed in writing that withdrawal at any stage would have absolutely no impact on their academic standing, grades, or institutional trajectory.

2.2.2. Participant Characterization

The sample consisted of 12 female participants (66.7%), 5 male participants (27.8%), and 1 non-binary participant (5.6%), with ages ranging from 19 to 26 years ($M = 22.2$ years). Regarding academic year, 2 participants were in the 2nd year (11.1%), 6 in the 3rd year (33.3%), 6 in the 4th year (33.3%), and 4 in the 5th year (22.2%), which allowed for collecting narratives from various stages of the studying trajectory.

This demographic distribution (Table 1), particularly the predominance of female participants, accurately reflects the broader enrollment profile of the Occupational Therapy program at the institution, consistent with the historical feminization of health sciences in the region.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characterization of the 18 participants.

Interview ID	Participant ID	Age	Gender	Academic Year
EI-1	P1	21	Female	Senior
EI-2	P2	23	Female	Senior 5th
EI-3	P3	22	Female	Junior
EI-4	P4	22	Female	Senior
EI-5	P5	21	Male	Junior
EI-6	P6	21	Female	Junior
EI-7	P7	21	Female	Junior
EI-8	P8	23	Male	Senior 5th
EI-9	P9	22	Female	Senior
EI-10	P10	21	Female	Junior
EI-11	P11	19	Non-binary	Sophomore
EI-12	P12	25	Male	Senior
EI-13	P13	22	Male	Junior
EI-14	P14	25	Male	Senior 5th
EI-15	P15	23	Female	Senior
EI-16	P16	23	Female	Senior
EI-17	P17	26	Female	Senior 5th
EI-18	P18	22	Male	Sophomore

Note. Data compiled by authors, 2025. EI = *entrevista individual* (individual interview). $N = 18$. Gender categories reflect participant self-identification. Academic year refers to the level of the Occupational Therapy program at a private university in Chile.

2.3. Data Collection Technique

Data was collected between June and September 2025 through individual semi-structured interviews conducted in person with each participant. This technique was chosen because it facilitates in-depth exploration of each person's meanings and subjective experiences, without the influence or inhibition dynamics typical of group settings (Kvale

& Brinkmann, 2015). The semi-structured script, organized around thematic axes, guided the conversation without limiting the emergence of unanticipated narratives.

The script consisted of 17 questions and was structured around four thematic axes (Table 2): (1) patterns and types of daily digital use; (2) perceptions of effects on emotional well-being; (3) perceived impact on academic–personal balance; and (4) strategies for digital regulation and disconnection. The questions combined open-ended formats and probing questions, following the structure recommended by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) for qualitative research interviews.

Table 2. Semi-Structured Interview Guide.

Thematic Axis	No.	Question
1. Patterns and types of daily digital use	1	What digital devices do you use regularly?
	2	On average, how many hours per day do you spend on digital devices? (Less than 1 h; 1–3 h; 4–6 h; more than 6 h)
	3	What type of content do you consume online? (social media, videos/streaming, online games, gambling, blogs, articles, other)
	4	Which are your preferred social media platforms?
2. Perceptions of effects on emotional well-being	5	How do you think digital consumption impacts your daily life?
	6	Do you have any concerns about your digital consumption? If so, which ones?
	7	To what extent do you feel that constant internet connection affects your emotional well-being?
	8	Have you experienced any change in your emotional state due to constant use of digital platforms (e.g., anxiety, stress, happiness)?
	9	Have you felt exhaustion or stress related to technology? If so, can you describe how it manifests?
3. Perceived impact on academic–personal balance	10	Do you believe digital platforms take away time you could dedicate to other important activities (study, social life, hobbies)?
	11	How do you manage your time in relation to digital platform use and your academic responsibilities?
	12	How often do you use digital platforms for academic activities (e.g., research, online classes, communication with peers and professors)?
	13	Do you think excessive digital connection has improved or worsened your academic performance? Please explain why.
4. Strategies for digital regulation and disconnection	14	What specific strategies do you use to disconnect from digital platforms (e.g., setting usage schedules, outdoor activities, screen-free rest)?
	15	How often do you apply these strategies, and how do you feel they benefit you?
	16	Do you consider these strategies to have been effective in improving your emotional and academic well-being?
	17	Is there any strategy you would like to implement but have not yet tried?

Note. The interview guide underwent content validation through expert judgment from four specialists with experience in qualitative research and/or university mental health. Each item was evaluated according to relevance, clarity, and sufficiency on a 1–4 scale, and the Content Validity Index (CVI) was calculated per item and overall (Lawshe, 1975), with items scoring below 0.78 eliminated or reformulated. The final version was pilot-tested with two students not included in the definitive sample.

Informed consent was signed beforehand, and confidentiality was ensured. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 min, was audio-recorded with participant authorization, and fully transcribed.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to the provisions of Law No. 20.120 on scientific research in human beings and their genome, and on the prohibition of human cloning ([Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2006](#)), which mandates informed consent in all scientific research involving human subjects. Participants who agreed to join were informed that data would be used responsibly, ethically, and confidentially, with access limited to authorized personnel.

Participation was voluntary. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without prior explanation, in accordance with fundamental ethical principles: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. The research received approval from the Bioethics Committee of the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, Universidad Andrés Bello, dated 9 October 2025, resolution 90660/2020.

2.5. Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software (v25). Consistent with the study's overarching phenomenological-interpretive framework, coding procedures derived from Grounded Theory ([Strauss & Corbin, 1998](#)) were employed strictly as a systematic analytical device for data categorization and reduction, rather than with the ontological aim of generating a new substantive theory. In the initial phase, a systematic reading of the material was conducted, using open coding to identify emergent categories and assign preliminary codes.

Open coding initially generated many meaningful units, which, after successive cycles of axial review and consolidation, were grouped into 12 operational codes distributed across two categories. This reduction process adhered to the criterion of theoretical relevance for the phenomenon under study, following the logic of selective coding ([Strauss & Corbin, 1998](#)). The operational definitions for each code were established collaboratively among the researchers and recorded in the codebook.

The process followed an iterative cycle that included: (i) importing the 18 individual interviews into an Atlas.ti project titled "Digital Hyperconnectivity Study"; (ii) initial coding to identify meaning units and emergent categories; (iii) developing a codebook (12 codes) organized into two category groups, with operational definitions; (iv) axial and selective coding to establish relationships between categories and consolidate theme construction; (v) using analytical memos to record ideas, assumptions, and interpretive decisions during analysis; (vi) constructing conceptual networks to visualize links between key concepts; and (vii) triangulating information across interviews to contrast patterns and strengthen interpretive consistency.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, researcher triangulation was implemented: two independent coders analyzed 30% of the corpus in parallel. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus sessions and an argued discussion. Given the phenomenological-interpretive nature of this study, inter-coder reliability was not assessed through quantitative statistics such as Cohen's kappa, as this metric is more consistent with post-positivist or quantitative content-analysis designs. Instead, credibility was established through consensus-based argued discussion between coders, a procedure aligned with qualitative criteria of trustworthiness rather than statistical agreement ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)). Additionally, the analytical process underwent an external audit using expert judgment (5) from

individuals with doctoral degrees and experience in the study area, thereby reinforcing the credibility and transferability of the findings.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Spanish to capture the deep semantic richness of the local context; subsequently, selected narratives were rigorously translated into English by the research team to ensure conceptual and cultural equivalence for international publication. This iterative analytical process was maintained until data saturation was achieved. Theoretical saturation was operationalized not as a numerical quota but as the analytical threshold of informational redundancy, defined as the point where continuous comparative analysis yielded no new emergent categories, properties, or conceptual relationships regarding digital hyperconnectivity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The assessment of saturation was continuously evaluated by the two independent coders and verified through research team consensus sessions. Although preliminary thematic categories began to stabilize around interview 12, data collection was deliberately extended to interview 18 to robustly capture the depth and nuances of the axial codes. Informational redundancy was formally observed starting at interview 15 and definitively confirmed by the research team at interview 18, as no novel conceptual properties emerged.

Table 3 summarizes the hierarchical organization of the analytical framework, linking individual codes to two overarching categories. The category “Experiences and Perceptions of Digital Hyperconnectivity” integrates six codes: (1) Devices Used, referring to the explicit identification of devices employed for Internet connection and their usage frequency; (2) Usability and Utility, relating to the evaluation of digital applications or tools in terms of ease, satisfaction, and pedagogical or practical utility; (3) Type of Content, identifying the nature of consumed content, whether educational, social, entertainment, informational, or multimedia; (4) Concern Regarding Consumption, capturing expressions of worry or alarm about digital use, including perceptions of risk or dependency; (5) Changes Due to Consumption, considering modifications in habits, routines, or behaviors attributable to digital consumption; and (6) Consequences of Digital Hyperconnectivity, referring to emotional, behavioral, or social effects arising from intensive connectivity.

Table 3. Hierarchical Structure: Code-to-Category Associations.

Objectives	Category	Codes (No. of Citations)
Explore how university students experience and perceive the effects of digital hyperconnectivity on their emotional well-being and academic life balance.	Experiences and Perceptions of Digital Hyperconnectivity	Devices Used (40); Type of Content (101); Concern Regarding Consumption (70); Changes Due to Consumption (44); Consequences of Digital Consumption (110); Usability and Utility (82)
Identify digital disconnection strategies that students implement to mitigate exhaustion and overexposure effects.	Emotional Well-Being and Academic Life Balance	Emotions Associated with Consumption (63); Academic Life Balance (59); Usage Time (39); Family Context (64); Disconnection Strategies (69); Reflections and Advice (37)

Note. Data compiled by authors, 2025. *N* = 12 codes across two categories derived from grounded theory analysis of 18 individual interviews. Citation counts reflect frequency of code application across the corpus using Atlas.ti (v25). Objectives align with study aims specified in the methodology section. Citation counts should not be overinterpreted as indicators of theoretical importance or experiential salience; they reflect only the extent to which each code was applied across the corpus and do not imply a hierarchy of relevance among categories or participants’ experiences.

The category “Emotional Well-Being and Academic Life Balance” comprises six codes: (1) Usage Time, referring to the quantity and patterns of digital device utilization; (2) Family Context, considering the influence of the family environment on connectivity habits, including support, norms, or conflicts; (3) Emotions Associated with Consumption, identifying emotions explicitly linked to digital technology use; (4) Academic Life Balance, addressing

perceptions of balance between study, leisure, and connectivity; (5) Disconnection Strategies, encompassing deliberate actions aimed at regulating or reducing digital exposure; and (6) Reflections and Advice, capturing learnings and recommendations derived from hyperconnectivity experiences.

3. Results

The findings are interpreted by understanding everyday life as a dynamic organization of occupations (study, self-care, rest, relationships, leisure, social participation) whose balance can be strained by hyperconnected environments. In this framework, digital hyperconnectivity emerges as an occupational environment that redistributes time, attention, energy, and meaning, impacting the ability to sustain satisfactory occupational balance and meaningful participation in chosen occupations.

3.1. Category 1: Experiences and Perceptions of Digital Hyperconnectivity

3.1.1. Types of Consumed Content

Narratives reveal that social media and streaming consumption function not merely as leisure but as a form of companionship that regulates affective and sensory states during routine moments. As illustrated by the participants, this pattern can be read from an occupational perspective as a “background occupation” (always-on) that overlays self-care and household tasks, reducing space for silence, contemplation, and self-observation, conditions that are also essential for meaningful participation.

“I mainly consume social networks, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube more than streaming (...) I used to consume a lot of Twitch, now I consume YouTube” (P18, EI-18)

“I do a lot of scrolling, and lately I follow healthy lifestyle influencers (...) I check out lots of diet topics, arms exercises and legs exercises (...) and I listen to podcasts” (P8, EI-8)

“I use my phone to listen to something (...) While cooking, I put on a shows that I don’t ever watch or that i’ve watched so times. That I’ve seen 50 times, I like it as company” (P3, EI-3)

“Some people put on reality shows for company (...) for me, if I’m taking the bus or anything when I’m alone, I put my headphones on, because being on the bus without headphones is horrible” (P4, EI-4)

Interpretively, these descriptions suggest that brief, highly personalized content is utilized as a strategy for micro-emotional regulation (avoiding loneliness, discomfort, or boredom). However, this dynamic points toward a potential “occupational dependency”: everyday well-being appears to become contingent on external stimuli rather than internal resources (reflection, pause, in-person interaction).

“Utility” emerges as a legitimizing argument integrating digital tools into instrumental and academic occupations, yet narratives also describe the substitution of occupational processes (creating, planning, sustaining attention) with immediate solutions. From occupational science (Taylor, 2025), this dynamic closely resembles a tension between occupational efficiency (quick resolution) and occupational meaning (learning, creating, owning the process).

“I start by opening Pinterest, which I use a lot as an app to see clothes, flowers, whatever, I tap Pinterest and get hooked” (P8, EI-8)

“With AI, the skill to create is gone, so we generally search for everything ready without going through the creation process, inventing, thinking (...) We go straight to the answer and delegate to technology the work we should do as people” (P11, EI-11)

“You have to go online even to get a health bonus, technology is here to stay, before you had to queue, now you log into a platform and are done” (P16, EI-16)

In this paradox, the accounts suggest that the digital does not merely interrupt occupations; it seems to reconfigure performance criteria (speed, immediate response) in ways that conflict with occupations requiring sustained attention, frustration tolerance, and elaboration.

3.1.2. Concern Regarding Consumption

The expressed concern regarding consumption suggests an experience that can be interpreted as an indicator of a potential diminished occupational agency: participants frequently describe a perception of not fully choosing when to start or end a digital occupation, pointing to an inability to sustain mental stillness. In terms of occupational balance, these narratives indicate that hyperconnectivity appears to interfere with daily rhythm self-regulation (starts, ends, transitions), affecting the equilibrium between demands and recovery, as evidenced by the following reflections:

“Being so dependent worries me; I need to be watching something or else start overthinking” (P1, EI-1)

“At least studying at the uni, I’m always with stimuli, either the slides on the board, computer to take notes, phone to record. Always with my iPad and that worries me” (P4, EI-4)

“For me, what worries me, the most is not realizing how time passes when I’m online” (P17, EI-17)

“It worries me that it’s really hard when I try to do something without a screen. I can’t be in silence” (P6, EI-6)

Based on these descriptions, hyperconnectivity seems to generate what could be described as an “occupational climate” of constant stimulation. Within the students’ accounts, this environment is perceived as hindering sustained attention occupations, mental rest, and presence (with others, with self).

3.1.3. Changes Due to Consumption

The changes reported by participants extend beyond mere “excessive use”; their narratives describe deep transformations in interests, motivation, and meaning. These descriptions suggest experiences that can be theoretically interpreted as occupational alienation, understood as feelings of disconnection, emptiness, and loss of identity or meaning in daily occupations (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). Furthermore, the accounts point toward potential trajectories of occupational deprivation, where the progressive abandonment of previously meaningful occupations (such as intense reading or outdoor activities) appears to reduce real access to opportunities for full participation, as reflected in the following testimonies:

“I remembered Chul Han’s contemplative time and how important reflection times are, about who I am, my interests, what I follow, because I think many of us are losing our identity (...) We start permeating with others’ lives and form ourselves by others’ lives, not because interest arises from our own heads” (P5, EI-5)

“I used to read, devouring 1 to 2 books a day, and now I struggle to concentrate reading (...) there’s a negative influence physiologically, almost organically. On one hand, it helps; on the other, it takes away creative potential” (P2, EI-2)

“I’ve lost appreciation or value for things I did as a kid (...) I was out playing with my friends all day, and now that doesn’t motivate me at all, I prefer a thousand times being locked in my room studying or consuming social media” (P11, EI-11)

“I feel I no longer have the same capacity to be bored and let something new arise from that boredom” (P3, EI-3)

Interpretively, these reflections suggest that hyperconnectivity may contribute to a reorganization of occupational identity. As illustrated by the students, there appears to be a weakening of the occupational repertoire that sustains biographical continuity (what they liked, what makes them who they are), accompanied by the strengthening of a repertoire based on quick consumption and highly guided by external stimuli.

3.1.4. Consequences of Digital Consumption

The physical and emotional consequences described by participants suggest not only discomfort but also an interference in occupational performance (concentration, rest, relating, and academic output). From an occupational perspective, these narratives point toward a potential deterioration of occupational balance: time and energy allocated to digital occupations appear to displace rest, physical activity, quality social interaction, and creative occupations, as noted by several students:

“Headaches, tired eyes, I feel diminished capacities like concentration, visual capacity after long screen exposure, I need glasses, to rest” (P2, EI-2)

“I feel technology kills the quality of professionals graduating now (...) they’re not the same as they were years ago” (P5, EI-5)

“Lots of mental, emotional, social, physical things from social media use, phone use, like posture, relating at the table, also sedentarism issues” (P9, EI-9)

Crucially, the narratives also describe a recurring loss of control over the time spent on digital platforms, pointing toward what could be theoretically interpreted as “algorithmic capture.” This perception of being trapped by the design of the applications is vividly illustrated when a participant explicitly identifies this dynamic:

“My eyes hurt and tear lately because I spend so much on screen, they’re glassy, neck hurts from posture (...) you atrophy a bit because of the algorithm, same videos over and over, stuck in the loop” (P11, EI-11)

While the hyperconnectivity experience appears shared, the narratives emphasize that digital tools do not exert a homogeneous influence; rather, a clear distinction emerges based on the technological logic of the platform. Participants with higher generative AI tool use (P11, P13) more frequently articulate reflections centered on cognitive delegation, the outsourcing of thought, and the potential erosion of the learning process. Conversely, social network prioritizers (P8, P14) more intensely recount affective and relational consequences, such as FoMO, compulsive validation-seeking, and social comparison emotions. This distinction indicates that while social media hyperconnectivity operates primarily through emotional and temporal capture, AI engagement introduces a different occupational risk characterized by the bypass of creative and analytical efforts. These differences suggest that interventions should be segmented by digital use profile rather than applied homogeneously.

3.2. Category 2: Emotional Well-Being and Academic Life Balance

3.2.1. Emotions Associated with Consumption

The disruptive emotions described by the participants (anxiety, guilt, fatigue, distress) suggest experiences that can be interpreted as signals of occupational imbalance: within these narratives, the occupational organization appears to no longer sustain well-being but rather perpetuates a cycle of immediate relief and subsequent cost. In occupational science, these descriptions align closely with experiences of occupational alienation, as social media use is shown to potentially alter habits, routines, interests, and occupational performance, even when it does not benefit well-being (Basto Tarazona et al., 2019).

“Today there’s FoMO, fear of missing out on what’s happening on social media (...) and not answering others’ demands, it’s not trendy to miss things (...) it’s caused me a lot of distress and feeling lost” (P14, EI-14)

“I get FoMO, anxiety, frustration because I could have used my time productively instead of piling up pendings, worst of all identity loss, that’s what I feel” (P6, EI-6)

“It’s affected personal relationships (...) constant distress if a friend or partner doesn’t reply, I give too much importance to a Like, it may be stupid, but I care if they comment on my photo and see my status, but don’t reply while online, generates next-level anxiety” (P13, EI-13)

“I feel tiredness, anger, exhaustion, always feeling guilty check for being useless (...) now there’s no right to fail, you don’t even dare ask someone out, everything digital, people don’t even meet, it is making it harder to establish relationships now” (P5, EI-5)

Based on these reflections, the affectation seems to extend beyond mere mood. The students describe what can be understood as an observed reorganization of bonds (hyper-vigilance, response need, like-validation), which appears to transform social participation into a demanding, anxiogenic occupation, ultimately risking the weakening of meaningful experiences of connection.

3.2.2. Academic Life Balance

Within the narratives, the perception of balance appears ambivalent: participants note that digital tools can serve as an academic resource when used judiciously but also act as a severe study-rest rhythm disruptor. Through the lens of occupational science, the experiences described by the students illustrate how an occupational conflict can arise between competing systems for the same resource (time, attention): the academic system (prolonged tasks) vs. the digital system (immediate rewards) (Taylor, 2025).

“I follow serious content creators, filtering, and use AI according to uni’s parameters, turning it into a living digital library. That’s how I most usefully integrate social media and digital content into academic responsibility” (P13, EI-13)

“I can control myself between study moments and phone use (...) but watching shows, makes time flies, saying one episode turns into two, three, I don’t stop till night and study until late” (P16, EI-16)

“For important tasks I put my phone away in another room, but don’t always succeed at it. Temptation too strong” (P9, EI-9)

3.2.3. Usage Time

The recurring notion of losing track of time suggests what can be interpreted as an alteration of lived occupational time. Participants frequently describe situations where they do not register the passage of time during digital engagement, which appears to trigger an overload-guilt cycle as they feel pressured to recover those lost hours:

“Scroll creator defines as visual dopamine you can’t stop. Very addictive. Can scroll 3,4,5 h without noticing” (P8, EI-8)

“I Don’t realize how time pass when online, say I procrastinate, till 2 am, then it’s 3 am” (P17, EI-17)

“To study, I set a timer. I now realized I can’t study straight. I need Pomodoro, 25 min studying five resting” (P6, EI-6)

These accounts indicate that the problem is not simply “using technology,” but rather how digital occupation seems to alter daily sequences and transitions. For many partici-

pants, the night becomes a compensation space (late study), which ultimately affects their rest, performance, and well-being.

3.2.4. Family Context

Family narratives frequently describe the displacement of traditional conversations and rituals toward parallel digital consumption, which appears to impact co-occupations (shared occupations that sustain bonds and meaning, such as eating, talking, or recounting the day). This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the students' descriptions of their home environments:

"Any important measure I've taken when having with my parents is to try to leave my phone charging and not include it on the table, but sometimes it's hard because if one of us takes their phone, everyone end up doing the same" (P4, EI-4)

"I see my parents consuming their favorite social networks to entertain themselves, like Facebook (...) we have lost that instance of sharing and talking. Everyone consumes content. My younger brother consumes games like Minecraft, Roblox, etc." (P13, EI-13)

"People don't share now, my parents don't talk about what happened at work or try to lecture me about what I have to do, or are with me. They tell me about the last reel they saw, and they laugh about that. They talk like a meme; in fact, they sing 'meme song' as they speak. I've done that too my younger brother speaks between Argentinian and Mexican because of that." (P16, EI-16)

From an occupational science perspective, these family dynamics point toward what can be theoretically framed as relational occupational deprivation: it is not a lack of people in the home, but rather an environment (norms, habits, device availability) that reduces access to presence and dialogue experiences (Taylor, 2025). Thus, rather than locating the problem in the individual alone, this analysis positions it within the domestic occupational context, framing these intergenerational digital practices not as mere isolated behaviors, but as a core micro-systemic factor. The home environment operates as a socially organized setting that normalizes hyperconnectivity, progressively transforming shared family routines, such as dinner or daily dialogue, into spaces of parallel digital consumption. Consequently, this dynamic reconfigures the domestic routines, roles, and normative transmissions through which everyday occupations and healthy boundaries are traditionally learned, sustained, and reproduced within the family unit.

3.2.5. Disconnection Strategies

The narratives reveal diverse practical measures that students adopt to manage their digital consumption. These strategies include setting limits, reorganizing daily routines, protecting rest, and prioritizing face-to-face and nature-based interactions, as evidenced by the following accounts:

"I have opted for uninstalling apps and set my phone to 'no-disturb' mode" (P7, EI-7)

"I use a face-mask to not wake up. I use to fall sleep with my phone on" (P3, EI-3)

"When I go to see my friend in Santiago I almost don't use my phone. I'm there talking, occupying myself to study I use a stopwatch" (P6, EI-6)

"I feel that when you do outdoor activities, you get to your house feeling complete. Being on a river heals you. You have to take advantage of natural spaces to go out." (P8, EI-8)

"If we eat I don't take my phone with me. I leave it charging. Even when go out to clean the yard or any outdoor activity" (P12, EI-12)

"A strategy is to have a schedule in which you do nothing, not even reading. Like a 'Brain-break', like a mental pause in a specific schedule." (P15, EI-15)

Based on these testimonies, such actions can be understood as deliberate efforts to restore occupational balance. From an occupational science perspective (Wilcock, 2007), these disconnection practices also point toward a potential reconstruction of a more diverse occupational repertoire, reintroducing occupations that sustain well-being through relationships, bodily engagement, environmental connection, silence, and creativity.

3.2.6. Reflections and Advice

Within the participants' narratives, reflexivity emerges as a turning point. The articulation of advice shifts from merely describing effects to attributing meaning and proposing change, a shift that can be interpreted as a reconstruction of occupational identity. In this process, the accounts suggest that disconnection is resignified: it moves from being experienced as "missing out" (FoMO) to being understood as a way of "recovering" bonds, hobbies, and presence, that is, as re-occupation.

"Like reading, painting, knitting (...) I don't forget enriching activities beyond reels/TikTok (...) It would be good to regulate inside the classroom, restricting its use only to academic related tasks." (P7, EI-7)

"Advice: reflect, the only way to detach from social media, don't seek in soulless tech" (P1, EI-1)

"Invitation: enjoy people you love, more than your phone. Content is not going anywhere." (P6, EI-6)

Interpretively, these voices appear to formulate a practical equilibrium ethics: they prioritize finite/embodyed occupations (with someone, body-making, creating) over infinite flows (feeds), a stance that directly tensions the university's temporal/affective organization.

3.3. Intra-Sample Variation

Preliminary comparative narrative analysis by academic year suggests that upper-cycle students (fourth and fifth years) tend to articulate more consolidated self-regulation strategies and exhibit greater reflexivity regarding the psychological and academic costs of intensive device use. For instance, participants in later stages of their training described deliberate disconnection practices, such as explicitly defining offline periods to manage cognitive load (e.g., P15, 4th year: "Strategy: scheduled nothing time, no reading, brain break, mental pause specific time, day distraction/rest brain"). This observed capacity for self-regulation is consistent with literature demonstrating that learning autonomy, metacognitive control, and emotional coping become more sophisticated as students' progress through higher education trajectories (Campos-Céspedes et al., 2026; UNESCO, 2023).

Conversely, the narratives of first- and second-cycle students reveal patterns of use that appear more impulsive and less mediated by deliberate monitoring strategies. These younger students more frequently reported substituting previously meaningful activities with digital consumption, demonstrating a greater susceptibility to continuous stimulation (e.g., P11, 2nd year: "I prefer a thousand times being locked in my room studying or consuming social media"). This vulnerability aligns with previous research highlighting the adaptive challenges and digital distractibility prevalent during the initial transition to university life (UNESCO, 2024; Lozano-Mulet et al., 2025).

Furthermore, exploratory analysis suggests relevant variations by gender. Female participants more frequently and intensely described disruptive emotions linked to the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), social comparison, and relational hypervigilance (e.g., P6, Female: "I get FoMO, anxiety, frustration because I could have used my time productively. ... worst is identity loss, that's what I feel"). This heightened affective impact is consistent with existing literature on gender and social media usage (Lacunza et al., 2019; Statista, 2023). In contrast,

male participants tended to emphasize the concrete consequences of hyperconnectivity on their physical well-being, visual fatigue, and academic performance (Linares Pinto, 2023; Pinto-Cortez et al., 2024; Campos-Céspedes et al., 2026).

While these exploratory intra-sample trends should be interpreted with methodological caution given the qualitative nature and size of the sample, they underscore the heterogeneous nature of digital exhaustion and suggest a productive agenda for future comparative studies to examine whether these differences persist with greater depth and methodological rigor (UNESCO, 2024).

4. Discussion

The study's findings illustrate the constitutive ambivalence of hyperconnectivity: on the one hand, it opens opportunities to access educational resources, sustain support networks, and expand communities; on the other, it is associated with digital exhaustion, a sense of time loss, and difficulty interrupting consumption. This ambivalence should not be interpreted as merely the sum of advantages and risks, but as the effect of a sociotechnical assemblage that reorganizes time, attention, and expectations of availability in contemporary university life. In this sense, the study provides situated evidence regarding how these specific participants perceive hyperconnectivity as an immersive element that deeply shapes their daily routines, rather than a mere individual "habit." While these qualitative findings reflect subjective, localized experiences and cannot be generalized as a universal structural condition of broader university life, they capture experiential patterns that align with contemporary sociotechnical literature regarding technological globalization and its less visible effects on youth (UNESCO, 2024; Cifuentes, 2025).

Narratives also reveal enabling uses of connectivity that warrant specific attention. P13 describes building a "living digital library" through selective integration of academic content in social media: "I try to follow serious content creators, I filter, use AI according to what I'm learning at university." This instrumental, reflective use aligns with what Lozano-Mulet et al. (2025) term critical appropriation of platforms and contrasts with compulsive patterns described by other participants. The joint analysis of the two patterns offers a contextualized and nuanced interpretation of technology use, moving beyond oversimplified readings and engaging with the perspective of Ruiz-Palmero et al. (2021), who primarily emphasize its negative effects without distinguishing among different types of use. To avoid a disproportionate interpretative weight on Artificial Intelligence within the broader phenomenon of hyperconnectivity, it is crucial to theoretically decouple its occupational impact from that of entertainment-driven platforms. Social media and streaming services typically induce passive, high-frequency immersion that fragments attention and displaces self-care or rest, leading to traditional occupational imbalance. In contrast, interaction with AI tools represents an active, goal-oriented engagement. Its main implication for Occupational Therapy students does not lie in temporal distraction, but in the transformation of cognitive performance criteria, where the speed of ready-made answers risks replacing the meaningful processes of creation, problem-solving, and professional identity construction.

Furthermore, the findings regarding the family context challenge the common paradigm that academic digital hyperconnectivity is exclusively an individual or peer-driven phenomenon among university students. The narratives expose an intergenerational synchronization of digital consumption, where parents' own device habits mirror and validate those of their children. From an occupational perspective, this shared digital immersion disrupts family co-occupations and alters foundational socialization routines. This aligns with recent sociotechnical research (European Commission, 2023; Martínez-Orozco et al., 2025) which posits that domestic spaces often transition from environments of

occupational restoration and dialogue into spaces of collective digital distraction, thereby reinforcing the cycle of hyperconnectivity from the micro-systemic level.

Additionally, it is theoretically vital to acknowledge that the disruptive phenomena reported by the participants—such as emotional fatigue, academic anxiety, sleep disturbances, and chronic procrastination—are inherently multi-causal dynamics. While this study intentionally isolates and examines these challenges through the lens of digital hyperconnectivity, they cannot be disconnected from broader systemic and structural stressors. Factors such as heavy academic workloads, institutional performance pressures, socioeconomic anxieties, and the developmental transitions typical of emerging adulthood play an equally decisive role in producing occupational imbalance. Therefore, digital hyperconnectivity should not be interpreted as an isolated, linear cause of these difficulties, but rather as an amplifying and compounding element that interacts with and often exacerbates the pre-existing pressures of contemporary university life.

4.1. First Axis: Temporality and Deterioration of Daily Boundaries

The category Experiences and Perceptions of Digital Hyperconnectivity enables an exploration of how algorithmic architecture (Gillespie, 2018) may not only interrupt occupations but also appear to reshape the criteria by which everyday performance is organized. The narratives suggest that students' experiences are characterized not merely by high levels of use, but also by a perceived temporal capture and a reported difficulty disengaging from digital activity. This supports an interpretive analysis of boundary erosion, as described by Martínez et al. (2022) and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), as a practical and situated phenomenon: boundaries seem to erode not only because of limited self-control, but also because platforms encourage continuous consumption, potentially disrupting key transitions such as starting and ending tasks, resting, and maintaining sustained study.

Unlike studies such as Lacunza et al. (2019), which focused on adolescents, these qualitative findings suggest that the challenges associated with intensive device use persist and may become more complex at the university level, where academic demands coexist with greater autonomy in time management and more intensive device use. This perceived reorganization of time is especially relevant in higher education, where performance depends on sustained work rhythms, attentional continuity, and restorative rest, and where prior evidence links intensive use to sleep disruption and concentration difficulties (Statista, 2023; Armaza, 2023).

4.2. Second Axis: Political Economy of Attention

While several sophisticated concepts emerge from analytical interpretations such as algorithmic capture, attentional fragmentation, and the perceived diminution of occupational agency, these must be approached with necessary methodological caution. Within the boundaries of this qualitative design, these phenomena are presented as interpretive possibilities anchored in the students' subjective, lived experiences, rather than as empirically demonstrated, generalizable outcomes. When participants describe the architecture of platforms that maximize permanence and exposure (Gillespie, 2018), this reflects their perceived loss of control rather than an objective measure of algorithmic intervention. Furthermore, the profound emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and temporal dysregulation reported by the participants cannot be unidirectionally attributed to digital hyperconnectivity.

It is crucial to consider overlapping contextual variables: the inherently high academic workload of health science curricula, the high baseline prevalence of stress and depression symptoms documented among the university population in Chile (Instituto Nacional de la Juventud [INJUV], 2019; Campo-Arias & Herazo, 2015), and the normative developmental

challenges of early adulthood. These alternatives, compounding factors likely exacerbate the subjective burden of maintaining constant connectivity, suggesting a highly complex, multifactorial landscape of student well-being.

4.3. Third Axis: Affective and Relational Dimension of Hyperconnectivity

The Emotional Well-Being and Academic Life Balance category provides specific evidence of disruptive emotions (anxiety, guilt, FoMO) and their articulation with deteriorated daily occupational balance. Results show digital consumption-associated malaise is not limited to isolated emotional states but implies interpersonal bond reorganization: hypervigilance, an immediate need for response, and like-validation transform social participation into a demanding, anxiogenic occupation.

This finding aligns with FoMO as a mechanism of online persistence (Przybylski et al., 2013; Linares Pinto, 2023), but it goes further by showing that the phenomenon affects not only the fear of missing out on social media, but also the quality of face-to-face bonds and perceptions of relational identity. Unlike prior studies that have focused mainly on usage frequency (Ruiz-Palmero et al., 2021), the present individual narratives provide richer interpretive depth regarding the subjective, everyday dimension of this experience.

Expanding on the individual and occupational consequences of hyperconnectivity, it is important to recognize the digital ecosystem as a pervasive contemporary cultural environment that actively shapes emotional development and socialization (Lipatova, 2024; UNESCO, 2024). The narratives offer strong evidence of broader sociocultural transformations, shifting the analytical focus beyond individual behavioral deficits. The virtual environment fosters the erosion of personal boundaries and reshapes identity processes, which are strongly mediated by social comparison and idealized narratives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Martínez et al., 2022). More fundamentally, the domestic setting emerges as a culturally situated space in which hyperconnectivity is normalized; participants reported a noticeable displacement of traditional family conversations and shared rituals in favor of parallel digital consumption. This relational reorganization, characterized by hypervigilance and the need for immediate validation, shows how digital environments are reshaping culturally situated forms of belonging and, in turn, transforming the ethical frameworks of contemporary sociability and the transmission of familial support (Galende, 2008).

5. Conclusions

The central phenomenon emerging from this study can be termed digital occupational imbalance: a condition in which permanent connectivity reorganizes time, attention, and meaning in the daily life of university students, such that high-value occupations (rest, creativity, in-person relationships, reflection) are systematically displaced. This phenomenon is inherently ambivalent rather than intrinsically negative, and it is shaped by the type of use, the domestic context, and levels of media literacy.

The analyzed narratives confirm that hyperconnectivity is significantly associated with university students' emotional well-being and with the balance between academic and personal life. However, this relationship is not unidirectional: the same platforms that generate FoMO, anxiety, and temporal capture can, when used reflectively and selectively, also function as academic support resources, tools for community building, and sources of knowledge.

5.1. Implications Directly Supported by Data

The findings solidly support the following implications:

Disconnection strategies reported by participants as effective (temporal limits, offline activities, structured mental breaks) should be incorporated into university wellness programs as concrete, teachable practices rather than generic recommendations.

Family context emerges as a factor that reproduces or modulates hyperconnectivity habits, suggesting that individual-focused interventions have limited reach.

Differentiation by usage type (social networks, AI, streaming) is relevant for understanding the phenomenon and designing tailored responses, given that emotional and cognitive effects vary by platform and usage pattern.

5.2. Institutional and Policy Suggested Implications

It is essential to state that the following institutional proposals are not interventions that were directly tested or empirically validated by this study; rather, they represent practical, context-sensitive implications logically derived from participants' reported struggles and effective disconnection strategies. Based on students' narratives about the tension between pedagogical utility and digital exhaustion, universities must move beyond mere normative prohibitions and consider the following potential avenues for future action:

Institutional Policies for Conscious Disconnection: The narratives suggest the potential value of structurally supporting the students' self-reported need for offline recovery time. Concretely, institutions could implement structural "conscious disconnection" protocols—for instance, formally programming university platforms (e.g., institutional email, academic forums) to silence non-urgent notifications during weekends.

Curricular Media Literacy: Integrating specific, actionable "digital identity and media literacy" modules into the first-year curriculum could be a promising strategy. These modules would guide students in critically and ethically integrating digital tools (Lozano-Mulet et al., 2025; Cancio-Méndez et al., 2024), helping them develop the metacognitive tools needed to manage algorithmic capture.

Structured Disconnection Practices: Based on the students' own successful strategies, the implementation of tools such as timers, "brain breaks," or the Pomodoro technique within pedagogical designs is proposed as a theoretical framework to alleviate cognitive overload and combat digital exhaustion.

These suggestions are intended to open an institutional dialogue and should be approached as conceptual implications to be rigorously tested in future action-research designs.

Moreover, course-level pedagogical measures can operationalize ethical digital integration by (a) embedding a short weekly LMS (Learning Management System)-based wellbeing check with anonymized self-reports and clear, opt-in referral pathways to human support when needed, and (b) incorporating a graded in-class or online deliberation activity where students analyze a real-case use of AI or algorithmic study aids, identify risks (privacy, dependency, bias), and jointly draft a course-specific protocol of responsible tool use. These additions ensure that institutional policy is paired with classroom practices that protect student autonomy, minimize intrusive data collection, and cultivate critical digital literacy as an explicit component of academic formation.

5.3. Future Research Directions

The study opens at least three lines for future research: (1) whether identified patterns are specific to Occupational Therapy training or comparable across university disciplines; (2) which institutional conditions (pedagogical, wellness) foster more sustained self-regulation strategies; and (3) how family environment, particularly in Latin American high domestic connectivity contexts, intervenes in reproducing or modulating documented hyperconnectivity dynamics.

5.4. Limitations

This study presents several methodological limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting its findings. First, the transferability of the results is inherently limited; the purposive sample of 18 Occupational Therapy students drawn from a single private university in Viña del Mar, Chile, precludes generalizing these experiential dynamics to other academic disciplines, public institutions, or distinct international contexts. Nevertheless, this homogeneity was a deliberate methodological choice designed to leverage the participants' academic training in human occupation and health, thereby yielding highly reflexive and deep narratives regarding their occupational balance. Second, the entire analytical corpus relies on self-reported narratives and lacks objective behavioral metrics, digital usage logs, or tracking diaries. While this approach is epistemologically coherent with phenomenological inquiry, self-reported data is highly susceptible to recall bias, introspection limits, and social desirability bias, particularly among Occupational Therapy students who may be intimately familiar with concepts of balance and self-care, and thus feel pressured to demonstrate theoretical mastery of their own occupational balance. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the research design captures a singular experiential snapshot, severely limiting any ability to infer causality or observe how digital habits and emotional exhaustion evolve longitudinally across the university lifecycle. Fourth, exploratory trends regarding gender differences must be interpreted with caution due to the small and uneven sample distribution, which limits the robustness of comparative claims. Finally, the specific timing of the fieldwork (June–September 2025) coincided with final examination periods and academic vacations in the Chilean calendar; this temporal variable likely introduced a seasonal inflation effect in narratives about academic stress, emotional overload, and perceptions of occupational imbalance.

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