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AVATARS AND CONFIGURATION OF THE DIGITAL SELF IN PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the construction of the digital self among undergraduate psychology students at a Chilean university in Concepción. It employed a mixed-methods approach with a descriptive and exploratory design. Data were collected through a questionnaire completed by 98 students. The results indicate that the most frequently used avatar among students is personal photography, reported by 89% of women and 61% of men. The second most common option was characters or comics, used by 74% of men and 39% of women. The findings confirm that digital platforms function as performative scenarios in which individuals construct and manage presentations of the self in dialogue with specific audiences.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the expansion of digital environments has transformed forms of social interaction and processes of identity construction, particularly among young people and university students. According to the report *"Digital Snapshot of Children and Adolescents"* (Criteria & VTR, 2021), the average age for first mobile phone use is 10 years, and more than 90% of children over the age of 13 own a mobile device; additionally, 90% regularly use at least one social media platform. Digital communication platforms—such as social networks, virtual spaces, and avatar-mediated environments—have become established as everyday settings in which individuals not only interact, but also represent and reinterpret their identities.

Donath and Boyd (2004), cited in Del Prete and Pantoja (2020), define digital social networks as public displays of connection and as devices for identity definition in relation to others, in which alterity becomes part of the individual's extended social network. Moreover, this network of contacts functions as a mechanism for validating one's personal profile. These transformations challenge classical theories of psychosocial development and social interaction, inviting their reconsideration in light of emerging technological trends.

From a psychosocial development perspective, Erikson conceptualizes identity as a dynamic process of continuity and change, particularly relevant during youth, when personal exploration and social recognition are articulated. In digital environments, this process takes on new configurations, as individuals have access to symbolic resources that expand opportunities for self-expression, identity experimentation, and control over self-presentation.

In parallel, from the sociology of interaction proposed by Goffman, virtual spaces can be understood as performative scenarios in which individuals manage impressions before diverse audiences, constructing presentations of the self that are adjusted to specific norms, expectations, and situational frameworks.

Butler (1991), cited in Del Prete and Pantoja (2020), argues that multiple selves are constituted through discourse and can be reconfigured in different ways through new, imaginative discursive adjustments. These may include alternative categories, new names, and identity norms encountered in online environments.

In this context, avatars emerge as central symbolic devices in the mediation of digital interaction, functioning as condensed representations of the self and as vehicles of social communication. Their use raises significant questions regarding contemporary forms of subjectivation, the boundaries between the personal and the public, and the psychosocial implications of inhabiting technologically mediated identities.

1.1. Identity and Psychosocial Development in Youth

Drawing on Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, identity formation is conceptualized as a dynamic and ongoing process through which individuals integrate subjective elements of their personal histories and lived experiences with processes of social and cultural recognition (Erikson, 1980, 1993). From this perspective, identity emerges from the interaction between personal characteristics and the sociocultural context in which individuals are embedded.

Accordingly, social and cultural transformations introduce new ways of understanding and experiencing the self (Erikson, 1980). Identity, therefore, should not be understood as a fixed or internally closed entity, but rather as a situated psychosocial construction that is continuously redefined across the life course.

Within his theory, Erikson proposed the existence of eight stages in human psychosocial development, the fifth of which corresponds to the developmental crisis known as *identity versus role confusion*, considered a central developmental task. During this stage, individuals are confronted with the need to integrate past experiences, expectations, and social demands into a relatively coherent narrative of the self (Erikson, 1980, 1993).

This "crisis" does not imply pathology, but rather a normative process characterized by the active exploration of roles, values, and affiliations. Successful resolution of this stage is associated with the virtue of fidelity, understood as the capacity to commit to meaningful identity choices while maintaining a sense of personal continuity (Erikson, 1993; Fierro, 1996).

1.2. Psychosocial Moratorium

One of the most relevant concepts in Erikson's theory for understanding youth identity is that of *psychosocial moratorium*, defined as a culturally sanctioned period of postponement of definitive commitments, during which individuals are able to explore identity alternatives without fully assuming adult responsibilities (Erikson, 1980).

The moratorium does not constitute a void in identity development, but rather an active space of exploration characterized by experimentation, variation, and the testing of life possibilities (Fierro, 1996; Oliva, 2010). In contemporary contexts—marked by the extension of educational trajectories and the flexibilization of traditional markers of adulthood—the moratorium tends to be prolonged, particularly among university populations, where the academic environment functions as a privileged setting for identity exploration (Meeus, 2011).

Erikson's theoretical proposal was later operationalized by Marcia (1966), who introduced the concepts of exploration and commitment as empirical dimensions of identity, giving rise to the so-called *identity statuses*. This model made it possible to investigate identity as an observable and dynamic process rather than as a single, fixed outcome.

Subsequent research has shown that identity develops in the form of trajectories, involving transitions and ongoing reformulations over time, especially during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Meeus, 2011). Recent studies confirm that higher levels of identity resolution are associated with indicators of psychological adjustment, self-concept clarity, and subjective well-being among university students (Mitchell et al., 2021).

1.3. Toward the Digital Self

From an Eriksonian perspective, digital technologies do not replace identity processes but rather reconfigure the conditions under which they are developed, particularly in two central dimensions: exploration and social recognition.

On the one hand, digital environments expand opportunities for identity exploration, functioning as a contemporary analogue of the psychosocial moratorium by providing spaces in which individuals can experiment with roles, styles, and self-narratives. On the other hand, as sites of persistent social interaction, digital platforms intensify processes of validation and recognition—elements that are fundamental to identity consolidation from an Eriksonian standpoint (Erikson, 1980; Meeus, 2011).

Thus, the digital self may be understood as a contemporary mode of identity construction, consistent with the conception of identity as a psychosocial process that is historically mediated and culturally configured (Erikson, 1993).

1.4. Social Interaction in the Digital Era

As noted in previous sections, individual identity is shaped through an ongoing process of interaction between subjectivity and the experiences individuals undergo within the various sociocultural contexts in which they live. Within this process, social factors play a fundamental role, as they directly influence the construction of personality. Identity, therefore, is not a static entity, but rather is continually molded through interaction with the social environment, within a constant interplay of roles and statuses that provide a certain order to both personal and collective life. This perspective was developed by the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman through his dramaturgical approach to everyday life (Goffman, 2001).

Goffman employs the theater as a metaphor for everyday social life. Social actors (individuals) perform their acts (roles) on different stages (the social spaces in which they move) in order to convince an audience (others who observe them) that they are adequately fulfilling the roles assigned by society in accordance with their particular circumstances. In this way, the audience accepts the performance as valid and legitimizes it by granting the status associated with each role. Ultimately, this legitimation enables individuals to access the benefits and responsibilities linked to those roles. Consequently, individuals may accumulate or lose privileges, power, or material resources depending on how convincing their performance is. To achieve this, people adapt their ways of acting and dressing in order to perform their dramatic roles effectively, creating a "mask" that facilitates role performance while simultaneously protecting their most intimate identity—that which relates to their personal subjectivities, or self.

From this perspective, there exists a visible space in which action takes place—the performance enacted for others—which must align with the expectations of appearance and conduct held by each social group. Goffman termed this space the *front stage*. At the same time, there is an area that remains hidden from the audience, where actors prepare their performances and where there is room for relaxation and even for mistakes. This space is known as the *back stage*, or the backstage of the performance. Each social setting thus has its own audience, its own role expectations, and a corresponding back stage, which the actor manages with varying degrees of success depending on contextual conditions and personal experience.

It is important to note that Goffman conceived these spaces within the framework of face-to-face interactions, characterized by immediacy and shaped by factors such as paralanguage (Rizo, 2011). His work did not anticipate the mediation of interaction through contemporary virtual environments, as he passed away in 1982. Consequently, Goffman's theoretical contributions were grounded in the analysis of interactions occurring in contexts of physical co-presence and focused on the personal management of verbal and nonverbal impressions through which the reality of everyday life is constructed.

1.5. The Virtual Environment as a New Performative Space

Since the emergence of computers nearly ninety years ago, the ways in which people work, communicate, and relate to one another have changed at an accelerated pace. Today, virtuality opens up the possibility for individuals to diversify the settings in which they act and interact, particularly for younger generations, whose social relationships increasingly unfold within digital environments. Virtuality breaks with the relational norms of previous generations that were centered exclusively on face-to-face interaction, giving rise instead to multiple, fragmented, and simultaneous spaces characterized by hyperconnectivity and constant visibility, thereby reconfiguring social life in profound and enduring ways.

In this context, masks become selective according to the specific virtual spaces individuals inhabit, responding to the demand for acceptance through mechanisms such as the "like," which exerts pressure—especially on young people—to display themselves and progressively reduce the boundaries of the private sphere. This is a world that compels visibility, where everything is encouraged to be seen (Han, 2022), and which, as a result, operates through continuous symbolic surveillance. Such conditions increase the likelihood of phenomena such as harassment, stigmatization (Goffman, 2001), and labeling.

1.6. Objectives

The general objective of this study was to analyze the construction of the digital self among university students through the use of avatars in digital environments. In addition, three specific objectives were established. First, the study sought to describe the use of digital devices and the main social media platforms utilized by university students. Second, it aimed to identify the types of avatars employed by students across different digital environments. Finally, the study intended to describe the relationship between the offline self and the digital self.

2. Methodology

This research corresponds to a mixed-methods study with a descriptive and exploratory design, based on the administration of a self-administered online survey (Hernández et al., 2014, 2018). The sample followed a non-probabilistic self-selection design; therefore, the results are interpreted with scope limited to the respondent group, without direct statistical inference to the overall population.

All students enrolled in the Psychology program at a Chilean university in Concepción were invited to participate (N = 354). Of these, 102 students responded to the survey (four declined to participate), resulting in a final sample of 98 cases.

The statistical analyses conducted were descriptive in nature. Microsoft Excel and SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 25, were used for data processing. The analysis involved descriptive and exploratory statistics, including the construction of frequency tables and cross-tabulations, as well as the calculation of basic statistical indicators. These procedures subsequently enabled the development of graphical representations to facilitate data visualization and interpretation.

To complement and deepen the information obtained, the instrument also included open-ended questions. These responses were analyzed through thematic analysis, allowing for a closer examination

of students' perceptions regarding the object of study. The qualitative data were processed using MAXQDA Analytics 26 software. Methodologically, the analysis began with a word frequency analysis supported by the creation of word clouds, followed by the use of word trees, which facilitated the identification of semantic associations and core meaning structures within students' responses.

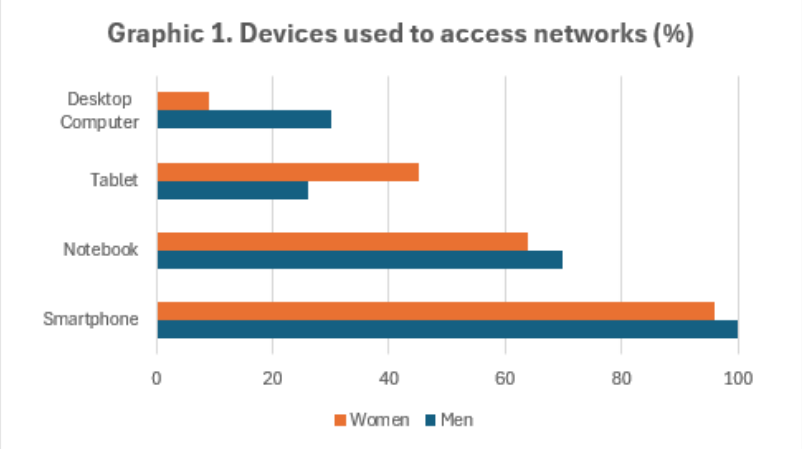
3. Results: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

This section presents the results obtained from both the quantitative and qualitative approaches, emphasizing the main characteristics of the variables analyzed as well as the emerging patterns identified in the open-ended responses. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the study's findings.

3.1. Quantitative Analysis

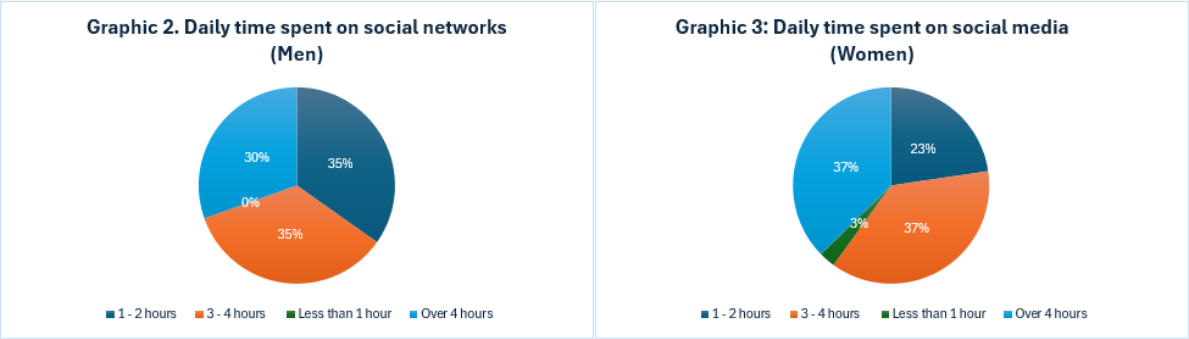
The sample consisted of 98 students, of whom 76.5% were women and 23.5% were men. Regarding gender identity, 74.5% of the sample identified as female, 23.5% as male, and 2% as trans men. All respondents (100%) reported using social media platforms. When asked about their digital competencies—that is, their ability to use computers and other electronic devices—20.4% reported a basic level, 61.2% an intermediate level, and 18.4% an advanced level.

The average age at which participants began using social media was 11 years, with no significant differences between sexes. Smartphones and laptops were identified as the preferred devices for accessing digital platforms (see Graphic 1).



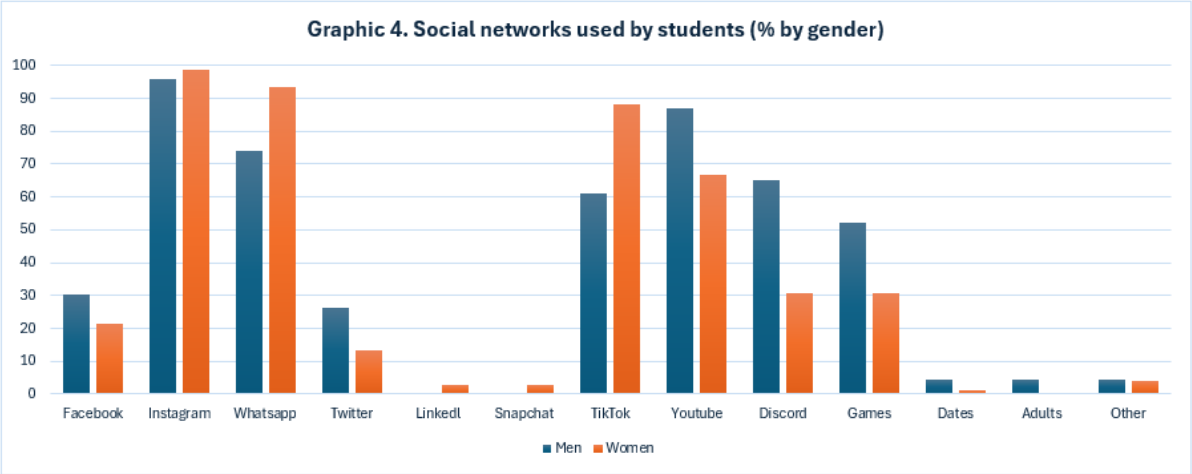
Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

It is noteworthy that when asked whether they had any form of parental supervision at the onset of their social media use, 53.3% of women reported having such supervision, compared to 43.5% of men. Regarding the amount of daily time spent on social media (see Graphics 2 and 3), a significant finding is that students of both sexes report usage exceeding three to four hours per day.



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

When students were asked about the social networks they use, **Instagram** emerged as the most widely used platform among both genders. However, an analysis of usage patterns reveals relevant differences. Among women, social media use is primarily oriented toward creating communication spaces and establishing personal networks. In contrast, among men, these uses are broader, incorporating functions related to information access and entertainment.

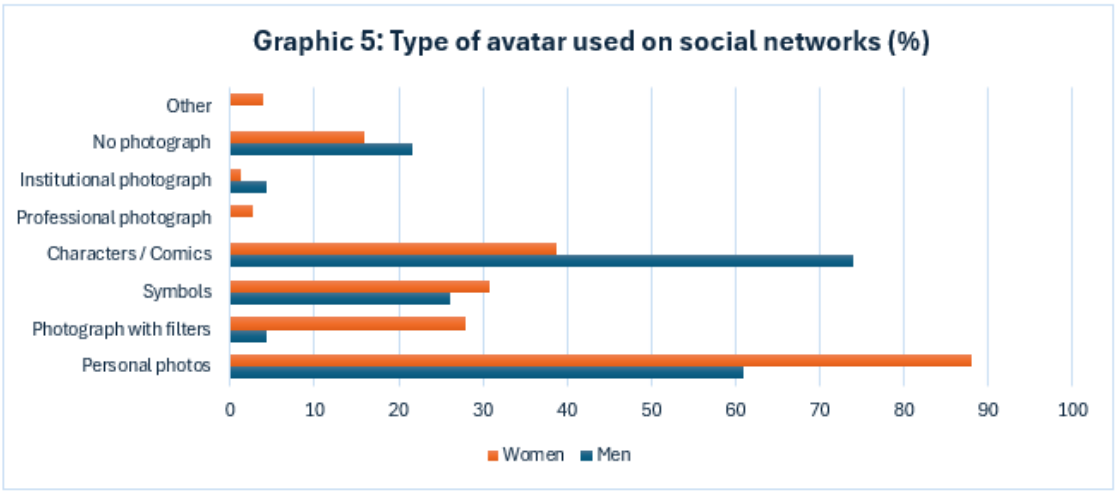


Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

It is particularly noteworthy that platforms centered on short-form video content appear to be consolidating their prominence among these young individuals as primary means of communication and self-expression.

Regarding the type of avatar predominantly used by university students, the data indicate that personal photographs occupy the first position, reported by 89% of women and 61% of men. In second place are characters/comics, selected by 74% of men and 39% of women (see Graphic 5).

These findings further underscore significant gender-based differences. Specifically, 89% of women employ a realistic or self-referential avatar, whereas 74% of men demonstrate a preference for fictitious or alterity-based representations.



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

These results are consistent with the ways in which young people use social networks. In the case of men, usage is more strongly oriented toward gaming and entertainment, whereas among women it is more closely associated with social self-representation.

When asked whether avatars allow them to experiment with different versions of themselves, 68.4% of respondents answered affirmatively. Disaggregated by gender, this corresponds to 65.2% of men and 69.3% of women. Similarly, in response to the question *"Does your avatar allow you to display aspects of your identity that you do not usually show?"*, 65.2% of men and 69.3% of women responded positively.

Despite this, respondents reported that they do not frequently change their avatars, particularly men (87%), compared to 68% of women. Viewed from another perspective, women appear to engage more actively with their avatars across the different social networks they use. This behavior does not necessarily reflect differences in personality, as it may instead be related to aesthetic considerations or other intentions.

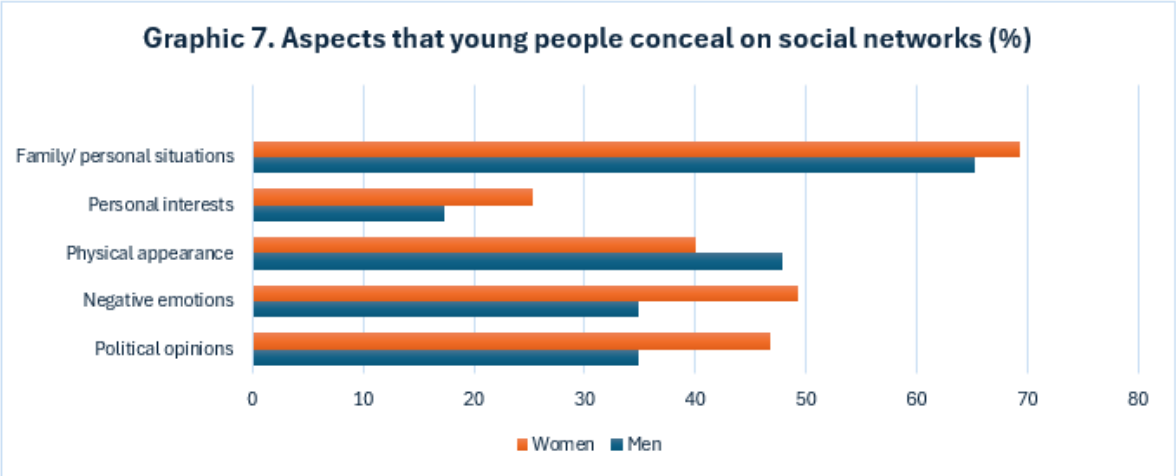
Finally, when asked whether they change their avatars based on others' opinions or their emotional states, the vast majority of university students reported that they do not (82.3% of men and 84% of women). Nevertheless, they do acknowledge modifying certain aspects of their avatars with some frequency (see Graphic 6).



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

Regarding the motivations underlying these modifications, students primarily focus on protecting sensitive aspects of their lives, such as personal or family-related issues. This suggests an effort to safeguard one's identity from the vulnerability associated with public exposure in digital media. Likewise, it is noteworthy that respondents tend to avoid expressing negative emotions or political opinions, as these may give rise to potential conflict.

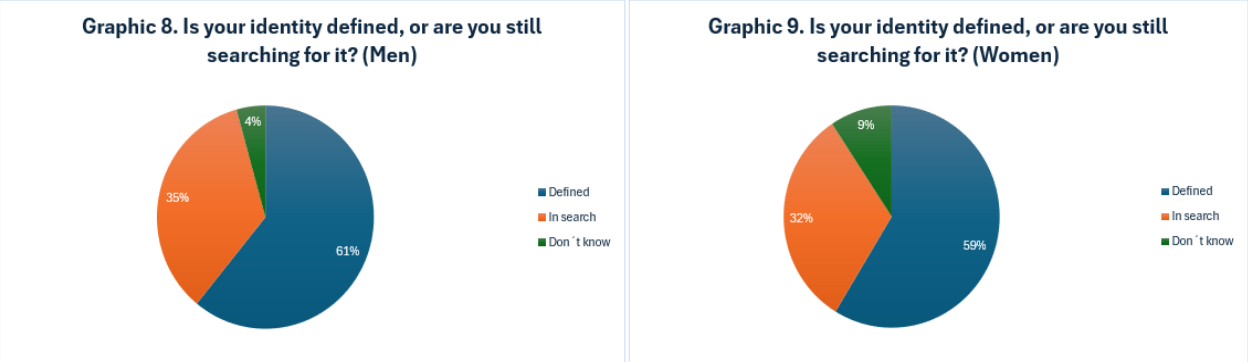
Another relevant finding within this group is that men appear to be proportionally more concerned than women about not displaying an unfavorable physical appearance within their respective groups (see Graphic 7).



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

Finally, in the quantitative section of the survey, students were asked about how well-defined they perceive their identity to be at present. More than 40% of respondents indicated that they are still in the

process of constructing their identity. This finding can be understood as a natural and expected response when considered in light of Erik Erikson's concept of identity moratorium.



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative component of the study was developed on the basis of three open-ended questions incorporated into a predominantly quantitative questionnaire. An exploratory categorical–thematic approach was adopted in order to deepen the understanding of the meanings attributed by the students. Each of the three questions and its corresponding analysis are presented below.

Are there aspects of your personality, way of thinking, or way of feeling that you deliberately do not show through your avatar or digital identity? Please explain which ones and why you decide to conceal them.

Figure 1. *Word cloud for Question 1.*



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

3.2.1 Identity Construction

3.2.1.1 The Avatar as a Reflection or Extension of the Self

A significant proportion of the participating students indicate that the avatar does not construct identity but rather reflects or extends it. Within these accounts, identity is conceived as relatively stable and prior to the digital environment, while the avatar is understood as a secondary visual representation.

University students emphasize that the avatar expresses tastes, interests, or aesthetic aspects, but does not modify who they are or how they understand themselves. This reinforces a notion of identity

as internal, coherent, and relatively closed, in which the digital sphere operates as a showcase rather than as an origin of identity construction.

E11:

"No, I do not think my avatar influences how I construct or understand my identity. The avatar I use is only a visual representation of myself, but it does not directly influence my identity. I believe identity is mainly based on personality, values, and character. My avatar does not change who I am or how I see myself as a person."

3.2.1.2 The Avatar as a Space for Identity Exploration

In contrast, another group of students acknowledges that the avatar does influence how they understand or develop their identity, particularly by allowing them to experiment with, rehearse, or project possible versions of the self. This use is associated with the freedom afforded by digital platforms, partial anonymity, and the absence of immediate consequences.

In this perspective, the avatar is described as a reflective tool that enables individuals to view themselves "from the outside" and to explore tastes, positions, or traits that are not always expressed in everyday life.

E85:

"Yes, I think that different uses of avatars allow for varying levels of freedom, for example, when expressing an opinion on a topic or even offering a critique of a movie. Using an avatar of a character rather than a personal image makes one feel less restricted, since the chances that someone known or close will know it is you on that social network become minimal (unless one is identified through the username). Therefore, in my case, I feel that using an avatar that is not a personal image does allow for more fluid experimentation with identity, perhaps with aspects that one represses due to embarrassment, insecurity, or fear of others' judgment."

E79:

"It does not influence how I construct or understand my personality, since I am clear about who I am and how I present myself. What I reflect about myself on social networks is what I want people to know; however, I do not pretend to be someone different."

3.2.1.3 Lack of Influence and Distance from the Digital Self

A third group adopts a more distant or critical stance, arguing that the avatar has no real impact on identity and even describing it as superficial, fictitious, or irrelevant.

Here, a clear distinction emerges between "real life" and "digital life," where social networks are not considered a legitimate space for self-construction.

E84:

"My avatar is just a part of me that is not important enough to influence how I build my identity, because I only share superficial elements of myself."

E69:

"I am simply looking for a way to share and meet people; it is just a medium."

3.2.2 Management of Visibility and Concealment

The question posed to students in this section was: *Are there aspects of your personality, way of thinking, or way of feeling that you deliberately do not show through your avatar or digital identity? Please explain which ones and why you decide to conceal them.*

Figure 2. Word cloud for Question 2.



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

3.2.2.1 Concealment of Political and Social Opinions

Some students express apprehension about displaying aspects of their personality primarily associated with political opinions, as well as more sensitive dimensions of their identity, including sexual orientation. The vast majority perceive social networks as spaces that can be used negatively by certain individuals. For this reason, they choose to protect specific aspects of their identity in order to avoid public exposure and the risk of social sanction.

E6:

"I do not express my political position through my profile picture, not because I am trying to hide it, but because the photo serves another purpose."

E20:

"If there is 'something' I hide, it is related to politics, mainly because people do not know how to have a conversation with someone who thinks differently from them, and that bores me."

3.2.2.2 Concealment for Security and Privacy

Another relevant category relates to the protection of highly personal information, as well as the safeguarding of family members and internal family dynamics. The majority of university students identify social networks as insecure and potentially dangerous spaces.

E27:

"I hide a bit who my family members are, for security reasons."

E38:

"I feel unsafe in the online space; I believe it is not a safe place to share your ideas, and since I started using it, I have perceived it that way."

3.2.2.3 Concealment of Emotions and Vulnerability

In this domain, several students report concealing emotions such as sadness and insecurity due to fear of being perceived as weak on social networks. Consequently, they avoid selecting or sharing content related to their emotional states.

E39:

"I do not often show my feelings or how a situation makes me feel. I do not show them because I believe they are part of my privacy and are not important to display, at least not on social networks."

E11:

"Yes, there are things I do not show in the digital world because I consider them to be more personal and intimate aspects, such as insecurities or problems."

E31:

"Negative emotions such as anger, because everything that happens on social networks stays there and people take it very seriously; afterwards, they may think I am violent."

Across several accounts, there is a shared perception that what is said or published online remains permanently accessible. As a result, students are cautious about what they express. This reflects an intuitive concern regarding the digital footprint that each individual leaves on social networks.

3. Differences Identified Between the Projected Self and the Private Self

The following category addresses the question: *What differences do you identify between the version of yourself that you project through your avatar and the way you are in more private or intimate spaces? To what do you attribute these differences?*

Figure 3. Word cloud for Question 3.

Principio del formulario
Final del formulario



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

Here is a more precise and academically refined version**,** maintaining conceptual accuracy and explicitly preserving the term *avatar* throughout:

Among the participants, it is possible to identify a group of students who report presenting themselves differently in public contexts compared to private ones. Students who describe themselves as more introverted in offline contexts indicate that, through their avatar, they tend to be more communicative and daring in social networks. Conversely, students who identify as more extroverted in offline settings report adopting a more reserved or restrained stance in online environments.

E5:

"Only that in digital contexts I am more expressive than in person; although, depending on whether the person is close to me or not, I may become a bit more expressive or open."

E64:

"Normally, in person I am a bit quieter; social networks sometimes allow me to express certain things that I would feel embarrassed to say face to face."

In contrast, another group of students report no significant differences between their offline self and the self they project through their avatar. In these cases, coherence is observed between the offline self and the digital self, with the avatar functioning as an extension of the offline identity into the virtual environment. This group is smaller in number and, nevertheless, acknowledges that they do not share all aspects of themselves online, deliberately withholding certain comments, preferences, or personal dimensions.

E7:
"I don't really see much difference between what I project and who I am, honestly."

E84:
"I do not identify any difference, because the little that I share is seen by a limited number of people whom I know; therefore, I do not need to project a version different from the one I show in person."

Overall, the findings suggest a clear segmentation of audiences. Students adjust what they communicate and display through their avatar according to the perceived audience on each platform, modulating their self-presentation in relation to context, visibility, and social proximity.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the construction of the digital self among undergraduate psychology students at a Chilean university in Concepción, focusing on the role of the avatar as a mediator of interaction in digital environments. Using an exploratory–descriptive approach, the findings confirm that digital platforms do not constitute neutral spaces of communication but rather function as performative environments in which individuals actively construct and manage presentations of the self in continuous interaction with specific audiences.

The digital self does not emerge as a dissociated or fragmented identity separate from the offline self; instead, it appears as a complementary dimension characterized by selective processes of visibility, emphasis, and concealment. This dynamic poses important challenges for higher education, particularly in relation to digital well-being, mental health, and the integral formation of students.

The results demonstrate that the avatar does not operate merely as an aesthetic or decorative resource. Rather, it fulfills a relevant symbolic function in processes of identity exploration, especially during a life stage marked by psychosocial moratorium. Consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Erik Erikson, digital environments expand opportunities for rehearsal, experimentation, and identity negotiation, allowing students to explore different facets of the self without fully compromising their offline identity.

However, this exploration is not unrestricted. Most participants acknowledge deliberately concealing certain aspects of their personality, which reflects a conscious management of boundaries between public and private spheres. In this sense, the avatar emerges as a key instrument in the configuration of the digital self in contemporary university contexts, as young people intertwine their offline and online experiences into their everyday sociocultural references (Gómez, 2007).

From this perspective, the virtual environment appears as a space of exploration in which the avatar seeks to represent, as faithfully and strategically as possible, those aspects of the self that the individual wishes to make visible. This interpretation aligns with the increasing affordances offered by digital platforms for the customization of virtual appearance in ways that enhance social acceptability and symbolic coherence (Mazerant et al., 2025).

From a dramaturgical standpoint, drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, digital environments can be understood as stages on which students manage impressions through visual, narrative, and symbolic choices associated with their avatar. In this framework, the avatar operates as a "mask" that does not imply deception, but rather a situational adaptation of the self to the norms, expectations, and interactional codes of each platform.

Students' reports that they do not modify their avatar primarily in response to others' opinions suggest a degree of agency and autonomy in the construction of the digital self, challenging the notion of an identity entirely determined by external validation. At the same time, these practices reaffirm the existence of a managed process of self-presentation aimed at achieving social acceptance. As in offline contexts, the individual negotiates with the audience what is displayed in order to attain recognition linked to the role being performed.

Young people carefully regulate their avatar-mediated performances to avoid ridicule or social sanction, even within virtual spaces. In this sense, the avatar is not false but strategic. The virtual social self is protected as much as, or even more than, the offline self, given that social sanctions in digital contexts may be equally or more damaging than the direct forms of bullying experienced by previous generations (Jonathan Haidt, 2024).

The management of multiple digital stages introduces new tensions into identity formation. Individuals must now regulate not only physical, face-to-face contexts but also multiple virtual environments that can intersect with and influence offline life. Within this framework, the avatar

functions as a regulatory device that mediates identity across contexts, enabling young people to manage visibility, belonging, vulnerability, and recognition in settings characterized by high symbolic exposure.

Finally, considering the non-probabilistic nature of the sample and the descriptive scope of the study, future research should adopt longitudinal designs and more extensive qualitative methodologies. Such approaches would allow for a deeper examination of digital self trajectories across the university life course, as well as their implications for mental health, social participation, and contemporary processes of subjectivation.

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