

Original Article

Occupational balance in occupational therapy students at a university

Equilibrio ocupacional en estudiantes de terapia ocupacional de una institución universitaria

Equilíbrio ocupacional entre estudantes de terapia ocupacional de uma instituição universitária

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Abstract

Introduction: Entering university involves a transitional stage marked by academic, social, and personal changes. Adapting to this new environment requires not only meeting academic demands but also managing emotions, interpersonal relationships, and self-care, factors that may influence well-being, academic success, and occupational balance. **Objective:** To describe the occupational balance of occupational therapy students at a university in Cali, Colombia. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted with 185 occupational therapy students. Data were collected using a sociodemographic questionnaire and the OBQ-E. Categorical variables were reported as frequencies and percentages, while numerical variables were presented as means and standard deviations. Student's t-test and ANOVA were used to compare means between groups, considering $p < 0.05$ statistically significant. **Results:** Most participants were women (76.76%), aged between 18 and 20 years, predominantly from urban areas and belonging to socioeconomic strata 2 and 3. The mean occupational balance score was 39.82. **Conclusions:** Students perceived a moderate level of occupational balance, engaging in meaningful and desired activities. However, they reported difficulties regarding the time available to perform mandatory activities, maintaining a balance between energy-giving and energy-draining activities, and feeling satisfied with the amount of time dedicated to rest and sleep.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy, Activities of Daily Living, Students.

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Resumo

Introdução: A entrada na universidade implica uma etapa de transição com mudanças acadêmicas, sociais e pessoais. Adaptar-se a esse novo ambiente não envolve apenas responder às demandas acadêmicas, mas também gerenciar emoções, relações interpessoais e o autocuidado, aspectos que podem influenciar o bem-estar, o sucesso estudantil e o equilíbrio ocupacional. **Objetivo:** Descrever o equilíbrio ocupacional de estudantes de terapia ocupacional de uma instituição universitária em Cali, Colômbia. **Métodos:** Estudo transversal com 185 estudantes de terapia ocupacional. As informações foram coletadas por meio de um questionário sociodemográfico e do questionário OBQ-E. Os dados categóricos foram apresentados em frequências e porcentagens e as variáveis numéricas em médias com desvios padrão. Para comparar médias entre grupos, foram utilizados o teste T de Student e ANOVA, considerando valor $p < 0,05$ como significativo. **Resultados:** A maioria dos participantes era do sexo feminino (76,76%), com idades entre 18 e 20 anos, predominantemente residentes em áreas urbanas dos estratos econômicos 2 e 3. A pontuação média de equilíbrio ocupacional foi de 39,82. **Conclusões:** Os estudantes percebem um equilíbrio ocupacional moderado, realizando atividades com significado e vontade. No entanto, apresentaram dificuldades em relação ao tempo para realizar atividades obrigatórias, em manter o equilíbrio entre atividades que dão e tiram energia e em estarem satisfeitos com o tempo dedicado ao descanso e ao sono.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional, Atividades Cotidianas, Estudantes Universitários.

Resumen

Introducción: El ingreso a la universidad implica una etapa de transición con cambios académicos, sociales y personales. Adaptarse a este nuevo entorno no solo conlleva responder a las demandas académicas, sino también manejar emociones, relaciones interpersonales y el autocuidado, aspectos que pueden influir en el bienestar, el éxito estudiantil y el equilibrio ocupacional. **Objetivo:** Describir el equilibrio ocupacional de estudiantes de terapia ocupacional de una institución universitaria en Cali, Colombia. **Método:** Estudio transversal con 185 estudiantes de terapia ocupacional. Se recopiló información mediante un cuestionario sociodemográfico y el cuestionario OBQ-E. Los datos categóricos fueron presentados en frecuencias y porcentajes y las variables numéricas en medias con desviaciones estándar. Para comparar medias entre grupos se utilizaron la prueba T de Student y ANOVA, considerando un valor $p < 0,05$ como significativo. **Resultados:** La mayoría de los participantes fueron mujeres (76,76%), con edades entre 18 y 20 años, predominantemente residentes en zonas urbanas de estratos económicos 2 y 3. El puntaje promedio en equilibrio ocupacional fue 39,82. **Conclusiones:** Los estudiantes perciben un equilibrio ocupacional moderado, ejecutando actividades con sentido y que desean hacer. Sin embargo, muestran dificultades respecto al tiempo para ejecutar las actividades obligatorias, tener equilibrio entre las actividades que dan y quitan energía, y estar satisfechos con el tiempo dedicado al descanso y el sueño.

Palabras clave: Terapia Ocupacional, Actividades Cotidianas, Estudiantes.

Introduction

Entering university is a transitional stage marked by academic, social, and personal changes. According to Delgado et al. (2019), adapting to this new environment requires not only responding to academic demands but also managing emotions, interpersonal relationships, and self-care. This adaptability is linked to psycho-emotional factors such as emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and social support, all of which influence well-being and academic success.

Studies have shown an increase in mental health problems among university students, including symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. Recent research in Israel found that approximately 50% of students experienced moderate levels of depression, anxiety, and stress following traumatic events that affected their occupational patterns (Györi et al., 2023). These findings underscore the need to consider the university not only as a space for academic training but also as an environment that actively promotes students' mental health and overall well-being.

In this sense, the university environment constitutes a demanding space where academic overload, pressure to perform, and the accumulation of tasks generate significant levels of chronic stress among students. According to Pozos-Radillo et al. (2015), these conditions affect not only psychological and physiological well-being but also daily behavior, directly interfering with the ability to maintain a healthy balance among different daily life activities. Furthermore, the university stage, characterized by the search for autonomy and identity construction, increases pressure due to self-imposed and external expectations, exacerbating anxiety and chronic stress (Antúnez & Vinet, 2012). Recent research also indicates that a lack of balance between academic and daily life activities may increase the risk of reduced quality of life among university students (Liu et al., 2025).

From an occupational therapy perspective, occupational balance, understood as the appropriate and satisfactory distribution of daily activities, is a key determinant of well-being. The imbalance caused by academic overload can limit the time available for self-care, recreation, and social life, compromising not only subjective well-being but also academic and social performance (Györi et al., 2023). Given this situation, it is essential for higher education institutions to implement psychosocial support strategies, foster a culture of self-care, and recognize occupational balance as a fundamental pillar of academic success and overall well-being.

Furthermore, socioeconomic factors further complicate the student experience. The need to balance academic and work demands in order to meet basic needs can significantly reduce the time available for study and leisure, seriously affecting students' mental health (Hulla, 2021).

Similarly, the excessive use of electronic devices and social media, while facilitating social interaction, has been shown to interfere with basic daily activities such as sleeping, studying, and spending time with family (De la Villa & Suárez, 2016). A study by Romero-Tébar et al. (2021) found that occupational imbalance is directly associated with a higher risk of problematic internet use, significantly affecting the quality of life of university students.

Investigating occupational balance among young university students is crucial for identifying how the distribution of their activities influences their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Understanding these factors allows for the design of effective interventions that promote balanced lifestyles, preventing conditions related to stress,

anxiety, and academic overload, thereby improving students' quality of life and academic performance.

In addition, fostering research in this area contributes to the development of university policies focused on holistic well-being. Having robust scientific evidence will allow institutions to design mental health prevention and promotion strategies based on the principle of occupational balance, creating healthier, more sustainable, and inclusive educational environments that promote not only academic success but also the quality of life of the student population.

This is especially relevant considering that occupational balance is one of the conceptual pillars of contemporary occupational therapy, understood as a dynamic state in which the various occupations of daily life are distributed harmoniously, satisfactorily, and meaningfully (Backman, 2004). From a historical perspective, Meyer (1922) argues that health is maintained when there is a balance between work, rest, and leisure, which he termed a "life program" and which represents the foundation of physical and mental well-being. This notion underscores that mental health depends not only on the absence of disease but also on balanced participation in fundamental occupations such as work, self-care, rest, and leisure. From this perspective, occupational balance is understood as an indispensable condition for overall well-being.

Particularly in the university context, the relevance of occupational balance takes on critical dimensions, as academic life is configured as a highly demanding ecosystem, characterized by intense cognitive loads, social pressures, and identity transitions. Within this framework, Romero-Tébar et al. (2021) identified an inverse relationship between occupational balance and problematic internet use in occupational therapy students, suggesting that a deficit in the distribution of meaningful activities favors addictive behavior patterns. This finding broadens the understanding of occupational imbalance as a risk factor not only for subjective distress but also for the emergence of maladaptive behaviors.

Likewise, the abrupt changes in daily routines imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the vulnerability of occupational balance in university students. In the study conducted by Srikhamjak et al. (2022) study showed that the loss of meaningful activities and confinement negatively affected the mental health of Polish students, demonstrating that disruptions to occupational patterns directly impact indicators of psychological well-being. This analysis is particularly relevant because it reveals that occupational balance is not a static concept, but rather a dynamic one, susceptible to sociocultural and environmental influences. These conditions also affect university professors, as observed in the study by Calvo-Paz et al. (2022), which identified changes in occupational participation during confinement. These adjustments were attributed to an increase in daily activities, a lack of variety between chosen and obligatory occupations, and satisfaction with the time dedicated to rest and sleep.

However, in response to the changes brought about by confinement, adjustments and adaptations emerged that allowed the maintenance of well-being despite the restriction of meaningful occupational activities, as reported by Valderrama Núñez & Ojeda Águila (2024a). They found that telehealth, understood as an occupation, offers the possibility of providing socio-emotional support and fosters collaborative work focused on well-being during COVID-19 isolation. This type of care, as the authors demonstrate, allows the

home to be recognized as a meaningful territory, where material and relational resources are jointly appropriated by the team, including students and teachers.

Similarly, the same authors revealed that telehealth, as an important source of quality of life during confinement, needs to be integrated into professional training plans. Its potential is promising to the extent that sufficient resources, adequate access to technologies and connectivity, and training processes aimed at caregivers and family members are available (Valderrama Núñez & Ojeda Águila, 2024b).

From a therapeutic perspective, the measurement and analysis of occupational balance emerge as priority strategies in interventions with university students. As Anaby et al. (2010) point out, measurement instruments must capture not only the quantity of activities performed but also their subjective value and alignment with the student's life project. This methodological requirement implies recognizing occupational diversity and respecting individual contexts, moving beyond models that homogenize student trajectories.

The importance of promoting occupational balance in university students lies in its potential to prevent conditions related to stress, anxiety, and life dissatisfaction. Articulating classic theoretical models with contemporary proposals centered on subjective experience allows for the development of more comprehensive, culturally relevant, and effective intervention strategies. Promoting occupational balance involves not only addressing the distribution of daily activities but also recognizing their meaning, internal coherence, and capacity to sustain well-being in a high-demand context such as the university environment.

In recent decades, interest in occupational balance has grown, positioning it as a key factor for individuals' mental and physical health (Wagman & Håkansson, 2019). However, most studies have addressed this concept from an individual perspective, without considering how a person's occupations may influence those of their environment. This limitation has led to a partial understanding of the phenomenon, highlighting the need to incorporate an interpersonal perspective. The omission of interpersonal dynamics in occupational balance research has been identified as a gap in the literature, underscoring the relevance of the approach proposed by Wagman & Håkansson (2019).

Furthermore, occupational balance should not only be considered at the individual level but also within a broader social context. Townsend & Wilcock (2004) propose that occupational imbalance may be a manifestation of social and economic inequalities, thus highlighting the importance of occupational justice. Economic and social conditions can significantly influence individuals' ability to achieve occupational balance. For example, people in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability may face greater barriers to participation in recreational or leisure activities.

However, a literature review by Wagman & Håkansson (2019) reveals a scarcity of studies addressing occupational balance from an interpersonal perspective. This knowledge gap represents an opportunity for future research, which could explore factors such as social support, family dynamics, and culture influencing the perception of occupational balance. A deeper understanding of these interactions could lead to more comprehensive strategies for promoting occupational well-being in diverse contexts.

In this sense, it is relevant to investigate how occupational balance is configured across different populations and settings, in this case, educational settings where academic

and social demands generate constant tension. Therefore, this research aims to describe occupational balance in terms of meaning, satisfaction, and variety of occupations among occupational therapy students at a university in Cali, Colombia.

Methodology

An observational, descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted using structured questionnaires administered to students enrolled in an occupational therapy program at a university in Cali, Colombia, between February and March 2025. Ethically, the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki were considered, and the study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the National School of Sport University Institution through minutes No. 126.01.05.01.11 (Colombia, 2025). In accordance with Resolution 8430 of 1993 of the Ministry of Health, the study was classified as minimal-risk research. To mitigate risks, the anonymity and confidentiality of participant data were guaranteed; furthermore, informed consent and/or assent were obtained for participation in the study, and each participant was free to withdraw at any time (Colombia, 1993).

Participants

This study was conducted at a university in the city of Cali, which at the time of the research had a total of 320 students enrolled in the undergraduate occupational therapy program. These students were contacted via email, in-person meetings, and telephone, ultimately resulting in a convenience sample of 185 participants.

Instruments used and procedure for data collection

Online tools were designed for data collection. A survey was created using Google Forms to collect data on sociodemographic variables and occupational balance. The team responsible for sending and collecting data from the project participants received training. Pilot testing of the surveys was conducted to verify the level of comprehension of the questions. Once comprehension and clarity were confirmed, the surveys were sent to each participant's email address. Upon receiving the completed surveys, their completeness was verified.

The Occupational Balance Questionnaire (OBQ-E), in its Spanish version, was used to assess occupational balance. This instrument was designed by Wagman and Håkansson in 2014 and adapted and validated into Spanish by Peral-Gómez (2017). The OBQ-E developed by Wagman & Håkansson (2014) focuses on evaluating satisfaction with the quantity and variety of occupations, as well as with the time dedicated to them, through the degree of agreement with 13 statements. Each question is scored from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and the overall score is obtained by summing all item scores. The total score ranges from 0 to 65, with higher scores indicating greater occupational balance (OB).

Data analysis

Once the data were collected, the database was downloaded in Microsoft Excel 2013 format and subsequently exported to the statistical software Stata v.16. Descriptive

analysis was performed using frequency tables and percentages for categorical variables, and means with their standard deviations (SD) for numerical variables.

Finally, means were compared between two groups using Student's t-test and among more than two groups using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Regarding sociodemographic characteristics, most participants were women (76.76%), aged between 18 and 20 years (47.57%), predominantly from socioeconomic strata 2 and 3 (74.51%), and most lived in urban areas (89.01%). Similarly, most students were in the basic training cycle (from the first to the fifth semester), representing 64.33% of the sample (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characterization of the Participants.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Man	43	23.24
Woman	142	76.76
<i>Age</i>		
Under 18 years old	18	9.73
18 to 20 years old	88	47.57
21 years or older	79	42.70
<i>Socioeconomic stratum</i>		
1	45	24.32
2	78	42.16
3	58	31.35
4	2	1.08
5	2	1.08
<i>Area of residence (n=182)</i>		
Rural	20	10.99
Urban	162	89.01
<i>Training cycle</i>		
Basic (1st to 5th)	119	64.33
Professional (6th to 9th)	66	35.67

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Regarding occupational balance, the mean score obtained by the participants was 39.82 (SD: ±16.16) out of a possible 65 points. Items 2 (“the activities I do daily have meaning for me”), 3 (“I make sure to do the things I really want to do”), and 6 (“I have enough things to do in a regular week”) obtained the highest scores, with mean values of 3.70 (SD: ±1.58), 3.51 (SD: ±1.57), and 3.38 (SD: ±1.53), respectively, corresponding to scores between “somewhat agree” (3) and “strongly agree” (4). In contrast, items 7 (“I have enough time to do the things I need to do”), 12 (“I have a balance between activities that give and those that take away energy”), and 13 (“I am satisfied with the

time dedicated to rest and sleep”) presented the lowest mean scores, ranging between “somewhat disagree” (2) and “somewhat agree” (3) (Table 2).

Table 2. Occupational Balance in Students.

Variables	Mean	SD
<i>Balance between the things I do for myself and for others</i>	3.21	±1.45
<i>The activities I do daily have meaning for me</i>	3.70	±1.58
<i>I make sure to do the things I really want to do</i>	3.51	±1.57
<i>I maintain a balance between the different activities in my daily life</i>	3.04	±1.51
<i>I have variety between what I do alone and what I do with others</i>	3.12	±1.41
<i>I have enough things to do in a regular week</i>	3.38	±1.53
<i>I have enough time to do the things I need to do</i>	2.85	±1.45
<i>I maintain a balance between physical, social, intellectual, and rest activities</i>	2.88	±1.42
<i>I am satisfied with the time I dedicate to the activities I do</i>	2.96	±1.45
<i>I am satisfied with the number of activities I perform in a week</i>	2.98	±1.47
<i>I have variety between the things I have to do and the things I want to do</i>	2.92	±1.38
<i>I have a balance between activities that give and those that take away energy</i>	2.77	±1.41
<i>I am satisfied with the time dedicated to rest and sleep</i>	2.50	±1.46
<i>Total questionnaire score</i>	39.82	±16.16

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Regarding the overall score on the OBQ questionnaire, no statistically significant differences were found according to sociodemographic variables (p-value > 0.05); however, it was observed that increasing age was associated with lower occupational balance scores, with a mean of 37.88 ± 17.21 for the group aged 21 years and older compared to those under 18 years of age (45.77 ± 13.60). Similarly, students living in urban areas presented higher occupational balance, with a mean of 40.53 (±16.10) compared to those living in rural areas (mean 35.05 ± 17.13) (Table 3).

Table 3. Occupational Balance According to Students’ Sociodemographic Characteristics.

Variables	Mean	SD	P Value
<i>Gender</i>			
Man	39.81	±15.07	0.995
Woman	39.83	±16.52	
<i>Age</i>			
Under 18 years old	45.77	±13.60	0.159
18 to 20 years old	40.35	±15.47	
21 years or older	37.88	±17.21	

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Table 3. Continued...

Variables	Mean	SD	P Value
<i>Socioeconomic stratum</i>			
1	35.55	±18.28	0.355
2	41.29	±15.21	
3	41.12	±15.84	
4	44.50	±2.12	
5	36.50	±7.77	
<i>Area of residence (n=182)</i>			
Rural	35.05	±17.13	0.155
Urban	40.53	±16.10	
<i>Training cycle</i>			
Basic (1st to 5th)	40.07	±15.01	0.779
Professional (6th to 9th)	39.37	±18.17	

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Discussion

Studies on occupational balance among university students, such as those by Sánchez et al. (2017), focus primarily on two aspects: first, the analysis of occupational patterns, emphasizing how students organize their time and the meaning they attribute to the various activities they perform daily; and second, the exploration of how they perceive their own occupational balance. The study conducted here revealed key aspects related to sociodemographic variables and to the satisfaction, quantity, and variation of occupations.

Thus, participation in this study was predominantly represented by women and students between 18 and 20 years old. This aligns with the findings of Segura-Carrillo et al. (2025), who, in their case report with fourth-year occupational therapy students, received responses only from women, with a final total of eight participating students. A similar situation was reported by Trigos-Tapia et al. (2022), whose sample consisted of 84.76% women, and by González et al. (2024), who also reported a predominance of female participants in their study.

The female predominance observed in the sample can be understood in light of a widely documented structural phenomenon, in which women tend to concentrate primarily in professions related to care, attention, and support. This tendency stems from historical sociocultural constructs that have associated these tasks with traditionally feminine roles (Matos et al., 2013).

Historically, women have faced the challenge of balancing paid work with domestic and caregiving responsibilities, which has become a central tension in their life and career trajectories. In this context, occupational therapy has established itself as a profession that promotes and reconciles balance among students and professionals, since its philosophical foundation is oriented toward developing solutions that allow individuals to respond to these multiple demands and adapt to different spheres of daily life (Figueiredo et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, the low participation of men in occupational therapy has been explained primarily by factors associated with limited career growth prospects, low salaries,

and reduced social prestige. However, among men who choose this career, the most frequently cited reasons include the possibility of working directly with people, the use of specific skills, job availability, and the opportunity to access leadership positions (Rider & Brashear, 1988).

Similarly, a study conducted in a healthy Chilean population was particularly noteworthy due to the similarities observed, not only in the application of the OBQ-E but also in the sociodemographic aspects that coincided with the results obtained. In this research, most participants were women (81.7%), and although the mean age was 24.38 years, the sample was representative of a predominantly young population. Furthermore, a significant percentage (51%) were university students at the time of data collection (Romero-Ayuso et al., 2024). These findings demonstrate women's interest not only in pursuing careers in the health field but also in their commitment to participating in research, considering the importance of promoting social participation and contributions to health.

On the other hand, the participating university community was primarily concentrated in the low and middle socioeconomic strata. This aligns with a collaborative experience among occupational therapy professionals and future professionals in Latin America and the Caribbean, which revealed that 57.3% of the population belonged to the middle socioeconomic level (Villagra et al., 2021). Similarly, local literature supports the finding that most undergraduate students enrolled in health-related programs come from low- and middle-income backgrounds, as demonstrated by Zapata-López & Betancourt-Peña (2023) in their research in Cali, Colombia, where they found that 53.11% of students belonged to the middle socioeconomic stratum and 38.59% to the low socioeconomic stratum.

These results could be related to the fact that public institutions offer benefits and accessibility to students facing economic difficulties in accessing higher education. Furthermore, they implement strategies that facilitate students' transition, retention, and graduation, thus recognizing not only the need for family support to cover university expenses but also the key role played by the institutions themselves.

Continuing with the sociodemographic aspects, a large proportion of the participants came from urban areas of the city of Cali, which coincides with the findings of Barrera-Herrera & San Martín (2021), who reported that most university students live in urban settings. In their study involving three universities, 88.5% of Chilean students came from urban areas near the universities. Similarly, López-Flórez et al. (2025) corroborated these findings through their study at a university in Colombia, reporting that 80.25% of participants resided in urban areas.

It is important to highlight that the participants in this study were predominantly in their first five semesters of study. This may be related to the higher number of students enrolled in the early years of the program, as well as to the greater willingness and active participation of first-year university students in academic, recreational, and cultural activities. This is particularly relevant considering that students in their first semesters are not yet completing their professional internships, a period that may place greater demands on their university role.

The literature reports that studies involving university students highlight the participation of first- and second-year students in discussions related to health, lifestyle, coping mechanisms, and retention (Callieri & Montes, 2022). Moreno (2022) mentions that, when characterizing the academic performance of health sciences

students, first- and second-year students are used as a reference point. This is because, at this academic level, students can demonstrate the courses they have completed and the habits they have developed to meet the demands of the university environment, as well as the other roles they assume (Sandoval, 2021).

Regarding occupational balance, it was found that occupational therapy students presented a mean balance score of 39.82 points. When compared with the results obtained by Romero-Ayuso et al. (2024) in a healthy Chilean population, this suggests the existence of possible tensions and imbalances in the organization of participants' daily activities. This result is especially relevant considering that future occupational therapists, as promoters of occupational balance in others, should ideally present adequate levels in their own occupational experience. Likewise, this literature emphasizes that occupational balance not only influences the perception of well-being but is also related to self-efficacy and quality of life, fundamental elements in professional practice and comprehensive health (Romero-Ayuso et al., 2024).

These aspects could favor the achievement of occupational balance, considering occupational organization. However, when evaluating occupational balance in university students in the health sciences, this population tends to prioritize occupations such as education and work, neglecting activities that may be gratifying and comforting due to perceived difficulties related to academic demands and optimal performance in daily activities (Ferreira de Sousa et al., 2022).

In agreement with Ferreira de Sousa et al. (2022) and considering the results of this research, low scores were identified regarding satisfaction with the time dedicated to rest and sleep, as well as the balance between activities that provide energy and those that deplete it. This may be related to the demands and expectations that university students must respond to in meeting academic requirements involving performance and participation in daily activities outside the classroom.

Similarly, Larsson et al. (2024) report a decrease in sleep quality among higher education students, which may trigger more episodes of stress during academic training. Managing time between academic and social life can be complex for students in professional programs, especially those in the coping and adaptation stage during their first year.

The general population invests most of its time in productive activities, which may lead to stress and chronic deficiencies in sleep and rest, consequently becoming a public health problem (Liu et al., 2021). Given that the population in this study undergoes life-course changes, as well as transformations in roles and educational level during the first years of training, it is important to highlight that, as students progress in their academic careers, they are assigned new demands. These demands require the development of specific professional competencies for the graduation process, which directly impacts their perception and level of occupational balance.

Continuing, the detailed analysis of this study shows that the highest mean scores were found in items 2 ("the activities I do daily have meaning for me"), 3 ("I make sure to do the things I really want to do"), and 6 ("I have enough things to do in a regular week"), with mean values of 3.70. This reflects that students prioritize activities that have personal meaning and maintain active lives with diverse occupations. These aspects are related to the components of occupational balance described by Romero-Ayuso et al. (2024), who show that the perception of control over one's occupations and the ability to participate in meaningful activities are protective factors for mental health and well-being.

However, given the contrast in the perception of occupational balance among university students—some statements showing satisfaction and others dissatisfaction regarding the time and energy invested—Ferreira de Sousa et al. (2022) demonstrated significant positive changes after an intervention that promoted participation in activities such as ballroom dancing, identifying improvements in performance during waking hours and reductions in fatigue, promoting rest and sleep, as well as motivation and willingness to engage in other occupations.

Based on the above, some occupations may be perceived as relaxing or demanding; however, the integration of vigorous and restorative activities may generate greater occupational balance (Hernández et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021).

Liu et al. (2021) point out that studies considering the roles a person performs are fundamental to understanding occupational balance. This is because these roles are closely linked to the occupations, activities, and tasks individuals perform in their daily lives, integrating their skills, abilities, personal resources, as well as the environment and time available to carry them out. In this sense, a significant connection is established with daily activities, in which the individual is actively involved, mobilizing volitional aspects and organizing time to respond to the various demands arising from occupational participation.

Thus, roles are related to participation in various occupations. This study identified difficulties related to having enough time to complete tasks, balancing activities that provide energy and those that drain it, and feeling satisfied with the time dedicated to rest and sleep. These results draw attention to a possible tendency toward academic overload or the excessive prioritization of productive occupations at the expense of those that promote physical and emotional recovery, a finding that is also consistent with what Romero-Ayuso et al. (2024) reported regarding occupational imbalances and their negative impact on quality of life.

All of the above allow us to reflect on the need to promote, within professional training, strategies that foster greater awareness of occupational balance among students, not only as theoretical content but also as a practical application in their own lives. Furthermore, it is essential to develop support programs that facilitate the establishment of healthy routines, promote time management, and contribute to overall well-being, aligned with the recommendations proposed by Romero-Ayuso et al. (2024) in their study on the relationship between occupational balance, self-efficacy, and quality of life. Student or university well-being services may contribute to this by implementing psychoeducational workshops on self-care, creating individual and group guidance spaces for managing academic and family stress, and strengthening recreational and participatory activities that promote a balance between study, rest, and leisure.

Limitations and Recommendations

Regarding the study's limitations, its cross-sectional nature prevents the identification of changes in students' occupational balance over time. Similarly, the limited participation of students and the convenience sample preclude the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the OBQ questionnaire does not allow for a detailed identification of the occupations performed by the participants or the time dedicated to them.

Similarly, few studies address occupational balance among university students, highlighting the limited literature on satisfaction with the quantity and variety of occupations, as well as the time dedicated to them.

It is recommended that prospective longitudinal studies be conducted to identify the influence, impact, implications, and sustainability of occupational balance among university students. These studies should include students from other health-related disciplines to broaden participation in research and contribute to the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the coordinated application of other instruments providing specific information on occupations and the time students allocate to them should be considered.

Finally, it is necessary to continue developing scientific evidence on this topic, beginning with the identification of changes in well-being resulting from the implementation of programs that promote occupational balance among university students, taking into account their current health status.

Conclusions

This study identified that a large proportion of the students in the program are women, between 18 and 20 years old, predominantly residing in urban areas and belonging to socioeconomic strata 2 and 3.

The students in the program indicated a moderate perception of occupational balance, recognizing that they perform activities that are meaningful in their daily lives, ensuring they do the things they truly want to do, and having enough to do throughout the week. However, it was identified that they do not have enough time to do the things they should do, lack a balance between activities that energize them and those that drain them, and experience low satisfaction with the time dedicated to rest and sleep.

Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective, this study provides empirical evidence on occupational balance among occupational therapy university students, contributing to the expansion of the existing body of knowledge surrounding this construct in educational contexts. The results allow for a deeper understanding of how students perceive the organization of their daily activities, their meaning, time management, and satisfaction with rest and sleep—aspects that have been scarcely explored in university populations. Furthermore, the study reinforces the relevance of occupational balance as a useful construct for analyzing occupational well-being in the early stages of professional training.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer input for designing academic and psychoeducational support strategies aimed at promoting a more balanced organization of activities. In particular, the identification of difficulties related to time management, the balance between energy-giving and energy-draining activities, and low satisfaction with rest and sleep allows for the development of preventive and well-being promotion initiatives within academic programs and university student services.

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Author's Contributions

Mayling Calvo-Paz and Vanessa Alexandra Bustos-Núñez were responsible for the problem statement, conceptualization, writing and revision. Daissy Valdes-Torres and Faisury Mejía-Botina actively participated in the discussion of results, writing, and revision. Jhoan Sebastián Zapata-López was responsible for the statistical analysis and results, writing, and revision. All authors approved the final version of the text.

Data Availability

The data supporting the results of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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