

Testing the Self: Digital Trials and Identity Work on Instagram

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This article examines young people’s strategies for navigating identity challenges on social media, where platforms act as testing arenas for digital self-presentation. Drawing from narrative theory and the sociology of individuation, we conceptualize this process as “digital trials.” Through interviews and monitoring of 33 young people’s Instagram accounts in Chile, we identified three primary trials: the pursuit of singularization, the recognition of authenticity, and the delimitation of safe spaces. While Instagram presents challenges, users strategically engage with its features to navigate these trials. Certain platform functionalities facilitate this process. However, social differences emerge, with some individuals unable to overcome these challenges and seeking alternative options. Thus, social media serves as a trial-and-error arena for users and platforms alike.

Keywords: social media, digital trials, youth, Instagram, identity

Over the past decade, research has consistently underscored the significance of social media in shaping identities and fostering spaces of sociability (Humphreys, 2018; Matassi, Boczkowski, & Mitchelstein, 2019; Quinn & Papacharissi, 2017). The emergence of these digital interaction spaces is the culmination of an extensive process of technological innovation and business development. Specifically, the first decade of the 21st century witnessed the establishment of a social interaction infrastructure based on the principle of connectivity (Van Dijck, 2013a) and the ability to use user-generated content as feedback for digital platforms (Meikle, 2016).

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Date submitted: 2024-03-29

¹ We acknowledge the financial support provided by the National Agency of Research and Development of Chile (ANID) through the following grants: the Millennium Nucleus on Digital Inequalities and Opportunities (CODE NCS2022_046) and FONDECYT Regular 11200594. The authors are also grateful for the comments from the three anonymous reviewers, as well as those provided by Ingrid Bachmann, Rodrigo Cordero, Teresa Correa, Magdalena Lemus, and Jaime Verdugo.

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The literature also shows individuals appropriating and domesticating technologies according to their context and capabilities (boyd, 2014; Humphreys, 2018; Silverstone, 1994; Sørensen, 1994). Appropriation is the initial process through which technology is acquired, adopted, and actively integrated into individuals' daily lives, involving personalization and the redefinition of its uses (Matassi et al., 2019). Particularly in Latin America, where digital technologies are predominantly consumed rather than produced, researchers have focused on understanding technology appropriation (Lemus, 2019; Siles, 2023; Urresti, Linn, & Basile, 2015; Winocur, 2009). While the extensive use and appreciation of these technologies are not in question, there is less clarity about how people deal with recent tensions that have arisen in recent years with novel affordances of visibility (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017), pervasive social surveillance (Marwick, 2012), and the proliferation of hate speech (Carlson, 2021).

This article aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the appropriation of social media by shedding light on a dual dynamic experienced within digital platforms through the concept of trial. Drawing upon a rich tradition in the social sciences (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010; Greimas, 1976; Latour, 1990), our goal is to demonstrate that, on the one hand, users of social media are tested while navigating these digital platforms, be it by their parents, partners, strangers, algorithms, or the emerging norms of coexistence within these spaces (boyd, 2014). On the other hand, individuals also subject digital platforms to trial by resignifying or abandoning them. While trials have become inevitable as social media have established themselves as significant spaces for self-expression (Hogan, 2010; Humphreys, 2018), we also observe users' strategic deployment of tactics. This dual dynamic holds significance for individuals socialized in a digitalized world, such as the new generations.

This article is grounded in a qualitative study that investigates how a group of young people in Santiago, Chile, perceive and navigate the challenges of digital life. Previous research indicates that young people in Chile use digital media intensively (Etchegaray, 2022). In 2015, the country had the highest percentage of intensive Internet use among 15-year-olds compared to other countries, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019, p. 61). Although connectivity varies considerably in rural areas (Correa, Pávez, & Contreras, 2021), young people's smartphone usage remains remarkably high in urban centers like Santiago. Our analysis focuses on Instagram, the most significant digital space for social interaction among young Chileans in our study. Its relevance for identity construction has also been shown in different contexts (Bardhan, 2022; Pramiyanti, Miller, Caldwell, & Kurniawan, 2022).

The analysis of the results reveals how the young Chileans interviewed perceive Instagram as a realm of biographical challenges. We identified three primary trials: (1) the pursuit of singularization, (2) the transmission and recognition of authenticity, and (3) the delimitation of personal and safe spaces. By recognizing moments of both triumph and setbacks in these trials, individuals attribute meaning to their personal engagement ("feeling put to the test") and adapt their usage of social media strategically ("putting them to the test"). Before discussing the methods, we outline the concept of trials proposed in this study, present the findings, and conclude with a discussion.

Theoretical Framework: The Concept of Trials

In this study, the term *trials* refer to testing performances, processes, or treatments, rather than its formal connotation as a legal proceeding. It draws on scholarly interpretation from three sources: narrative theory, the sociology of individuation, and Bruno Latour's work within science, technology, and society studies (STS).

From its earliest formulations, narrative theory has emphasized the concept of trials as a literary device to articulate the challenges characters face in their stories (Propp, 1968). Greimas (1976) further elaborates on trials within the narrative structure. According to his approach, each sequence of events revolves around a series of trials in response to a mission that drives the character to overcome obstacles and achieve their desires. Characters in narratives achieve recognition by overcoming trials (e.g., Ulysses) or facing the consequences of their failures (e.g., Oedipus).

This initial narrative dimension of the concept of trials resonates within social media, where digital platforms, akin to diaries, serve to unfold personal stories (Humphreys, 2018). Within this context, the central figure is the individual self, and social media facilitates self-promotion (Van Dijck, 2013b). Walker Rettberg (2014, p. 35) emphasizes that micro-stories representing identity challenges emerge across various digital platforms, from blogs to contemporary Facebook walls or Instagram feeds.

The concept of trials in narrative theory has been taken up in various ways within the social sciences (e.g., Boltanski, 2005; Latour, 1990). Within the sociology of individuation (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010), trials are challenges individuals encounter throughout their lives. According to this perspective, navigating social structures involves confronting challenges such as completing education, maintaining social status, adapting to evolving technologies, and other societal dynamics. Consequently, the notion of trials helps comprehend the interplay between structural transformations and subjective experiences.

Araujo and Martuccelli (2010) propose that trials exhibit four key characteristics. First, they possess a narrative quality, becoming woven into individuals' life stories. Similar to the way literary characters face significant challenges, people perceive themselves as challenged by various aspects of life, such as motherhood, divorce, or career aspirations. Second, trials are depicted as obligatory occurrences. Individuals encounter certain inevitable trials, such as forming relationships or achieving financial stability. Third, they are inherently evaluative. People experience a sense of achievement or failure, either feeling mastery over key aspects of life or seeking alternative paths in response to setbacks. Finally, while trials have a structural foundation, they manifest in specific and unique ways within each society.

Following Araujo and Martuccelli's (2010) perspective, this research examines how young people navigate socially produced trials in the digital world when using social media. Given the increasing intertwining of offline and online realms (Quinn & Papacharissi, 2017), this approach analyzes how much digital trials intertwine with broader social challenges. These digital interactions shape young people's daily lives, much like how work pressures impact family life (Lasén Díaz, 2019, p. 37).

This study explores how young people experience digital trials differently across two key structural dimensions. Responses to digital trials can vary in contexts of high socioeconomic inequality—where people live in segregated neighborhoods, attend different schools, and have varying cultural resources to navigate challenges (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo [PNUD], 2017). Haynes (2018) found that lower-income groups in northern Chile used social media to reinforce a collective sense of marginality, rather than as a tool for upward mobility. In contrast, higher-income groups in the capital city of Santiago primarily use it to showcase their status. This raises the question of how Chilean middle-class groups represent their trajectories and mobility, where authenticity serves as a key value in contesting social identities (Méndez, 2008).

Conversely, previous research in Chile has shown that adolescent girls are more likely to regulate their behavior and appearance to avoid criticism on social media (Gómez-Urrutia & Figueroa, 2023). They may also experience what Marwick (2023, p. 128) calls gendered privacy violations, which occur not only through harassment but also through peer surveillance. Research shows that hegemonic beauty ideals shape social pressures and self-surveillance on digital platforms, influencing how young women perceive their bodies. While these pressures affect men and women, studies indicate that women experience them more intensely (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). As a result, digital trials may be perceived differently depending on gender.

Not only do individuals undergo testing in their use of social media—platforms and their features also undergo evaluation in this interaction, revealing a multidirectional relationship (Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Siles, 2023). Latour's work (1990, 2005), drawing on Greimas' narratology (1976), offers insights into this dimension. He employs the concept of "trials of strength" to analyze how objects in a laboratory undergo alterations through successive trials (Latour, 1990, p. 59). Within the STS framework, objects and subjects are seen as interdependent, without one being strictly determined over the other (Latour, 2005). This study addresses this dimension by scrutinizing how young people interact with Instagram's features. In positive instances, the platform satisfies users' needs and integrates into their individual experiences. Conversely, negative experiences may prompt a gradual disengagement from the digital network, leading users to explore alternative options and transforming the platform into a space for trial and error.

From the user's perspective, elements such as visibility, editing, and persistence are not only afforded, but also scrutinized, incorporated, and evaluated (Flyverbom, Leonardi, Stohl, & Stohl, 2016). Consistent with the literature on affordances, using digital platforms connects platform design with the diverse ways users interact with their devices (Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Hutchby, 2001). Users may deactivate their accounts or discontinue usage when their digital networks no longer meet their requirements. Over the past decade, numerous platforms have disappeared because of their failure to adapt to evolving user expectations or shifting practices. In this context, Instagram stands out as a platform that has consistently evolved and introduced new engagement opportunities (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020).

Consequently, digital platforms serve as arenas where both users and social media are put to the test. We will focus on what we term "digital trials," that is, the challenges that arise from navigating the digital realm and that shape users' experiences and evaluations of social media. Our findings extend the sociology of individuation (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010) by showing that young people's self-presentation

online is shaped not just by personal agency but by ongoing negotiations between platform affordances and user strategies, emphasizing that identity work in digital spaces is a dynamic, trial-and-error process rather than a linear one. This approach contributes to theoretical debates on social media by showing that digital trials are not only moments experienced by platform users but are also deeply embedded in broader social challenges, influencing the evaluation of platforms.

In our study, three specific trials stand out:

i) *Singularization*. Digital life enforces the creation of a visible profile for an audience that, in principle, is unknown. Visibility has become integral to modern communication technologies, aided by databases and search tools that enhance information accessibility (Evans et al., 2017, p. 42). Since the volume of shared information on digital networks is enormous, gaining attention can be challenging. Reckwitz (2017) characterizes this as a struggle for visibility. Drawing from Reckwitz's work (2017), we term this process the pursuit of singularization (p. 10).

Digital platforms stimulate the construction of a singular identity by showcasing images, practices, hobbies, preferences, or attitudes. Identity can be understood as those meanings attached to individuals' roles in society, the groups they identify with, and the ways they see themselves (Stets & Serpe, 2013, p. 23). Social media users curate online identities, carefully crafting their status updates, connections, and expressions (Hanckel, Vivienne, Byron, Robards, & Churchill, 2019).

ii) *Authenticity*. This is one of the fundamental requirements of modern individuation (Taylor, 1991). Central to this notion is the importance of maintaining a credible image in front of others (Goffman, 1959). The virtual realm complicates this issue when allowing the creation of digital profiles that may diverge from one's offline persona. Moreover, the pressure to constantly present one's best self on social media may exacerbate inauthenticity as the idealized image becomes increasingly difficult to sustain (Véliz, 2022, p. 41).

Still, authenticity may be evidenced when there is a sincere effort to portray a lifestyle that aligns with one's actual life experiences and to position oneself among social norms (Pramiyanti et al., 2022). Authenticity poses a challenge when individuals strive to present a consistent and appealing image. Lobinger and Bratner (2015) describe this phenomenon as the quest for "expressive authenticity" (p. 1850).

iii) *Demarcation*. Switching from public to private accounts, unfriending, and blocking people they do not want to be seen by have become recurring social media practices. This phenomenon of delimitation, termed "boundary work" (Quinn & Papacharissi, 2017), has been depicted as a true challenge: "Because the networked individual may be performing multiple roles in multiple relational contexts, recognition of the appropriate set of boundary expectations may be somewhat challenging" (Quinn & Papacharissi, 2017, p. 365).

The delimitation of spaces is primarily characterized by the search for security to confront two key phenomena: hate speech that targets identity attributes, such as gender, sex, religion, political position, or other factors (Carlson, 2021). Learning to navigate digital violence or online sexual harassment has become an integral part of using digital platforms. On the other hand, digital surveillance has been investigated both as an abstract mechanism for collecting personal data and as a form of monitoring by close individuals—family members, partners, or friends. Marwick (2012) calls the latter social surveillance.

With this in mind, the research questions this study seeks to address are as follows:

RQ1: How do these trials manifest in the daily digital lives of young Chilean people?

RQ2: How do young people respond to these challenges, and what strategies do they employ in appropriating digital platforms?

RQ3: How do gender and socioeconomic status shape young people's experiences and strategies in navigating digital trials?

Methods

This article relies on a qualitative study conducted with a sample of young people from Santiago de Chile. Drawing on narrative theory and biographical methods (Rosenthal, 1993), the study first explored participants' life stories to capture subjective meanings attributed to social media practices and how digital strategies evolve with life experiences. Second, we observed image-sharing routines and investigated how they navigate challenges when posting and interacting on Instagram.

We interviewed 35 individuals, ages 18–29,² with 33 consenting to have their social media accounts observed later (two declined to continue). Beyond age, two key criteria were used to build the sample: achieving a balanced representation of men and women and including participants from varied social backgrounds, as these groups possess different resources to navigate societal trials in Chile (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010). To meet these criteria, we sought participants from a range of sources: acquaintances from different social circles—including students and research groups—and neighborhood organizations of various origins (political, cultural, and religious). This recruitment yielded 28 participants from diverse backgrounds, with an additional seven obtained through snowball sampling. In total, we interviewed 16 men and 19 women, including 14 individuals from lower-middle-class backgrounds, 12 from middle-class backgrounds, and nine from upper-middle-class backgrounds. Social background segmentation was determined after interviews, based on collected information about participants' parents' education, income, and occupations. Additionally, we sought participants from 23 of Santiago's 32 local councils (*municipios*) to ensure broad social representation. Given the high level of social

² In Chile, individuals are formally considered young until the age of 29. We set 18 as the minimum age for participation to ensure that all interviewees could provide autonomous ethical consent.

segregation and inequality in the country, this approach helped ensure significant social differentiation in our sample.

Conducted between November 2021 and July 2022, the interviews had a dual focus. First, they began with a narrative introduction to contextualize participants within their biographical milestones and explore significant life events across sociability and family dynamics. Following this, the interviews transitioned to a focus on digital practices. This segment examined participants' primary app usage, audience curation, content organization decisions (editorial work and style), and emotional responses to interactions on social media, particularly regarding privacy, conflictive interactions, and boundary-setting. These questions also explored how the participants navigated distinctions between online and offline identities, revealing how digital networks intersected with their biographical narratives. On average, each interview lasted 90 minutes, ranging from 47 to 118 minutes.

The interview material was transcribed and analyzed using an inductive content analysis approach (Bardin, 1996), examining the meaning attributed to their practices. Following an initial round of content analysis, a research team of five began systematically monitoring the participants' Instagram accounts to observe the themes identified in the interviews. Account observation occurred twice-weekly over six months, from May 2022 to January 2023 (with monitoring starting later for subsequent interviews as needed). On average, participants had approximately 600 followers on their social media accounts (with a range of 200 to 1200 followers). None of the participants self-identified as influencers; posting varied, with some sharing around 10 posts per month and others uploading up to 15 stories per week.

Observers noted each participant's network characteristics, interaction patterns, and post content (drawing on Miller & Slater, 2000), recording data across five dimensions: biographical, performative, aesthetic, semantic (explicit meanings associated with posts), and interactional and employing the grounded-theory technique of memo-writing (Flick, 1998, pp. 434–435). We periodically discussed the results within the team and held an additional workshop with an international peer in January 2023 to review the monitoring process. Finally, we re-coded and interpreted the interview material to integrate insights from both stages.

All materials were anonymized in compliance with informed consent forms signed by the study participants, and throughout this article, we use pseudonyms to refer to each individual. The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at Universidad Diego Portales under IRB number 025-2020.

Findings

Stories recounted by the young people interviewed often began with their early exposure to computers and the Internet, typically through family or school settings. As smartphones proliferated among urban youth, the use of social media became ubiquitous for most. Instagram, launched in 2010, was the most used digital network in Chile in 2020, second only to WhatsApp, garnering widespread adoption among young people across all socioeconomic groups, albeit with a slight prevalence in the upper-middle class (93% daily use compared to 83% in the less affluent sectors; see Etchegaray, 2022).

In this digital context, our analysis reveals three trials the young Chileans interviewed encountered on Instagram. These trials capture the challenges and strategies involved in navigating digital spaces. Below, we detail each trial and the variations observed across gender and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Pursuit of Singularization

The first digital trial identified in our findings, the pursuit of singularization, reflects the challenge participants face in crafting a distinct and recognizable online identity. For interviewees, establishing a presence on Instagram means connecting with peers and discovering appealing content—activities, networks, products, or places accessed through the platform. Yet it goes beyond mere connectivity; it involves achieving recognition through curated images, content, and behaviors that shape a unique profile. Still, pursuing a singular profile is not aimed at amassing friendships, becoming an influencer, or achieving high visibility. It does not resemble a “struggle for visibility” (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 9). Instead, this trial holds two specific and practical meanings.

On the one hand, the interviewees described the process of singularizing their audiences. Profile creation typically targets a specific audience of acquaintances, such as family, friends, affinity groups, or school or university peers with whom individuals share daily activities, emotional states, or updates. Some respondents stressed the importance of Instagram’s “Close Friends” section (introduced in 2018), which allows the cultivation of a more intimate image tailored to a small group of friends, fostering direct communication among them. As James said, “I post almost everything to ‘Close Friends.’ I don’t post a lot of stuff, either. And what I do post that’s, like . . . more mine . . . It’s people I know, really” (Man, 24, upper-middle class). Similarly, some users manage two or three accounts on the same platform, created according to the desired audience type (this option has been available since 2017; see Leaver et al., 2020). Faustina describes it this way:

I have three Instagrams . . . I have a personal one, which I started with a long time ago, and later, over time, I made one for my drawings. . . . And then there’s one I made just for fun, with my best friend this New Year. . . . So those are the three I have, and I’m thinking of making one just for work. (woman, 22, middle class)

This flexibility contrasts with Facebook, where interviewees find fewer opportunities to cultivate an intimate, peer-to-peer environment or maintain versatile profiles. Despite being owned by the same company as Instagram, Facebook is seen more as a memory box, a repository for memes, or a marketplace. Instagram, instead, is the digital space where visibility is managed and prioritized within a close reference group.

On the other hand, the pursuit of singularization extends to the content shared on Instagram. By monitoring profiles, we found that meticulous attention is given to (self-) presentation. This care is evident in the profile setup, with details such as nickname, hobby, zodiac sign, profile picture, or caricature, representing an initial stage of digital identity construction. Furthermore, our monitoring revealed the visibility of editorial work, such as the consistent use of color palettes (dark, blue, or pink), similar photo aesthetics, strategic captions, and coherence in the type of content shared. Laurel explains this: “I always post with the same shades of color. And I like to upload photos with minimal filters—I really appreciate the

naturalness in how one presents oneself" (woman, 23, lower-middle class). Andres also emphasizes the significance of his editorial work, stating, "I decided to leave some photos and things that align with how I feel because it's important to me that people, when visiting my profile, get to know me in every aspect of who I am" (man, 29, upper-middle class). He underscores the importance of finding his profile's right tone and meaning, reflecting his identity and emotions.

When observing profiles during digital monitoring, finding images or stories selected as a priority was common. Some accounts keep one or two pictures, leaving the rest of their profile as Instagram stories, which disappear after 24 hours. Sofia highlights the idea of hierarchy in her uploads, indicating that the content she deems most important, such as the photo of her graduation with her parents, is featured on her main profile. She explains:

The only post I have is from my high school graduation, where I am with my parents and I am very happy . . . that photo is very important to me, as if there's a hierarchy of importance. For example, things that don't matter as much to me are in my stories.
(woman, 19, middle class)

The difference between photos and stories holds significance for them. Creating an identity image is facilitated by the ephemeral nature of stories, which vanish after 24 hours (a central innovation introduced by Instagram to compete with Snapchat at the time; see Leaver et al., 2020). This feature allows users to avoid justifying their posts over time, although they can be archived if desired. Gerónimo recounts: "Now my Instagram feed doesn't have any photos. I haven't uploaded any pictures . . . but I do post stories . . . Currently, I interact more with stories . . . Many times, I go into the story archives . . . to remember, like . . . things that happened" (man, 18, middle class).

In digital monitoring, we also observe that images featuring the body tend to elicit more positive feedback than abstract landscapes or textual messages (see Lemus, 2019). This synergy between body visualization and self-quantification—the focus on the number of likes or comments—has been recognized as central to the dynamics of new digital platforms (Walker Rettberg, 2014).

In this context, some women interviewed felt more scrutinized, leading them to express discomfort in uploading their pictures if they perceived themselves as overweight. While the account monitoring revealed that some men tried to appear in shape, none expressed discomfort associated with an ideal of fitness. As noted by Fardouly and Vartanian (2015), comparisons on social media can affect self-identity concerning body ideals, particularly among women. Consequently, the process of singularization becomes more challenging for young women who contend with the hegemonic ideal of beauty. Ana reflected on this issue and attempted to articulate why certain posts by women troubled her, stating, "I would say that I don't like the reports of girls showing off a lot . . . It affects me in the sense that you kind of tend to compare yourself to others, physically" (woman, 23, lower-middle class).

Socioeconomic class also plays a role in the trial of singularization, as observed in users' accounts. Similar to findings reported by Lemus (2019) in Argentina, the upper-middle class exhibits a high level of visibility associated with travel, parties, and one's physical appearance. In contrast, and consistent with

Haynes's (2018) work on the lower socioeconomic sectors in northern Chile, photos posted by young people in more precarious backgrounds tend to be less polished, often depicting closed spaces such as bedrooms or kitchen tables, and generally appear darker. Similarly, young people from lower social backgrounds often preferred viewing rather than posting, or shifted to TikTok, where they could more easily curate content to their preferences (Siles, 2023).

Overall, the pursuit of singularity is achieved when personal audiences recognize a distinctive style—a particular work of self-curation that aligns with the norms and ideals of one's social group (Hanckel et al., 2019). In our sample of interviews, this process varied slightly across gender and social class. When the challenge of singularization on Instagram becomes too daunting or exhausting, individuals often opt to stop uploading content, instead assuming the role of observers or limiting their audience interactions. Consequently, this shift strains the platform itself, prompting users to seek alternatives that impose fewer demands for visibility.

The Recognition and Transmission of Authenticity

The second digital trial emerges in the findings as a dual challenge of authenticity. First, several respondents noted the need to discern which aspects of the posts shared by their acquaintances reveal authentic facets of their personal or social reality. Given the potential disconnect between digital and face-to-face realms, it becomes crucial to identify which elements genuinely mirror the lived experiences of their contacts, enabling a deeper understanding of their circumstances or intentions.

Elsa expresses it as follows: "My friends always upload photos with smiles, posing happily, and what I pay the most attention to, especially if it's a personal photo, is the expression, what they want to convey with it, like the authenticity of the photo" (woman, 19, middle class). Antonio also recognizes this aspect, albeit with an effort to comprehend the interplay between fantasy and reality:

I don't know if what a friend tells me is true, if the photos they upload are true, if they depict reality. So, everything on social media has a grain of truth, but also a dash of fantasy, because I can create a false profile, invent a fake life. (man, 29, lower-middle class)

In this sense, part of the challenge involves comprehending why certain content is shared while other aspects remain omitted. In this dramaturgic exhibition (Hogan, 2010), audiences must discern which aspect of Instagram content reflects real-life experiences and learn to interpret what each picture or post truly conveys.

Second, authenticity poses a challenge when interviewees work to maintain an image that appears credible and attractive. Our digital monitoring showed a tendency to share content like places visited, hobbies, or normative messages reflecting the individual's identity and ideals. Additionally, people often present themselves in ways that highlight their best aspects (not limited to physical appearance). Various interviewees demonstrate an awareness that young people often use digital networks to portray an idealized version of themselves. As Camila expresses in one of her posts, "On social media, you only see what we want you to see; don't forget that" (woman, 23, upper-middle class). Alfonso remarks, "People show pure

light" (man, 18, middle class). Many of them admit to avoiding sharing negative emotions. Geronimo explains, "If my feelings aren't positive, I don't post them on social media" (man, 18, middle class).

Following up on the accounts was not simply about identifying "double lives." However, we observed a deliberate tactic among lower-middle-class individuals to avoid displaying their homes and neighborhoods. Those whose parents worked in manual trades or had not attained higher education preferred to showcase public spaces, such as parks or restaurants, positioning themselves outside of more intimate or less affluent environments. For some, this tactic helps address challenges related to social mobility and authenticity (Méndez, 2008), allowing them to project an aspirational image even if they have yet to leave home.

The challenge of authenticity can provoke anxiety and emotional distress. In our study, women across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and ages described the most dramatic cases. Mónica (woman, 27, lower-middle class) shares that the more depressed and anxious she felt in her life, the happier her posts became. Sofía similarly describes her struggles with her body image, noting, "When I had more problems with my physique, I showed it more and more clearly. When I liked my body the least, I showed it the most because that's where I needed the most approval" (woman, 19, middle class). In this sense, one can observe a feeling of failure in the digital trail of authenticity when what is shared contradicts how one truly feels or lives in a particular situation. As Andy argues in his interview, "how you portray yourself [on social media] is how you understand yourself. The dangerous thing is that often that doesn't correspond to reality" (man, 29, upper-middle class).

Young people construct lifestyles within their digital networks and strive to maintain a narrative consistent with their biographies (Humphreys, 2018). Most interviewees had no difficulty achieving this consistency, and sometimes both women and men reduced the number of posts to regulate their image and self-story. However, in certain instances, this goal proved unattainable, and the failure to maintain this ideal became a source of distress. In a previous study of Chilean adolescents, Gómez-Urrutia and Figueroa (2022) found that women felt more pressure than men to maintain an idealized body image. Similarly, in our study, two women—Mónica and Sofía—acknowledged that they posted content that contradicted their true feelings or self-perceptions, seeking validation for an ideal image during periods of feeling their worst. While these cases are specific, they resonate with the experiences of other interviewees who look for clues about what is truly happening in people's lives through their posts, attempting to discern between authentic and inauthentic self-presentations. Ultimately, the pursuit of authenticity on Instagram is both a personal and social trial, affecting users' mental well-being and shaping how they desire to be perceived within their social circles.

The Delimitation of Personal and Safe Spaces

The last digital trial addresses what Marwick and boyd (2011) label as "context collapse" in social media: spheres that are typically kept separate in daily life—such as family, school, or circles of friends—tend to come together on social media platforms (boyd, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011). In response to this collapse, our participants strategically described using Instagram's features to navigate these challenges.

One such boundary-setting strategy emerges in response to normative conflicts with family members. Laurel, for example, had started dating another woman, a relationship her mother disapproved of. When she began uploading photos with her partner to Instagram, the conflict escalated, leading her to hide certain stories from her mother: "I understand that she doesn't want to see that part of my life. I usually upload a lot of content with my partner. So, if she doesn't want to see it, I don't want her to see it either" (woman, 23, lower-middle class). Similarly, Faustina experienced ongoing conflicts with her brother and his partner while living in the same house. She blocked her sister-in-law's account on Instagram "just so she can't watch me" (woman, 23, middle class).

In addition to family dynamics, boundary work also plays a role in forming close-knit peer groups within age and social networks. Marcia, for instance, describes her goal for digital engagement as follows: "To have a good time, to see other people when I don't have much contact, and to keep those interested in me up to date" (woman, 29, middle class). Consequently, the social relationships observed in digital monitoring largely involve interactions with peers of similar age and social backgrounds. For instance, when a young woman from a suburban neighborhood was asked if she had best friends on Instagram outside her local community, her answer was "none."

This boundary work evolves with age, becoming part of maturing and transitioning out of adolescence. Rather than expanding networks, individuals tend to shift toward narrower, more controlled spaces as they grow older, allowing them to navigate with greater comfort and autonomy. In some interviews with upper-middle-class participants, this delimitation process continues during the transition from the university environment to the labor market. For instance, Georgina (woman, 27, middle class) began blocking her patients when she started working as a psychologist, and Filipa (woman, 27, upper-middle class) found herself hiding stories from her students and colleagues in his initial teaching position.

Beyond family and professional boundaries, another source of delimitation stems from experiences of toxic communication and harassment, particularly in interactions with ex-partners. Creating distance often involves blocking individuals whose presence can cause harm. Thus, limiting the gaze of others becomes an act of healing. Rodrigo explains this as follows:

I had an experience with another guy . . . and he ghosted me . . . He stopped talking to me . . . (then) I closed my Instagram for a month because I was so fed up with these relationships and I was looking for tools and mechanisms to defend myself against these situations, against things I could not control. (man, 29, middle class)

Gender plays a central role in harassment. Our findings include cases of female respondents being impersonated, approached by strangers requesting intimate photos, receiving unsolicited images, and feeling intimidated by ex-partners across social backgrounds. In some cases, this led to switching from a public to a private account, as Amanda recounts:

More adult people who had other intentions . . . I had to eliminate those people . . . It's boring, so it's better not to leave a public profile for anyone. . . . Now I prefer to be calmer with what I want to see and what I want to be seen by those who want to see me. . . .

Also, at one point, I hid photos because I had photos of myself with a shirt not so covered and it was misinterpreted or people wrote to me then, no . . . I kind of archived them, I took them out of my profile. (woman, 24, lower-middle class)

Many of these boundary-setting practices align with efforts to create safe spaces. As Hanckel et al. (2019) note in their study of LGBTIQ+ young people in Australia, “many engage in forms of audience segregation to manage and curate safe(r) spaces” (p. 10). Indeed, the ability to block offensive content easily influences the choice to use Instagram over other platforms like X (formerly Twitter). As Felipe put it, “Twitter is a toxic community in general” (man, 24, lower-middle class), a sentiment echoed by several respondents when commenting on political polarization and hate speech. After reading strangers’ comments, Dino reports, “To avoid getting into fights in the comments, I blocked them . . . So there they stayed, blocked forever on my Instagram” (man, 21, lower-middle class).

Instagram currently offers several options for boundary-setting, including the ability to hide content, block users, and privatize accounts. Except for one young man, all our participants use some of these Instagram features. Managing boundaries is not the most challenging aspect; users evaluate social media platforms based on their ability to protect privacy, facilitate the creation of multiple accounts for different purposes, and provide a comfortable online environment. Yet the effectiveness of boundary setting also depends on individuals’ willingness to be open and their perception of social surveillance (Marwick, 2012). Failure to establish boundaries may result in unwanted control by others, leading to potential harm and symbolic violence (Marwick & boyd, 2018). However, there are cases like that of Laurel, who chose to keep her profile open to publicly reveal the violence she experienced from her ex-partner, even though this decision attracted critical comments from strangers.

Recent literature has highlighted that establishing safe spaces online creates tension between feelings of protection and exclusion from a broader community (Skoric & Zhu, 2022). In our study, this issue is significant in terms of gender dynamics. For many women—across age and social backgrounds—refraining from posting images where their bodies are prominently visible serves as a strategy to avoid harassment. Indeed, those who aim to maintain visibility and express strong political, moral, or aesthetic views must be prepared to encounter hateful backlash.

Discussion: The Interconnection of Digital Trials

Based on the four trial components developed by Araujo and Martuccelli (2010, pp. 84–85), Table 1 summarizes the three digital trials identified in the analysis.

Table 1. Three Digital Trials and Their Components.

Trial	Narrative	Mandatory	Evaluation	Differentiation
Pursuit of singularization	"It's important to me that people, when they visit my profile, get to know me in every aspect of who I am."	For users seeking visibility in the digital space.	Positive: Achieving a recognizable style. Negative: Choosing to stop sharing content or images.	By gender: The women interviewed emphasized a more demanding beauty ideal, facing greater pressure to curate their appearance. By class: Upper-middle-class users share more visual content, while lower-income users have a lower presence.
The transmission and recognition of authenticity	"On social media, you only see what we want you to see, don't forget that."	For users engaging in social media interactions.	Positive: Presenting or gaining recognition through a coherent identity. Negative: Experiencing a discrepancy between digital and offline identity.	By gender: The most critical cases of perceived inauthenticity were among women who posted positive content despite experiencing personal difficulties. By class: lower-middle-class groups avoid showing signs of the precariousness of their spaces.
The delimitation of personal and safe spaces.	"It's better not to follow those people and not to leave the public profile for anyone."	For users managing content visibility and avoiding surveillance or harassment.	Positive: Creating a personal safe space. Negative: Facing harmful comments without knowing how to respond.	By gender: Women—across ages and social backgrounds—most frequently reported blocking accounts, hiding stories, and switching from public to private accounts to manage conflicts or avoid harassment.

Source: Own elaboration.

The three trials identified are analytical constructs based on the gathered narratives; interviewees themselves do not typically use terms like singularization or authenticity. However, elements in their stories reveal challenges in building a unique profile, questioning authenticity, or setting boundaries. In interviews, they evaluate their platform management—constructing a profile, gaining recognition, balancing offline and online life, or avoiding negative interactions—indicating whether they felt they were “passing the trial.” They also express dissatisfaction, withdraw from posting, or temporarily close accounts due to feeling overwhelmed by platform dynamics, reflecting a sense of not “passing the trial.”

It is crucial to recognize that the trials should not be considered in isolation. The three processes are indeed intertwined, forming an interconnected network of digital practices. The pursuit of singularization aligns closely with the practice of boundary work (Quinn & Papacharissi, 2017), especially in distinguishing different audiences and avoiding context collapse (boyd, 2014). For instance, Instagram’s “Close Friends” section allows users to share more intimate aspects of their lives with specific individuals. The trial of delimitation also encompasses managing relationships, whether with parents, ex-partners, or individuals who cause harm or discomfort in some way. A sense of “passing the trial” is achieved when individuals successfully create personal and safe spaces (Hanckel et al., 2019; Zhu & Skoric, 2021).

In the pursuit of singularization, a tendency toward idealizing one’s own image also comes to light. The aim is to show “the best side” while omitting aspects of the individual that could be unpleasant or unsettling. This process is influenced by comparisons with others against normative ideals related to body image, social expectations, and moral stances (Haynes, 2018; Pramiyanti et al., 2022). The trial of authenticity is linked to this idealization process occurring on Instagram. While individuals try to show their best selves, the younger audience must discern the extent to which this portrayal reflects offline reality (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015). It also entails an interpretative task to recognize the underlying message of each post or story, acknowledging the premise that perpetual happiness on Instagram is unrealistic. Part of successfully navigating the authenticity trial involves grasping the intended message behind people’s digital self-presentation.

The specific architecture of Instagram plays a significant role in facilitating these digital trials. The temporary nature of stories, which vanish within 24 hours, alleviates the pressure of maintaining the biographical persistence of media content, contrasting the notion of persistence discussed by boyd (2014) when studying other social platforms. As Humphreys (2018) points out, social media platforms are spaces where one reveals their identity to others through various means. Our interviewees report a sense of achievement, or “passing the trial,” when they successfully communicate elements of their identities to chosen audiences rather than merely striving to win the “struggle for visibility” (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 9).

In this context, the platform’s features interact with a refined personalization process (Siibak, 2009). This confirms research findings on social media in Latin America, which show that the features of these platforms are domesticated (Matassi et al., 2019) and appropriated by young people to construct self-representation and create a world of sociability (Lemus, 2019; Winocur, 2009). The concept of digital trials contributes to this literature by demonstrating that these processes are not always fluid or uniform across users; it also underscores that these trials are embedded in broader social processes (Araujo & Martuccelli,

2010), such as the work of crafting a singular identity, grappling with notions of authenticity, and marking safe spaces.

In our study, we also attempt to specify the weight of two dimensions. On the one hand, gender norms play an important role in shaping the challenges posed by digital trails on social platforms. Our study highlights instances where women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds faced heightened challenges related to body image, anxiety, and experiences of sexual harassment. While both men and women experience digital trails, the pressure is more strongly felt by the latter, a trend observable from adolescence in the Chilean context (Gómez-Urrutia & Figueroa, 2022).

On the other hand, middle-class accounts tended to avoid portraying signs of socioeconomic strain in their domestic settings, often opting to showcase more recognizable public spaces. The process of social mobility remains crucial in shaping tensions around authenticity (Méndez, 2008). Furthermore, accounts from lower socioeconomic strata tended to share less content, assume a more passive role on Instagram, and eventually lose interest in the platform altogether, transitioning to alternatives like TikTok. In these cases, individuals prefer to consume content rather than actively participate in sharing their own. In contrast, upper-middle-class accounts highlighted body aesthetics and showcased photos in natural settings or during trips abroad.

Conclusion

This study explored the appropriation of social media, particularly Instagram, through a qualitative study with young people in Santiago de Chile, shedding light on some digital trails they face as they navigate these platforms.

The concept of digital trails brings attention to three key dimensions. First, it aids in understanding how individuals incorporate social media into their lives and the challenges they encounter, aligning with research on the appropriation and domestication of technologies in Latin America (Lemus, 2019; Matassi et al., 2019; Siles, 2023; Winocur, 2009). It also emphasizes the importance of considering the sociocultural contexts where these trails emerge and embed, along with strategies to address them.

Second, young people are impacted by how they navigate these digital trails. If they fail to attain the visibility they desire, feel inauthentic, or cannot cope with hate and harassment, their offline lives are affected (Lasén Díaz, 2019). Identity construction, or how individuals perceive themselves, is challenged in these interactions—either positively, through recognition, or negatively, by feeling overwhelmed or invisible. This effect is more pronounced for the young women interviewed, who navigate heightened scrutiny when sharing images of their bodies.

Lastly, this perspective highlights how individuals tailor digital platforms to protect themselves against these challenges, such as social surveillance and interpersonal violence. While platforms contribute to the emergence of new dynamics, users also adapt these features to address such issues. In this sense, platform performance is evaluated by its ability to help users overcome these trails. Latour's (1990) concept

of trials of strength applies to both individuals maintaining their profiles and platforms needing to prevent user attrition by offering effective tools to address digital challenges.

Based on these findings, future research should explore comparisons across generations and platforms. How do digital trials differ across age groups, and how do specific platform affordances influence them? Examining how these challenges intersect with environments like schools, universities, or workplaces is also essential: What role do institutional settings play in shaping young people's strategies? Additionally, parameterizing these trials and analyzing their psychosocial impacts could provide deeper insights. Addressing these questions would enhance the depth and generalizability of this study's findings.

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