

CONCEPCIÓN, THE IMAGINED UTOPIA

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KEYWORDS

Concepción
Chile
Identity
Imaginary
Perception
City
Utopia

ABSTRACT

Utopias are a construct of modernity, projecting collective aspirations towards an imaginary horizon that often exceeds lived reality. This study seeks to examine the urban perceptions and imaginaries of the inhabitants of Concepción, Chile, in relation to their city. The research adopts a quantitative methodology based on a questionnaire administered to more than 115 participants. The findings indicate that 63% of respondents associate the city primarily with night-time, while 23% associate it with the colour green. When asked to identify a representative place within the city, only 9% mention the Biobío River that runs through Concepción. Quality of life, biodiversity and university life emerge as the most valued aspects, while future projections envision the city as smart, sustainable, ecological and youthful, a view shared by approximately half of the respondents.

Received: 24 / 07 / 2025

Accepted: 30 / 11 / 2025

1. Introduction

Utopias are a legacy of Western modernity. This symbolic universe channels collective hopes into an imagined future that often exceeds lived reality. Max Weber (1922) anticipated this condition more than a century ago when he addressed the disenchantment of the world, arguing that the loss of enchantment was driven by the rise of rationality, which marginalised myths and sacred narratives. This process gave rise to rational modernity, understood as a world stripped of magical and fantastical visions, and oriented instead towards everyday practices. In this context, attention is directed towards the daily activities of the city, in this case Concepción.

This reductive rationality promotes a logic governed by criteria of calculation and utility, extending to all the relationships that human beings establish with their environment. Elements that fall outside these parameters are ultimately marginalised and considered devoid of value. In this way, the foundations are laid for what would come to be known as the “productive ideal” (Tacussel, 1995), which functions as a guiding principle of Western societies. This ideal serves the emerging myth of modernity, namely that of Progress.

The study of urban imaginaries, in turn, constitutes a key approach for understanding how inhabitants ascribe meaning to the territories they occupy, and how these representations shape both urban identity and future projections. In the case of Concepción, Chile’s second most important city and a strategic centre within the Biobío Region, persistent tensions can be observed between historical territorial landmarks, such as the river from which the region takes its name, and newer forms of representation associated with lifestyles, nature and processes of modernisation.

To explore these perceptions, a quantitative study was conducted based on a questionnaire administered to more than 115 residents of the city aged between 18 and 80. The results indicate that 63% of respondents associate night-time as the time of day that best characterises Concepción, while 23% associate the city with the colour green. However, only 9% identify the Biobío River as a representative element, revealing a relative disconnection from one of the city’s principal geographical and historical landmarks. Among the most highly valued aspects are quality of life, biodiversity and university life. When projecting the urban future, approximately half of the participants imagine Concepción as a smart, sustainable, ecological and youthful city.

These findings invite critical reflection on the ways in which inhabitants construct urban imaginaries in an intermediate city marked by strong historical ties alongside aspirations for modernisation. They open a space for considering the challenges faced by urban and territorial planning policies in articulating collective memory with future-oriented projections emerging from the citizenry. In this respect, Concepción today shows a weakened relationship with its social memory (Halbwachs, 2004) and its own historical origins. This lack of awareness hinders the consolidation of sustained processes of cultural identification within an increasingly diverse and dynamic society. Nevertheless, as Halbwachs (2004) argues, social memory retains the potential for re-signification, enabling the reactivation of identity meanings. Cultural identity must therefore be understood as a process of social co-construction, a shared and ongoing subjective formation that is currently under strain in the face of contemporary transformations and the erosion of traditional reference points.

1.1. *The Identity of Concepción*

Identity is a complex construct, formed through a multiplicity of elements that emphasise a “self” composed of multiple, mutable identities, which contribute to its plasticity. In other words, subjects assume different identities at different moments (Hall, 1990). Identity therefore relates to the ways in which individuals and groups define themselves, seeking to identify with certain characteristics while differentiating themselves from others. Regional identity, in particular, distinguishes those who inhabit a given territory, defining what characterises them and how they recognise themselves in contemporary contexts. These and other processes contribute to the

formation of a people's identity. As Fuente-Alba, Basulto, and Moraga (2019) argue in relation to the Biobío Region, where Concepción is located, several long-standing identity processes are especially significant. These factors include cultural exchange between western Chilean populations and the Indigenous Mapuche people, the socio-historical characteristics of its cities, and the urban and geographical features of the territory. They also encompass recurrent natural disasters, given that the area has experienced some of the most powerful earthquakes and tsunamis in the world, and the transmission of social memory across generations.

Although the region has suffered severe natural destruction, which has resulted in the loss of much of its architectural heritage, it is nonetheless possible to identify an identity shaped by its urban character (Witker, 2001). Concepción, as the capital of the Biobío Region, exemplifies this condition through its industrial, commercial and university profile, as well as its strong underground and musical culture. These socio-historical traits, shared by the inhabitants of the region under study, are appropriated from specific repertoires within the social environment, whether at the level of groups or society as a whole. This becomes particularly evident when considering that the primary function of identity is to establish boundaries between those who belong to the region and "others". Differentiation, in this sense, is achieved through a constellation of distinctive cultural traits (Giménez, 2005), as previously indicated.

In line with this discussion, it is possible to identify several features that shape the identity of the inhabitants of Concepción. Notably, powerful elements linked to pre-Columbian history persist (Fuente-Alba et al., 2019), marked by the enduring presence of Mapuche culture, albeit now positioned as an ethnic minority. At the same time, the region is characterised by a long history of resistance. This includes resistance to Spanish colonialism, during which the Biobío River functioned as a territorial boundary, the signing of Chile's independence in Concepción, and, later, sustained opposition to Pinochet's military dictatorship. During this latter period, political movements emerged locally that mobilised in active resistance to capitalist neocolonialism, understood as the foundation of the neoliberal institutional framework imposed on Chile (Arboleya, 2007; Báez, 2017). Despite this resistance, the struggle ultimately failed, and the neoliberal model was structurally implemented (Zúñiga, 2011).

At present, the Biobío Region, and Concepción in particular, appear to exhibit a weakened social memory regarding the origins of significant sociocultural and political movements, alongside a limited awareness of the value of heritage (Basulto, 2014). This situation hinders the development of sustained processes of cultural identification within an increasingly diverse, dynamic, and progressive society.

1.2. Urban Imaginaries and the Construction of Territory

This "rational monovalence", on which Maffesoli (1979) places particular emphasis, emerges as a product of modernity, within which the imaginary dimension of social life is excluded. Not only the imaginary, but also myth, the nocturnal city and any cultural expression that exceeds the parameters of this totalising rationality are marginalised. By contrast, the postmodern era is characterised by a proliferation of non-rational elements, including the imaginary that was excluded by modern rationality. This process operates as a form of "return of the repressed", giving rise to a new cultural configuration identified as the "aesthetic paradigm" (Maffesoli, 2007).

In this sense, postmodernism entails a re-enchantment of the world through the reinstatement of elements excluded by modern culture. Moreover, it implies a partial return to pre-modern modes of experience. The contemporary effervescence of the imaginary, which permeates multiple domains of social life, thus signals the exhaustion of the modern programme and, by extension, of its reductive rationality. It also points to the need to reintroduce imagination into everyday life as a means of revitalising and expanding it (Carretero, 2012). The imaginary, therefore, may be understood as an effort to resist and transcend the reification promoted by the modern world (Balandier, 1988).

A clear illustration of this process is what Balandier describes as the "techno imaginary", understood as a form of dreaming that colonises the technological sphere and transforms

technology itself into a new vehicle for imagination. Through this process, technology becomes a means of re-enchanting social life (Balandier, 1988). Within this postmodern condition, the imaginary is thus consolidated as a fundamental axis of social experience. Through immersion in imaginary worlds, individuals encounter realities distinct from ordinary life, much as a film viewer enters a fictional universe in which dreams and fantasy extend the boundaries of everyday experience (Morin, 2000).

Thus, social life is amplified through the imaginary by the incorporation of dreams, fantasy, magic and fiction into everyday experience. In this sense, the vision of the city itself is transformed and expanded, at times extending to situations that do not form part of the material territory and that operate solely within the imagination and creativity of its inhabitants. The imaginary therefore functions as an anthropological resource through which creativity is introduced into, and animates, everyday life. The real is projected into the imaginary, just as the imaginary ultimately permeates the real.

This research examines the construction of the imagined city and the utopian dimension present in the inhabitants of a city in southern Chile in relation to their territory and conditions of habitability. More specifically, it focuses on the perceptions and urban imaginaries of the inhabitants of Concepción, the country's second most important city. The city is thus understood not merely as a geographically delimited space, but as a system of perceptions, representations and meanings through which individuals and social groups relate to the city itself and its institutions (Pascual & Peña, 2012).

Utopia and imagination are intrinsically connected. Their relationship lies in the fact that utopia emerges from a profound human desire to "invent" new worlds as alternatives to the established one (Servier, 1982). What Balandier (1984) terms "interstitial utopias" refers to forms of sociability that generate empathetic, emotional, and passionate bonds, through which everyday experience is aestheticised. Creativity, understood as the invention of possibilities that extend beyond established reality and are guided by the imaginary, plays a fundamental role in this process. These practices constitute a form of everyday utopia, seeking to reimagine daily life by distancing themselves from, or opposing, institutional structures and by locating within the everyday what the institutional fails to provide, thereby re-enchanting social experience in their own terms (Balandier, 1984).

From this perspective, it is necessary to understand the city of Concepción as a space of shared representations that are in a constant process of re-signification (Basulto, 2020). In this sense, the urban imaginary begins with:

(...) recognizing that the city is also a stage for language, evocations, dreams, and images. It should not surprise us, then, that the city has been defined as the image of a world; this idea would be complemented by saying that the city is likewise its opposite: the world of an image that is slowly and collectively constructed and reconstructed, incessantly. (Silva, 2006, p. 25)

The city may therefore be understood as a constellation of perceptions that are gradually and continuously socially produced. Urban imaginaries thus constitute a central resource for orienting civic practices, insofar as they shape the ways in which different actors interpret their roles within collective development. This is a process of social co-construction of meaning which, as Castoriadis (1989) argues, becomes effective only when imaginary valuations are recognised as one's own by the members of a community.

From this perspective, urban imaginaries (Silva, 2006) may be articulated with processes of social and territorial cohesion. As Pascual (2011) observes, social cohesion requires the existence of a shared vision of the territory and a sense of belonging that enables differences to be channelled towards common objectives. Within this framework, sustainable territorial development depends not only on material resources, but also on a system of collective meanings capable of guiding social action. In the case of Concepción, the activation of urban imaginaries linked to memory, participation, and resistance may constitute a fundamental axis for

strengthening cooperation among social actors, while promoting a strategic articulation of the territory and the projection of a shared future grounded in an endogenous logic of development.

Building on this argument, it is important to reaffirm that the city operates as a system of perceptions, representations, and meanings produced by the individuals and social groups who live and work within it. The actions of citizens and the various sectors that ultimately constitute the city are shaped not only by the conditions of the urban environment, but also by the representations and meanings that inhabitants construct about themselves and their surroundings (Basulto, 2020). This dynamic underscores the need for coordination between institutional and civic efforts, particularly in order to reduce discrepancies between political narratives and citizen perceptions. A well-documented example is that of London, as analysed by (Blay et al., 2017) where municipal authorities presented multiculturalism as a defining feature distinguishing the city from other European capitals, while the lived perceptions of the inhabitants who comprised this multiculturalism diverged significantly.

The multicultural implies a governmental commitment to cultural and ethnic minorities, yet in the case of Latin American communities this commitment was not evident. On the contrary, certain neighbourhoods were undergoing processes of gentrification (Blay et al., pág. 66, 2017)

From this perspective, the process of constructing and promoting a city brand presents the challenge of managing a form of corporate personality while taking into account the history, ideology and culture of a given territory (Gómez and Salinas, 2017).

That is, a city, from the standpoint of the imaginary construction of what it represents, must respond at least to certain natural and constructed physical conditions; to particular social uses; to specific modes of expression; and to a special type of citizen in relation to those of other national, continental, or international contexts; a city produces an urban mentality that is its own. (Silva, 2006, p. 28)

It is therefore evident that ways of understanding both the city and its inhabitants are undergoing transformation. Alongside the emphasis on cultural components highlighted by Silva, it is also necessary to consider the desires, frustrations and demands of the population, which, for the purposes of this study, form a central part of the imaginary representation of the city as experienced by those who inhabit it.

In contrast to the small group of global capitals such as London, New York or Tokyo, which shape the global economic, political and cultural agenda, many cities face the need to consolidate their visibility and attractiveness on the world stage. This challenge is compounded by the need to address issues such as pollution, security and inequality within their territories in order to ensure a prosperous and sustainable future for their citizens (Kolotouchkina, 2018). In the case of Concepción, this necessitates close attention to how territorial planning processes and community development strategies incorporate, alongside material considerations, the symbolic or socio-imaginary dimension that guides ways of living and acting in the city.

Indeed, much of traditional urban research in Latin America has focused primarily on economic factors and functional habitability, often relegating the representations, meanings and imaginaries that accompany the historical trajectories of territories to a secondary position (García Canclini, 2007). However, García Canclini (2007) argues that cities are traversed by multiple imaginaries that do not correspond mechanically to socio-economic variables, but instead express collective desires, dissatisfactions and ways of projecting the common good. From this perspective, the urban identity of Concepción derives not only from its physical and spatial configuration, but also from symbolic repertoires such as traditions of resistance, Mapuche memory and its university and artistic profile, which function as interpretive frameworks shaping how social actors engage, or refrain from engaging, in the present.

2. Methodology

2.1. Subject of Study

This research seeks to examine the perceptions and urban imaginaries of the inhabitants of Concepción, Chile's second most important city, in relation to their own territory. This approach is grounded in the premise that territorial identity is composed of specific characteristics that both distinguish inhabitants from others and simultaneously bind them together through shared imaginaries, which are at times utopian. This orientation enables not only a theoretical engagement with the phenomenon, but also the incorporation of an empirical analysis that explores these distinguishing features and examines how inhabitants think about and imagine different dimensions of life in their city.

2.2. Type of Research

The research adopts quantitative techniques (Sierra Bravo, 2001), combining the capacity to measure and analyse trends with an interpretative approach to social and cultural phenomena. From this quantitative perspective, which does not preclude analytical depth, the study seeks to explore how the inhabitants of Concepción perceive their city across a range of analytical categories. These include representations of the city in relation to urban and architectural landmarks, climate and territory, the time of day that best represents it, the colours and places that characterise it, perceived strengths and shortcomings, and projections of the city's future. These categories are justified insofar as they enable the organisation and operationalisation of key dimensions of urban imaginaries, facilitating their interpretation in social and cultural terms in accordance with the objectives of the study. This approach thus allows for an examination of the underlying and contextual social dynamics of an emerging phenomenon, offering a more nuanced understanding of both individual and collective experiences. To this end, the study employs a closed questionnaire (Sierra Bravo, 2001), which enables the systematic collection of structured data and the identification of salient patterns across the selected categories. This methodological strategy ensures rigour in relation to the object of study, while retaining sufficient sensitivity to capture the specificities of the phenomenon under analysis.

2.3. Scope of Study

This study examines the perceptions and urban imaginaries of the inhabitants of Concepción, Chile.

2.4. Data Collection Techniques

The primary instrument employed in this study was a structured questionnaire (Sierra Bravo, 2001), administered in person to a non-probabilistic sample of 115 inhabitants of the city of Concepción aged between 18 and 80. From this total, 100 questionnaires were selected for analysis, comprising 46% men and 54% women. The age distribution of the sample was as follows: 28% between 18 and 29 years of age, 30% between 30 and 44, 25% between 45 and 64, and 17% aged over 65.

The questionnaire was organised into thematic sections designed to explore the perceptions and urban imaginaries of the inhabitants of Concepción in relation to their city. This structure enabled a descriptive analysis of emerging trends and patterns, followed by a more in-depth interpretation of the observed phenomena. In addition, a documentary survey was conducted as a second instrument, focusing on the collection of documentary sources related to the city of Concepción.

2.5. Analysis Techniques

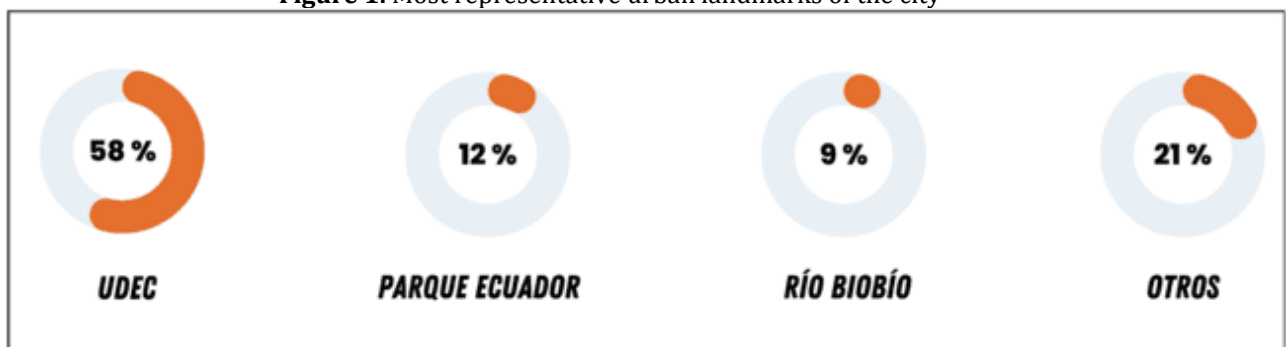
Data from the two instruments, namely the questionnaire and the documentary survey, were integrated through methodological triangulation. This approach involved contrasting and relating the results obtained from each instrument in order to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Quantitative data derived from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive inferential techniques, allowing for the identification of general patterns within the sample. This triangulation process not only strengthened the robustness of the findings, but also enabled a more nuanced interpretation of the urban perceptions and imaginaries of the inhabitants of Concepción, thereby addressing the complexity of the phenomenon under study.

From a strictly interpretative standpoint, data analysis was further informed by a hermeneutic perspective (Gadamer, 2000), which provided interpretative depth and situated the results within a broader framework of social and cultural understanding in relation to the city of Concepción, Chile.

3. Analysis of Results

This research, focused on the city of Concepción, offers an overview of the urban imaginaries and perceptions of its inhabitants in relation to their territory. With regard to the reported percentages, it should be noted that in certain cases the category “Other” was not analytically significant and was therefore excluded from consideration. This accounts for instances in which the totals presented in some figures do not sum to 100%.

Figure 1. Most representative urban landmarks of the city

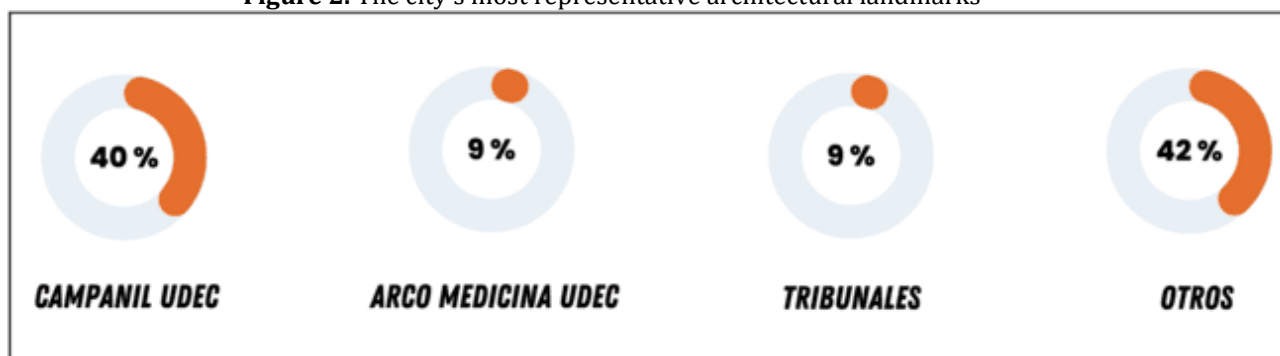


Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The results indicate that the most prominent urban landmarks shaping the city's urban identity, as shown in Figure 1, are the University of Concepción (UDEC), selected by 58% of respondents, followed by Ecuador Park, described as the city's principal green and recreational space, with 12% and the Biobío River, with 9%.

Since its foundation in 1919, the University of Concepción has been firmly embedded in the collective memory of the city's inhabitants. It is represented not only as one of the most important centres of higher education at the national level, but also as one of the city's principal public spaces, functioning as an open urban park oriented towards the city and its population. By contrast, only 9% of respondents identify the Biobío River as a significant component of Concepción's urban identity, despite its substantial hydrographic importance. The river traverses the city and lends its name to the region in which Concepción is located, namely the Biobío Region. Historically, however, the city has turned its back on the river, relegating its riverbanks to the most socially vulnerable populations. This stands in contrast to historic European cities such as Seville, Amsterdam and Paris, where the river constitutes a fundamental element of the urban landscape.

Figure 2. The city's most representative architectural landmarks

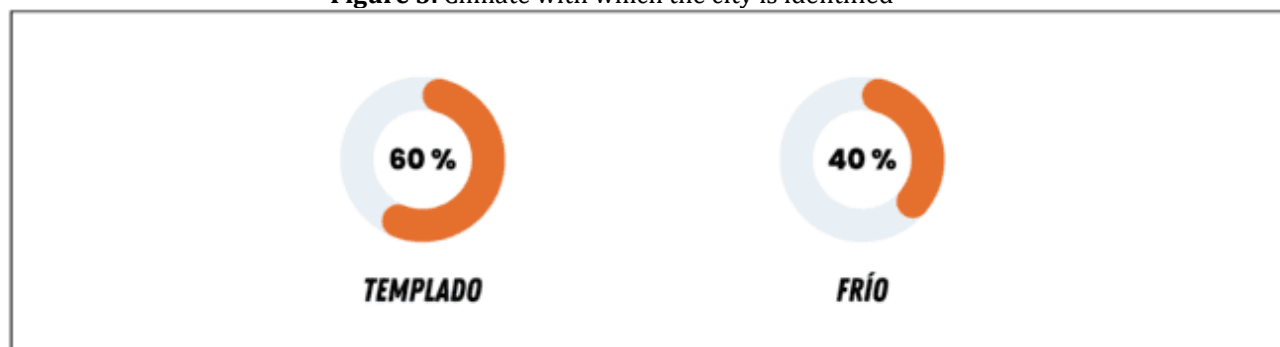


Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

With regard to architectural landmarks, Figure 2 indicates that the bell tower of the University of Concepción stands out as the most significant element, accounting for 40% of preferences. The medical arch of the same university and the courthouse located in the city centre are also identified as landmarks, although these are mentioned considerably less frequently, each receiving 9%.

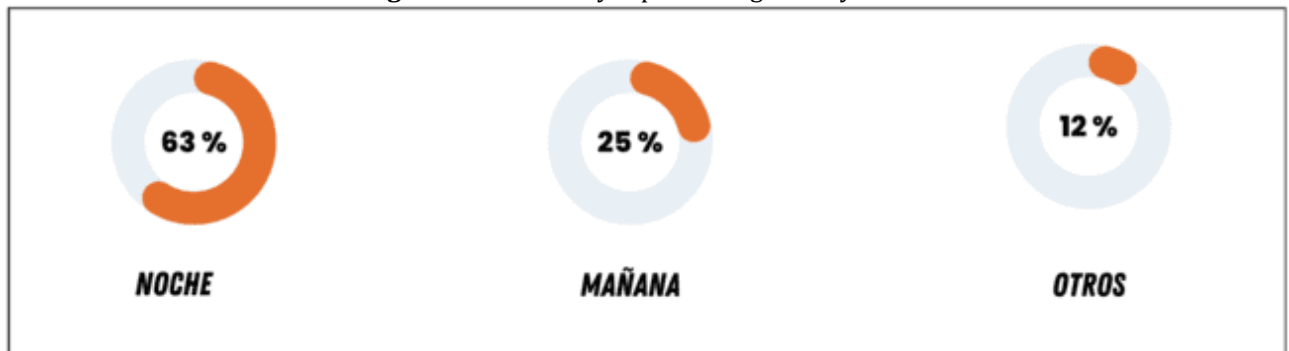
When considering the limited presence of architectural landmarks, it is important to note that the territory under analysis has historically been affected by major earthquakes, particularly those of 1939, 1960, 1985 and 2010. As a result, the city does not possess an extensive architectural heritage. Indeed, Concepción was refounded in 1751 after being completely destroyed by an earthquake and tsunami, an event that necessitated its relocation from its original site in Penco to the Mocha Valley, where it is currently situated (Memoria Chilena). This historical displacement explains the demonym *penquistas*, used to refer to the city's inhabitants.

Figure 3. Climate with which the city is identified



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

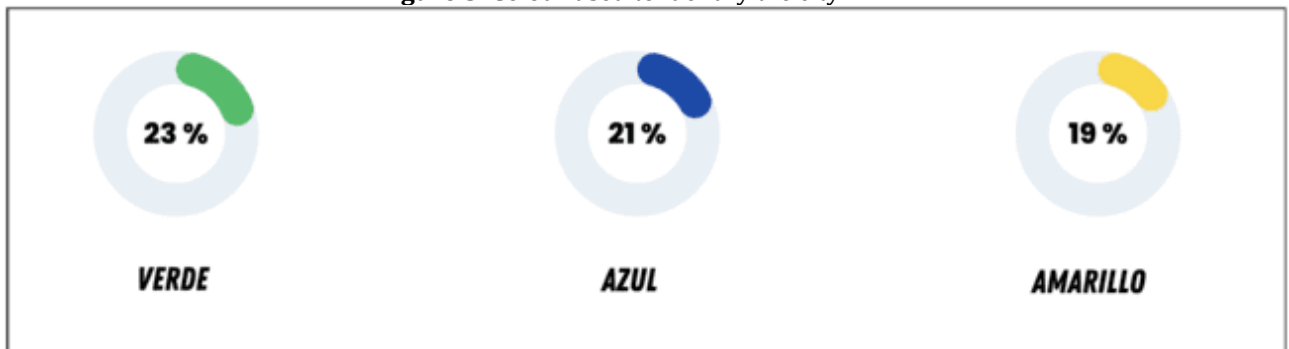
With regard to climate, Figure 3 shows that 60% of respondents perceive the city as predominantly temperate. This perception is noteworthy, given that Concepción is located in southern Chile and is generally characterised by frequent cloud cover. At the national level, the city is often colloquially referred to as "Tropiconce", a term that alludes to the rapid alternation between rainfall and sunshine. This climatic variability, marked by shifting conditions of cloudiness, sun, cold, and humidity, often generates confusion among visitors.

Figure 4. Time of day representing the city

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

With regard to the most representative moment of the day in the city of Concepción, Figure 4 shows that a substantial proportion of respondents identify night-time as the defining moment, a category selected by 63% of participants. This perception may be associated with the city's historically active nightlife. In recent years, however, this situation has shifted, not so much in relation to nocturnal leisure itself, but rather in patterns of mobility. Prior to the pandemic, Concepción was characterised by vibrant night-time street activity, with a strong presence of pedestrians in public spaces. More recently, street life at night has diminished considerably. Although bars and restaurants remain popular, residents now tend to travel in private vehicles or rely on ride-hailing applications to move directly from their homes to specific destinations.

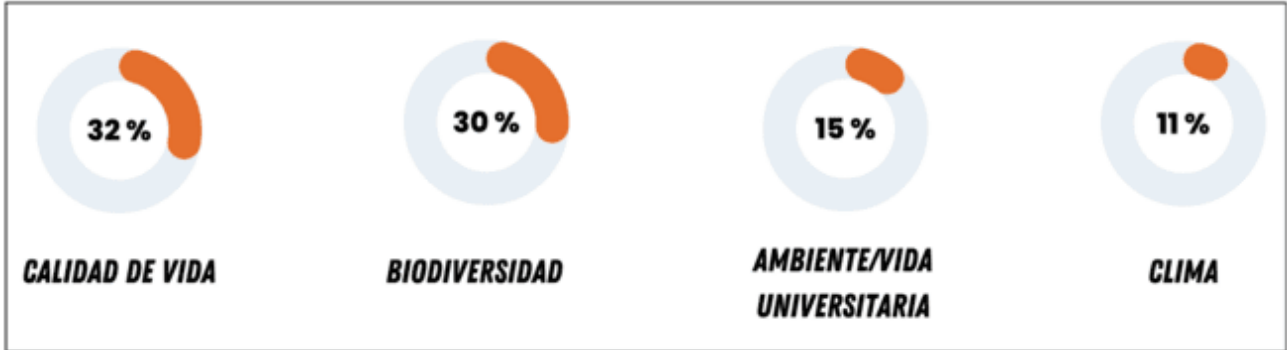
In this context, it is also important to note that Concepción has long been self-identified by both local authorities and inhabitants as the “cradle of rock”, a designation linked to its dynamic musical scene and night-time culture. The city has played a significant role in the emergence of influential local, national, and Latin American bands and musical groups (Napadenski et al., 2018), a trajectory that contributed to its designation as a UNESCO Creative City of Music in 2023.

Figure 5. Colour used to identify the city

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

With regard to the colour that represents the city, Figure 5 indicates that green predominates in respondents' preferences, with 23%. This result is unsurprising, given the large number of hills, forests, and areas of vegetation surrounding the city. Blue also stands out, with 21%, a choice associated with the presence of the Biobío River and the nearby sea. Yellow, selected by 19% of respondents, may be explained by its prominence in the city's coat of arms, as well as its use as the institutional colour of the University of Concepción.

Figure 6. What people like most about the city

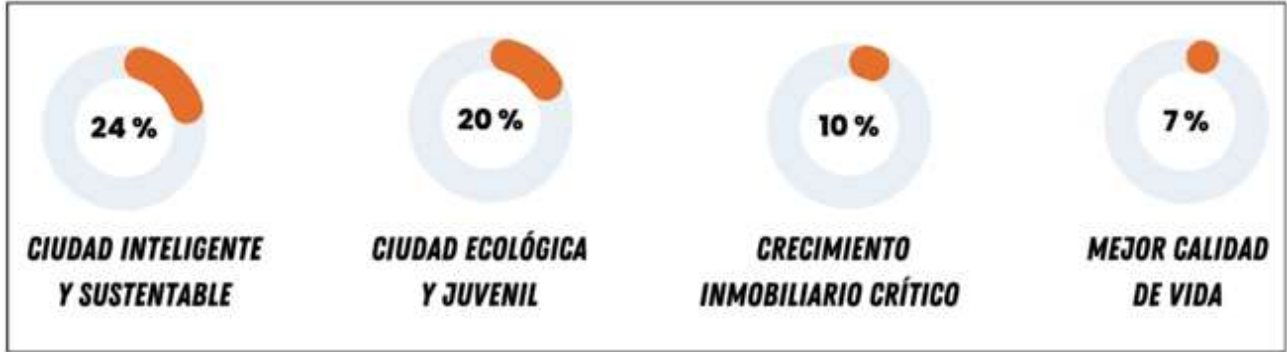


Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The study also reveals preferences regarding the positive aspects of Concepción. Figure 6 highlights quality of life, with 32% of respondents associating it with a city that remains walkable, experiences relatively low traffic congestion and has cycle paths that connect the urban area with some of its parks. Also noteworthy are the city’s four urban lakes, which facilitate family recreation and, together with the wetlands, contribute to the biodiversity of Greater Concepción; this helps explain why 30% of the sample emphasised this feature.

In addition, 15% of respondents highlighted university life, a characteristic that has distinguished Concepción for decades. Beyond the University of Concepción, the city currently hosts four universities belonging to the Council of Rectors, as well as approximately 20 higher education institutions, including private universities and professional institutes. This concentration of institutions generates a floating population from March to December, corresponding to the academic year, with a significant presence of young people from neighbouring cities and other regions of the country. This dynamic is further reinforced by the presence of exchange students, researchers and postgraduate students from around the world.

Figure 7. How the future of the city is envisaged

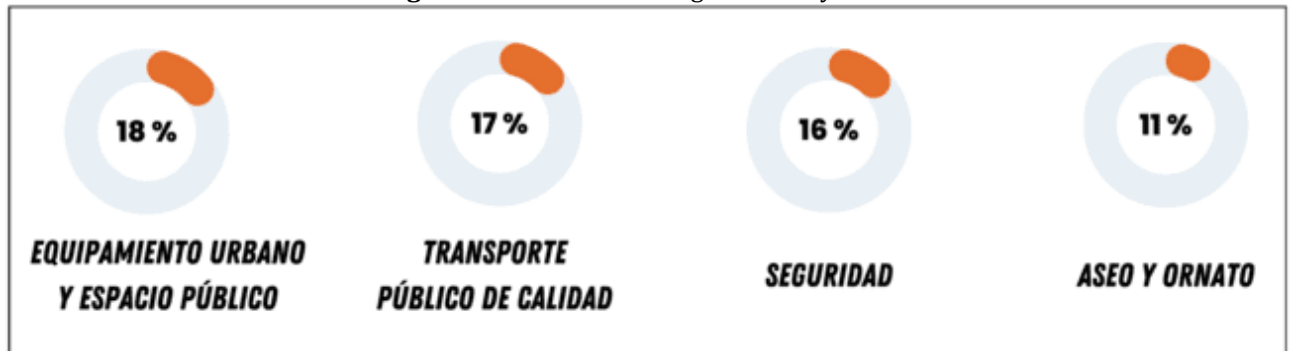


Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Looking ahead, Figure 7 shows that citizens envision an evolution towards a smart and sustainable city (24%), as well as an ecological and youthful city (20%). However, concerns emerge regarding critical real estate growth (10%), while only 7% of respondents anticipate an improvement in quality of life. These results offer a comprehensive view of urban perceptions, identifying both future aspirations and areas of concern.

Taken together, these perceptions highlight the complexity of contemporary urban imaginaries, reflecting tensions between historical memory and aspirations for modernisation. In this sense, the findings invite a reconsideration of urban planning policies that account not only for future-oriented development strategies but also for the heritage values and lived experiences that shape citizens’ relationships with the city.

Figure 8. Main shortcomings of the city



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The main shortcomings identified (Figure 8) relate to urban facilities and public space (18%), the quality of public transport (17%), and safety (16%), which emerge as the primary areas requiring improvement. The concern regarding safety is consistent with other findings, such as changes in the city's nightlife, which has altered pedestrian activity patterns, largely due to perceptions of insecurity.

Public transport is perceived as deficient in terms of timetable coverage, with services ending very early, and safety on board is also considered inadequate. Another feature that has characterised Concepción in recent years is the increased presence of street vendors, who have occupied public spaces such as Ecuador Park, one of the few parks that crosses the city, as well as the central pedestrian walkway, where pedestrian mobility has been significantly hindered by the density of informal commerce.

4. Conclusions

In relation to the objective of the research, which seeks to understand the perceptions and urban imaginaries of the inhabitants of Concepción, Chile, with regard to their city, a set of recurring perceptions and imaginaries can be identified.

First, with respect to the city's most representative urban landmarks, the centrality of the University of Concepción (Figure 9) as an urban symbol reveals how the *imaginary* (Castoriadis, 1989) tends to condense not only social memory (Halbwachs, 2004), but also the collective aspirations of a community within specific landmarks. Conceived as an open and green space, the university campus articulates educational, cultural and recreational functions, thus constituting an urban imaginary matrix (Silva, 2006) for the city. In this sense, it gives shape to what may be understood as an *urban university imaginary*.

Figure 9. Medicine arch at the University of Concepción



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Secondly, the Biobío River (Figure 10) reveals the persistence of a fragmented river imaginary. Despite its geographical and symbolic magnitude, the river does not fully flow into citizens' sense of identity, which may be interpreted as a form of internal otherness within the urban territory itself. This symbolic distance also resonates with processes of socio-spatial inequality, insofar as the riverbanks have historically been occupied by the most vulnerable populations, effectively turning their backs on the city.

Figure 10. Biobío River



Source: Diario de Concepción, 2024.

Thirdly, with regard to the city's representative architectural landmarks, it is difficult to identify a consolidated urban imaginary. This is largely due to the scarcity of architectural references, with the notable exception of the University of Concepción's bell tower (UdeC) (Figure

11), which reflects the fragility of Concepción's architectural heritage as a result of its long history of seismic catastrophes. This condition accounts not only for material loss, but also for the constant recomposition of urban imaginaries. As García Canclini (2007) argues, processes of modernisation in Latin America have been marked by discontinuities that hinder the consolidation of stable architectural traditions.

The bell tower thus emerges as a resilient memory, operating as a symbol of cohesion in the face of territorial and cultural discontinuity. In this sense, the urban architectural imaginary associated with the university's bell tower acquires particular relevance. Closely related to this reflection and to the previous discussion of the Biobío River is the fact that the bridges crossing the river have also been repeatedly damaged by seismic events. This has prevented the city from developing iconic architectural works that might define its image, as occurs in other contexts, such as Buenos Aires with the Puente de la Mujer, Valencia with its Calatrava bridges or Lisbon with the 25 de Abril Bridge.

Figure 11. Bell tower of the University of Concepción



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Fourthly, with regard to the climate with which the city is identified, there is a widespread perception of a temperate climate, despite the empirical evidence of persistent cloudiness, frequent rainfall, intermittent sunshine and overall climatic instability (Figure 12). Beyond the meteorological dimension, this perception gives rise to a symbolic narrative that exceeds objective climatic conditions. According to Maffesoli's logic (2007), the popular name "Tropiconce" operates as a metaphor of urban identity, articulating a playful imaginary that embraces diversity, contradiction and instability. This ironic appropriation of the local climate functions as a cultural marker that differentiates Concepción within the national context and fosters a shared sense of belonging. In this sense, one can speak of an urban imaginary of "Tropiconce".

Figure 12. Cloud cover and woman with umbrella in the rain in Greater Concepción.



Sources: Authors own work, 2024. Agencia UNO, Diario Concepción, 2019.

The fifth urban image identified, Concepción as the birthplace of rock, emerges when night-time is considered the moment of the day that best represents the city. The predominance of the night as a representative moment projects an urban imaginary linked to cultural life, music and alternative forms of sociability, as illustrated in Figure 13 by Festival REC, a free outdoor music event that lasts an entire weekend and transforms the city until a certain hour in public space, before continuing in nightclubs until the early hours of the morning. All these elements refer to what Morin (2000) describes as underground culture.

Concepción's self-definition as the "cradle of rock" expresses a utopian image (Servier, 1982) that idealises the city as a creative and youthful space. However, insecurity and changes in mobility patterns have eroded this experience, demonstrating how social tensions affect territorial cohesion (Pascual, 2011) by limiting the collective appropriation of urban night-time space. Nevertheless, Concepción's music-based bohemian culture has a long-standing tradition.

Figure 13. The REC Festival in Concepción's Bicentennial Park



Source: Cooperativa, 2020.

Colour constitutes the sixth urban imaginary identified, with green predominating as the city's identity colour (Figure 14), directly associated with the relationship between the city and nature. This perception reinforces the idea of an urban imaginary constructed in dialogue with the ecological environment, in which biodiversity appears not only as a material resource but also as a symbolic dimension of belonging. According to Balandier (1988), such perceptions project the city towards a utopian vision of balance between the urban and the natural, generating tensions between processes of modernisation and the pursuit of sustainability in the search for a lasting

equilibrium. In this sense, Concepción articulates an urban imaginary grounded in natural diversity.

Figure 14. Ecuador Park crossing Concepción



Source: Authors own elaboration, 2024.

Meanwhile, when asked what they value most about the city, its inhabitants express predominantly positive assessments, highlighting quality of life in relation to nature, biodiversity and the university environment (Figure 15), which together constitute the seventh urban imaginary identified. These elements confirm the presence of a modernising urban imaginary in Concepción, structured around ecological values and the symbolic centrality of the university. As Silva (2006) argues, urban imaginaries are not merely representations, but forms of social cohesion that enable communities to project shared horizons. In this sense, the aspiration towards a smart, sustainable and youthful city expresses an urban utopia in formation, linking social memory (Halbwachs, 2004) and university memory with a collective desire for modernisation.

Figure 15. Urban rupture between Obispo Hipólito Salas and Cochrane streets in Concepción



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

At the same time, there is a perception of certain shortcomings in the city (Figure 16), notably problems related to the use of public space, transport and security, issues that weaken social and territorial cohesion (Pascual & Peña, 2012), particularly when infrastructure fails to guarantee inclusion and accessibility. From Balandier's perspective (1988), these limitations constitute structural obstacles that hinder the construction of urban utopia, generating conflicts in the appropriation of the commons. In this sense, the occupation of parks and promenades by street vendors operates as a metaphor for this dispute, in which the right to the city is continuously negotiated and strained in everyday practice. It is therefore not surprising that an urban imaginary marked by utopian aspiration and frustration simultaneously emerges.

Figure 16. Pedestrian walkway in Concepción



Source: Burgos, 2015.

Finally, when referring to perceptions of the city's future, the eighth and final urban image emerges: the projection towards a smart and ecological city, which can again be interpreted in terms of modern utopias (Servier, 1982; Weber, 1922), where urban progress is conceived as a collective horizon. However, mistrust surrounding real estate growth highlights what Maffesoli (2007) describes as the ambivalence of the urban, understood as a space of promise and, at the same time, of potential social fragmentation. In this sense, the urban imaginary of Concepción's future (Figure 17) is configured as a utopia in tension, in which aspirations for sustainability coexist with fears of losing territorial cohesion (Pascual, 2011).

Figure 17. Night in the city



Source: Sernatur Biobío, 2025.

In sum, the urban imaginaries of Concepción reveal a complex fabric in which historical and social memory (Halbwachs, 2004), expressed through university symbols, bohemian culture and

a fragile architectural heritage, coexist with utopian aspirations such as the vision of a smart, green and youthful city. In line with Morin (2000) and Maffesoli (2007), these perceptions encapsulate both the pursuit of social cohesion and the experience of fragmentation that characterises urban modernity. From this perspective, Concepción emerges as a utopia in dispute, a city that imagines itself situated between its university and cultural heritage, the symbolic force of its biodiversity and the challenges posed by a sustainable future. As Pascual (2012) cautions, strengthening territorial cohesion will be essential to overcoming current shortcomings and advancing towards a model of urban development that integrates identity, heritage, sustainability and collective well-being.

Figure 18. Conceptual diagram of the main urban imaginaries identified in the city of Concepción.



Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

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