

Article

Disinformation and Responsibility in Young People in Spain during the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the main variables that determine the relationship between disinformation and youth responsibility during the latest stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain (from April to June 2021). Are young people keeping well informed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain? Are the youth behaving responsibly? This document presents several results regarding these questions. In our introduction, we establish a theoretical framework for the following concepts: disinformation, responsibility, credibility, and youth responsibility variables. Our primary interest is in communication factors. The applied methods are a reference review of the national and international literature surrounding this subject and qualitative opinion research conducted through discussion groups with young university students from private and public communication schools in Madrid. A recent study, held in June 2021, provides valuable material for this paper. The main results and findings are as follows: not being satisfied with the information received about COVID-19; knowledge about the most credible news sources; the connection between information and responsibility; and the solutions that are claimed to more responsible in this context by various youth participants. In conclusion, this paper confirms the first hypothesis of considering disinformation as a variable that causes a lack of personal responsibility among youths in complying with public health expectations. Regarding the second hypothesis, we verify that young people consider communication one of the main solutions for being more responsible. In other words, when presented with more information about COVID-19 they feel more aware of the disease.

Keywords: disinformation; responsibility in young people in Spain; COVID-19; credibility; social effects; communication solutions



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic not only affects public health, but it also influences the behavior of young people who have become new victims of this pandemic and vulnerable targets for disinformation. “Social media users have a deficiency in spotting falsehood in specific emotional states and when encountering what is consistent with their values or beliefs disinformation” [1] (p. 7665). Media consumption, access to social media, the immediacy of information, and the sources of information youths use and how they influence their opinions are transformed into irresponsible attitudes towards the disease, resulting in breaches of public health measures imposed by the Spanish government.

COVID-19 has triggered one of the worst streams of disinformation ever experienced. In mid-April 2020, the Coronavirus Fact Alliance database of the Poynter Institute and the International Fact-Checking Network registered 3800 hoaxes related to the coronavirus circulating around the world [2].

Disinformation, on many occasions virilized in group talks on social networks, creates “Hoax messages and rumors on messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook [that] spread like wildfire, and with an increase in smartphone usage, this makes the gullible public treat these false claims as genuine information and accordingly form opinions and

take actions” [3]; disinformation of this nature has negatively influenced public health, creating false information that influences decision making, causes distrust and a lack of compliance with the recommendations made by legislators. As noted, “It is important to differentiate promptly the true epidemic from an epidemic of false claims and potentially harmful actions” [4] that negatively affect the behavior of young people who have been victims of information overexposure, in many cases without scientific evidence, and this has harmed and affected their freedom to move freely, limiting their social life, affecting the economy in Spain, and living with COVID-19 deniers in the face of the pandemic. All this has caused confusion, disbelief, and has negatively affected the behavior of young people: “Fake news has all the more impact because the public likes to believe conspiracy theories. Although disinformation is old, social networks have amplified the phenomenon so much that fake news may have led to tragedies” [5].

The COVID-19 has not only affected public health but also the behavior of some social groups, such as young people. Their new ways of communicating, their opinions about several information sources, and their social interaction needs make them a more vulnerable target, and this needs to be investigated. Young people are not yet vaccinated in Spain and victims of the pandemic are younger than ever. However, their behavior regarding health measures is, in general, irresponsible. Every weekend, most young Spanish people attend street or indoor parties without masks and personal distancing. This paper analyzes the main variables that determine the relationship between disinformation and youth responsibility regarding public health measures.

The research objectives of this paper are as follows: (a) To understand the more credible news sources currently used by young people; (b) to analyze the best sources for young people to be informed about COVID-19; (c) to observe whether they consider themselves well or badly informed regarding COVID-19 information; (d) to research the levels of responsibility exhibited by young people in this pandemic from a self-knowledge point of view; and (e) to establish the best solutions suggested by young people for being responsible in this pandemic.

The authors identify two hypotheses in this research: (1) If disinformation affects the levels of responsibility in young people, then we attempt to understand the relationship between these two variables, i.e., disinformation and responsibility; and (2) to ascertain whether young people consider communication as a solution to being more responsible in the pandemic.

The connection between disinformation and lack of credibility comes from works by different authors. For instance, Nieves Estévez Delgado [6], in her final bachelor’s degree paper (TFG), studied hoaxes and disinformation during the pandemic. She mentioned the creation of *Fact-Checking* initiatives as an institutional solution for searching and neutralizing fake news. These are not the first *Rumor Offices*, as will be explained later. The second relevant paper for this research is one published by Rafael Aleixandre-Benavent, Lourdes Castelló-Cogollos, and Juan-Carlos Valderrama Zurián [7], “Información y Comunicación durante los primeros meses de COVID-19: Infodemia, Desinformación y Papel de los profesionales de la información”. These authors focused their study on the different challenges created by this crisis, such as health, economic, political, and social difficulties. Their paper examines the exponential growth of information, the keys to which are dissemination and message veracity. In this context, communication professionals can help to filter out false information using quality resources and the management of scientific information.

The next piece of research was published by one of the authors of this paper, María Elena Mazo Salmerón [8], who analyzed the psychological variables of rumors; this has been her main area of research over the last 20 years. The COVID-19 crisis has generated millions of rumors and pieces of disinformation, but they are not new. A rumor is the best example of an interpersonal and spontaneous message that is, at present, disseminated mostly on social media. It is a peculiar and *insubordinate* type of message. It could be said that, even without an unknown source, it has the role of *being credible*, even as the sender leads, paradoxically, without *credits*. There are a lot of rumor cases throughout

history but, as it has been mentioned before, the first modern *Fact-Checking offices* were created in the USA during World War II—*Rumor Clinics*—in order to neutralize fake news spread by the media. Some years later, Leo Roster [9] directed the O.W.I.—Office War Information—with a new approach: the importance of sender credibility, the quality of information, and the creation of confidence in communication professionals and their media. Another focused area of research related to this work is an article by Mazo, M.E. [10], “Rumor, a metamorphic message creating atypical reactions on the net”. Disinformation generated by the spreading of rumors in the digital environment of COVID-19 creates disturbing effects. This verbal process is a metamorphic one, and these kinds of messages are perverse but highly seductive.

Regarding disinformation and responsibility, Piper Lipping Liu’s paper [11], “COVID-19 information on social media and preventive behaviors: managing the pandemic through personal responsibility” (2021), outlines the relationship between the consumption of disease information on social media and preventive behaviors, including personal responsibility. He considers that social media provides vital information that might exert a positive influence on people’s preventive behaviors.

Youth responsibility variables are defined in several papers that analyze their environment and motivations. First, Antonia Lozano-Díaz, Juan Sebastián Fernández-Prados, Victoria Figueredo Canosa, and Ana M^a Martínez Martínez [12] presented a study focused on the impact of resilience, online social capital, and life satisfaction among 343 university students. Their main conclusions are that confinement has a strong impact on students, mainly in terms of psychology, and that the important role of the relationship developed between life satisfaction and resilience must be considered. Second, Wendy E. Elis, Tara M. Dumas, and Lindsey M. Forbes [13] state that time spent engaging with family is related to fewer incidents of depression reported by adolescents during the initial COVID-19 crisis. Young people spend their time using social media, with family, friends, and performing physical activities. They spend a lot of time utilizing social media, even more than before the pandemic. Third, E. Power, S. Huges, D. Cotter, and M. Cannon [14] suggest, in “Youth mental health in the time of COVID-19”, that the psychosocial effects of COVID-19 disproportionately affect young people. As short-term factors, the authors mention social isolation and the loss of all their structured occupations; as longer-term mechanisms, they state the strong effects of the predicted recession—including mental health—on young people. Finally, Rachel, I. Silliman, and Emily Adlin Bosk [15] analyzed the impact of considering young people as part of the vulnerable public in this pandemic.

Developing on the literature mentioned above, where some main variables are found and discussed, this research attempts to support the confirmation of our two hypotheses as a conclusion: (1) to consider disinformation a fact that provokes a lower level of youth responsibility, and (2) the setting of the general youth opinion that considers communication as a solution to being more responsible.

2. Materials and Methods

The first research material we used in this paper was a reference review of the literature found about this subject. The details are explained in the introduction.

Second, in order to adhere to our research objectives and establish our hypotheses, qualitative opinion research was conducted in seven discussion groups, and focused opinion research was performed among young university students from communication schools in the Madrid community (Spain). Two public universities (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos I and Universidad Complutense de Madrid) and one private one (Universidad CEU San Pablo) were selected as control groups.

The discussion groups were made up of students studying communication degrees from three different universities. The degrees included audiovisual communication, journalism, advertising, and public relations [16–18]; all students had different socioeconomic characteristics but common academic and professional interests. Currently, these young people find all the information they need in digital media, as it is an environment that

allows interaction and information exchange, and it raises a new communicative scenario that breaks with traditional unidirectional communication models [19]. The ZOOM video-conference platform (San Jose, CA, USA) was used to organize the sessions. Each session lasted sixty minutes and was coordinated by the authors of this paper.

The students were presented with four topics for discussion: level of satisfaction among young university students regarding the information they received about COVID-19; knowing the sources that young university students consider most reliable to inform them about COVID-19; the connection between disinformation and a lack of responsibility; and proposals to improve communication tactics to combat disinformation.

This recent study, held in June 2021, provides valuable updated material for this paper.

3. Results

In this chapter, we present the main results of our study. First, the discussion group research will be explained; second, the main findings will be analyzed.

The discussion groups were made up of communication students between the ages of 18 and 25 of both genders. The results obtained correspond to 7 discussion groups with a total of 84 participants. Each session was coordinated by the lecturers who led the research and who were familiar with the four topics that analyzed the main variables determining the relationship between disinformation and youth responsibility.

The main results and findings were as follows: not being satisfied with the information received about COVID-19; knowledge about the most credible news sources; the connection between information and responsibility; and the solutions that are claimed to be more responsible in this context by various youth participants. The social decision making of this group included two points of view for analysis: (1) young people's social needs include having relationships with their colleagues, and (2) the communicative frame in which they act daily includes social media.

3.1. Level of Satisfaction among Young University Students with the Information Received about COVID-19

The first question asked to the participants was related to their level of satisfaction with the information received about COVID-19. The fact of them being students studying for communication degrees must be considered, which means that they are more sensitive to the effects of media information. The results showed that a large majority indicated their dissatisfaction with the information received about COVID-19, while a small minority affirmed their full satisfaction or simply showed indifference. They were asked whether there were any comments they wanted to make, and different reasons were verbalized, most of them revolving around the credibility of the source of the information received. Some participants mentioned that there had been abundant information, but not quite scientific and rigorous enough due to its strangeness and their ignorance of the subject. They questioned the reliability of the information and the lack of guarantee, considering it confusing and not very transparent, and revealed that their most credible sources were those of their relatives against a mistrust of the information offered by their friends and social networks. Here, again, the social decision-making variable reappears. The influence of friends, first, and social media, second, is a constant in youth groups. In Section 3.2 this process is explained.

3.2. Knowing the Sources That Young University Students Consider Most Reliable to Inform Them about COVID-19

In order to establish the vulnerability of young people to the misinformation that the communicative management of the pandemic has generated, and to understand the sources that they look up to stay informed, we have classified sources into three groups:

3.2.1. Official Sources

Young people perceived information received through different institutional organizations dependent on the Government of Spain as reliable. They consider that, at some

points during the pandemic, they have not been very successful, causing certain confusion, although they did not understand the information as fake news. A minority doubted the informative role that official sources had in the construction of media discourse throughout the pandemic. Simplistic messages had a clear ideological orientation that only generated frustration in Spanish society and increased their distrust. For young people in Spain, official information was one more communication source that had to be followed, along with other friends and social media messages.

3.2.2. The Media

A vast majority express confidence in the general media, and some of the main national and international newspapers are cited, such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *Diario.es*; these newspapers have a reputation for reliability. Other international newspapers were added, among which the following stand out: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *BBC* television channel. They also mentioned the impact of radio, but they did not identify specific radio stations or programs. The most striking discovery was that television was not pointed out at any moment, and our subjects did not highlight any of the most informative programs that were being broadcast throughout the pandemic, even those with authentic opinion leaders. Again, young people in Spain need to establish their “official” information through the media in conjunction with their own social media accounts and the opinions of their colleagues.

3.2.3. Scientists and Academics of Recognized Prestige

Young university students in Spain lend the greatest credibility to scientist and academics of recognized prestige when it comes to being rigorously informed. The news that comes from health workers, scientists, and academics is therefore guaranteed to be viewed as reliable. In all cases, these were cited as the most reliable sources; however, at no time were any of these professionals named or highlighted, and they are only cited as a collective. It must be taken into account that young people in Spain mostly use social media to obtain messages from scientists.

3.3. Connection between Disinformation and Lack of Responsibility

A clear connection between disinformation and a lack of responsibility in youth in Spain has been found in our results. We identified that young people feel restless about the extensive and inaccurate information coverage around COVID-19, causing confusion, misinformation, and alterations in their behavior that have produced negative effects both individually and socially. Their exposure to false information and the influence it generates concern, as does the fact that they are often accused of irresponsible behavior. The new communication formats they use (mainly social media) and their need to be socially connected make them more vulnerable to disinformation. More than half of the analyzed group assumes responsibility in this pandemic, but they justify it with reference to their exposure to information and the credibility that they give to the news rather than clearly identifying instances of false reliability. Some of the young people commented that, sometimes, they detected false reliability due to the extravagance of the message or simply because it was massively disseminated on the WhatsApp messaging network (Menlo Park, CA, USA), thus generating mistrust. Most of them associate their irresponsibility in terms of public health (use of masks, personal distancing, etc.) to the misinformation that has existed during the pandemic, and they defend the importance of the credibility of the sender as well as the quality of the information and their trust in communication professionals.

3.4. Proposals to Improve Communication against Misinformation

Another question discussed with the youth groups was their suggestions for improving communication in relation to COVID-19. Our young participants pointed out that the Internet is a channel that amplifies disinformation and makes it spread quickly worldwide.

In this context, young people, called digital natives, are the most affected and they are considered users trained in the use of these technologies. Social media is part of their lives and helps them socialize in new environments. The pandemic has promoted the use of these networks to bring them closer together during moments in which they are most isolated.

They all consider the promotion of awareness as being important. Only then will they have the ability to think critically, to find and correct misinformation, to make rational use of the media and various networks, and to avoid their overexposure to false information. Social networks are becoming the main source of information for an increasing number of people, especially young people, meaning that “disinformation seems to have found a new channel for them.”

4. Discussion and Conclusions

After analyzing the results of this research, it is disturbing to observe the degree of dissatisfaction that young people indicate regarding the information that has been generated during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain (from April to June 2021). The complexity of the pandemic, its origin, evolution, and the impact it has, exponentially multiplied the information with the same proportionality in which the story of disinformation and its spread was constructed [20].

It is true that there has been an overload of information willfully used on numerous occasions. False messages in a major health crisis such as this are influencing people’s behavior, which can alter the effectiveness of measures taken by a government (about mask use, personal space, washing of hands, prohibition of parties, etc.) [21], posing a serious health risk. Its virilization is dangerous in a digital society that is interconnected by social networks. It is disconcerting to know that young people distrust and question the credibility of information sources and the lack of quality that the messages have, considering them confusing and not transparent [22]. In this way, young people confirm their dissatisfaction because they express feeling misinformed.

The vulnerability that young people suffer from in relation to disinformation guides an important stage of this work, as knowing the sources they trust and establishing how to stay informed are essential. It should be noted that the participants are students who are majoring in communication studies, so they grant greater credibility to all the information that comes from academics and scientists—their main reference group when it comes to rigorously informing themselves. This selected group is the one that guarantees the greatest reliability in the face of the mistrust they feel towards official sources, such as the Spanish government. This suspicion by citizens, and by extension young people, towards institutions and their failure to manage the pandemic poses a new scenario. We found that this crisis has compounded the problem of misinformation; in this new media and political ecosystem, institutions can lose power and citizens can feel disoriented.

All the results of the research that have been used in the field stage of this qualitative investigation confirm the importance of social networks for the participants, as well as their need to be socially connected. In fact, this social variable explains the relationship between youth media exposure and the perceived credibility of different news sources. This new digital society, where everything goes viral, creates a new phenomenon, namely the immediacy of sharing information; this environment has acquired a new dimension that makes young people participants in both social and political decision making [23]. In this way, young people assume their responsibility in the face of the pandemic and justify it in relation to their exposure to existing information and the credibility that they give to the news, rather than identifying reliability or contrasting the credibility of the sender or the quality of the information. This worrying phenomenon is already being addressed by the European Commission [24], which has created work lines to fight rumors and disinformation.

Regarding the proposals to improve communication in the face of misinformation, students consider themselves capable of using technologies and managing social networks.

They believe that it is vital to develop better and clearer messages in the face of the restrictions that have prevailed during the COVID-19 era (confinement, closure of commercial centers and educational centers, mask use, personal distancing in public areas, etc.). They feel they are victims of a system that takes away their rights (regarding social relationships) and does not train them in critical and social thinking to make them better citizens.

Social networks are the main source of information that young people use, and in the face of this new reality, they suggest some interesting solutions: to manage information properly, to promote clear and reliable communication and, by far, the best solution given by young people is raising awareness regarding the specific public health measures for COVID-19.

Finally, this paper confirms disinformation as a variable that has affected the lack of youth responsibility in Spain during the COVID pandemic, and we have shown that young people consider communication as one of the best solutions for being more responsible.

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