Connected and together, *primus inter pares* bias and a professional future with lights and challenges. Experiences and perspectives of Communication students during the pandemic

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Abstract

Despite the important role that young people can play in a context of health crisis, little attention has been paid to their discourses on how they experienced confinement and post-confinement. To fill this gap, discussion groups were conducted with young communication students in Spain to understand how they coped with these circumstances and to understand their professional expectations in a post-pandemic context. It was found that they coped well with the restrictions, using applications to keep in touch with their friends, and that the difficulties came with the end of the restrictions and the maintenance of certain restrictions, a period in which they felt the effects of possible contagion from a *primus inter pares* bias. Regarding their professional future, *Journalism* students, in contrast to advertising and public relations and *Audiovisual*

Communication students, were pessimistic and complained about a labour market that requires skills related to corporate communication. In the face of possible future pandemics, it is necessary to generate health information from an educational approach (Peñafiel *et al*., 2014) and involve them in the search for solutions (Paiva *et al*., 2021). Finally, the experiences of *Journalism* students coincide with the results obtained from the analysis of the labour market available on job portals (Martínez-Nicolás, 2023; Gómez-Diago; Martínez-Nicolás, 2024) and suggest the need to include in the curriculum design of *Journalism* courses content that goes beyond journalistic production and is related to corporate communication (Martínez-Nicolás, 2023).

1. Introduction
Covid-19 is the deadliest infectious disease to date. It first appeared as a pneumonia-like illness in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019 and was declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020, just over two months after the first cases were reported. In addition to the more than six million deaths it caused (*Johns Hopkins University*, 2023) and the devastating economic consequences it had on society, this pandemic established practices that were already in use but unknown to contemporary society, at least for Spanish citizens, such as confinement and the use of masks.

Young people, along with the elderly, are perhaps the sector of the population that suffered most from the consequences of this pandemic, not because their health was threatened as severely as it was for older people, but because of their need for social contact (**Donovan**; **Zentner**, 2020).

Despite the preponderance of the use of quantitative methodologies to study the effects of Covid-19 and specifically

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the effects of the pandemic on young people, the *World Health Organization* and the *Centre for Disease Control and Prevention* recommend the use of qualitative research techniques (**Wolff** *et al*., 2018) such as ethnography, used in *Mapping the Emotional Geographies of Covid-19* (*University of California*) and in *Autoethnographies of a Pandemic from Brooklyn's Epicenter* (*Social Science Research Center*), research projects aimed at eliciting citizens' experiences during the pandemic, or in-depth interviews, a research technique that, together with questionnaires, was used in the work –some of which focused exclusively on Spain (**Rodríguez-Bravo**; **Nicholas**, 2024)–, carried out within the framework of the *Harbingers-2* research project. In this project, aimed at finding out how the pandemic has impacted on young researchers who have not yet achieved a permanent position, interviews made it possible to identify that the change from a face-to-face teaching model or a distance learning model influenced the research of these young people, as well as to detect that this influence varied depending on their country of residence (**Nicholas** *et al.*, 2021).

Qualitative methodologies are well suited to understanding the responses of social groups to the pandemic because, through conversational methods, they make it possible to capture and understand how people give meaning and meaning to health and illness (**Teti** *et al*., 2020).

This work aims to contribute to the line of research on communication and health, which is dominated by quantitative research (**Hannawa** *et al.*, 2015) and needs qualitative approaches to understand the perspectives of different social groups (**Cappella**; **Hornik**, 2009). The aim was to obtain discourses from communication students in Spain about how they experienced the pandemic. In addition, we sought to understand these students' perceptions of their professional futures, as young people will play a crucial role in the management of post-pandemic society (**Arce**, 2021), and in particular communication students and graduates will have a relevant role in a society that is highly dependent on communication.

2. Research objectives and method
The aim was to find out, on the one hand, how young communication students in Spain have experienced the pandemic and, on the other, to find out how they perceive their professional future in a post-pandemic society.

Therefore, the first research questions posed are the following:

RQ.1. How have young communication students experienced the Covid-19 pandemic?
> RQ.1.1. Specifically, what were the communicative behaviors of the students during and after confinement?
> RQ.1.2. What is their perception of the media's treatment of the pandemic?
> RQ.1.3. How they perceived the possibilities and/or consequences of a possible spread of Covid-19?

RQ.1.4. How they experienced the restrictions imposed after the confinement?

Furthermore, bearing in mind that Communication graduates are called upon to play a fundamental role in society, given the importance of communication, the second research question is as follows.

QR.2. How do communication students perceive their professional future?
PI.2.1. Specifically, are there differences in students' perceptions of their professional future depending on the degree they are studying?

Discussion groups were performed, which is an ideal technique for accessing social discourse, as it fixes and orders the social meaning corresponding to the semantic field in which the topic under study is inscribed (**Canales**; **Peinado**, 1999). Furthermore, discussion groups allow participants to support each other in a way that is impossible to achieve in an interview (**Lee**, 1993; **Ward** *et al.*, 1991, **Lunt**; **Livingstone**, 1996), and are suitable for dealing with conflictive topics (**Gómez-Diago**; **Siyuan**, 2021).

Three discussion groups were designed. The meetings were conducted online and consisted of a maximum of six people, which is advisable when the issue affects them directly (**Morgan**; **Lobe**, 2011).

2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of sixteen young people aged between 18 and 21 from six Spanish regions: Madrid, Andalusia, Castilla La Mancha, Extremadura, Canary Islands and Valencia, who were studying at the *Universidad Rey Juan Carlos* one of the three communication degrees that were being taught at that time at this university[1]: *Journalism* degree, *Audiovisual Communication* degree and *Advertising and Public Relations* degree.

For the design of the discussion groups, two typological criteria were applied: the grade and the degree the young people were studying. Grade was considered because older age may imply greater freedom, which may influence these young people's perceptions of social distancing (**Fisher** *et al.*, 2021), how they experienced the pandemic and their perspectives on their professional future. Degree was used as a typological criterion to delimit the discussion groups to find out whether students have different perspectives and expectations of their professional future depending on their degree. The discussion groups were configured as follows:

DG1: one male and five females, aged between 19 and 20, students in the second year of *Audiovisual Communication* degree.
DG2: two men and four women, aged between 20 and 22, final year students of *Journalism* degree.
DG3: two men and two women, aged between 18 and 20, in the first and second year of *Advertising and Public Relations* degree.

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[1] From the academic year 2023-2024, the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos also offers a degree in Digital Communication.

3. Results

3.1. Confinement: connected and together

At the beginning of the meetings, the participants were asked to briefly define the period of confinement and they uttered words from similar semantic fields. Thus, DG1 expressed that the period of confinement was hard, DG2 spoke of uncertainty and surprise, and DG3 referred to difficulty, pain, despair and fear.

DG2 participants defined the confinement as unexpected and shocking, and experienced it differently depending on whether they were with their parents or whether they were living with friends or a partner, the latter two being more bearable.

> P1: I spent a month and a half at my parents' house and a month and a half with my flatmate and when I was with my parents, it was worse because you can see the differences in affinity.
> P2: I didn't have a bad time in confinement because I live with my boyfriend, so it was fine (DG2).

DG1 participants recalled the days when they were criticised for returning home and expressed feeling unfairly singled out by the media. During the confinement, these young people found ways to share time together, connected online. The important thing at that time was, according to them, "to make that time pass and to be closer" and in that context, apps became a fundamental ally for the members of DG1 and DG3, functioning as "extensions of the human being" (**McLuhan**, 1964), and as environments where they worked together, shared leisure time, kept each other company and even met people.

> P1: We had costume parties too. And we would start at twelve o'clock at night and finish at six or seven in the morning.
> P2: With the random Instagram call, you connected with people you didn't think you'd ever connect with in your life and now they're your friends.
> P3: I had classes in the morning, which were video calls. Then in the afternoons I was on video call every day with a friend, and we did homework together, and then in the evenings, with friends or family (DG3).

For the members of DG1 and DG3 it was important to share time and space. Their practices during the confinement move away from the "connected but alone" state that, according to Turkle (2012), generates the use of technologies, as these young people used technologies and applications to do things together: they watched series, celebrated parties, did class work, accompanied each other, recovered friendships and met people.

> P1: The important thing was to pass the hours and to be united with the rest.

P2: I got to put on the screen that I had used for 12 hours in a day, the Iphone.

P4: I got to know people in the quarantine. That is, friends who joined video calls with house party (DG1).

DG2 participants, who were older than DG1 and DG3, mainly made video calls to talk to friends and even regained friendships. For these young people it was essential to stay in touch with their friends and to "socialise".

P2: I would make video calls and have a beer with my friends in the Canary Islands, who I might not be there for three months and not talk to them.

P3: People who never contacted you, did so to see how you were doing. I really liked that a lot.

P4: In the end, if we stop to think about it, it wasn't confinement or anything because I, for example, was in contact with everyone, even with people who, as you say, I hadn't been in contact with for a long time.

P1: In the end, if you are used to social relations, calling arises from the need to be in contact with people (DG2).

Regarding the media's treatment of the pandemic, the participants expressed, on the one hand, that the information was necessary, as it allowed them to know the seriousness of the situation and to know more about Covid-19 and its effects, but, at the same time, these young people consider that too much emphasis was placed on the number of deaths caused by the pandemic, leading to a desensitization towards this issue.

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P2: Every time you turned on the news, they talked about so many dead that it was overwhelming. At one point, 400 dead, 500 dead, 600 dead.

P3: You turned on the TV and there wasn't a news report that didn't say there were so many dead (DG1).

P2: This bombardment was necessary because in the end the reality that one had at home was very limited but the reality outside was much more dangerous. In addition, people had no information on the subject, on how the virus was transmitted, on the usefulness of PCRs and antigen tests, on the symptoms and after-effects of Covid-19.

P1: There was over-information and that causes you to be uninformed. People reached a point where you told them five thousand deaths and they heard two. We had so much information that in the end, as we didn't focus

on any of them, we weren't informed. I don't think the information was the right one.

P2: The information was a bit morbid. I mean, I don't think they hurt him to scare him, but I think the information should have been more scientific (DG3).

From the discourses of these young people despite the difficulties that this new situation implied for them, with the help of different online applications and video calls, they adapted well to the confinement, which in Spain lasted three months (14 March - 21 June 2020).

3.2. Post-confinement: *primus inter pares* bias and bars as safe places

While these university students coped well with the period of confinement by sharing time and activities with their friends online, once deconfinement occurred and they were able to leave their homes, with restrictions, they found it very difficult to adjust their behaviors to the limitations set to prevent infection and stop the spread of the pandemic.

The *primus inter pares* bias (first among equals or false uniqueness) consists of believing that diseases affect other people more than oneself, assuming that one has a lower probability of acquiring them (**Igartua** *et al.*, 1997)

P3: I suffered more after the confinement, with all the restrictions, with the issue of the curfew and all the restrictions, and wearing the mask, all that stuff becomes heavy in the end.
P4: I don't live with my parents, so I am less worried about getting infected nowadays. If I lived with them, I would be more careful (DG2).

Faced with the situation of meeting friends and risking their health and that of their families, participants chose to meet. These young people experienced a progressive loss of fear of contracting Covid-19, which they combined with the use of measures to check whether they had been infected.

P2: My best friend came from Madrid, and I hadn't seen her since March until December, so I finally risked my health and met my friend, and we got infected.
P3: A friend of mine who was more obsessed with the issue, she used to buy rapid tests at the pharmacy [...] I don't know how reliable they were, but better that than nothing (DG3).

The participants identified themselves with the hospitality sector, even stating that they would not be infected in a bar, citing "studies that I don't know what they are" to support this information. In addition, participants expressed a *primus inter pares* bias whereby they perceived that a possible Covid-19 infection would hardly affect them. As a result, they went to bars and to flats with friends regardless of the restrictions.

P1: I feel very sorry for the catering industry because they have been riddled with measures. You sit at a table, and you don't get infected. You get infected when you go to a house. There have even been studies done that right now I don't know what they are [...].
P4: Many people say, well I have to keep getting together or I'm going to go to my living room and the four of us are going to stay and what we were doing in a bar, we do it here. In a bar we were doing it outdoors and we were with the necessary measures [...] (DG3).

Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the bars closing earlier and expressed how important these places are to them. At this point they identify themselves as a collective, as opposed to "them", who are the ones in charge of placing restrictions related to the closing times of these venues.

P1: They also have to think that we can't stay cooped up at home for two years. I am single, what do I do?
P2: If one day a bar plays reggaeton, I'm going to go straight there. I don't go to the cinema, or I don't go to Madrid for a walk, but if they play reggaeton, I prefer to go to that bar because it is that atmosphere that we are missing (DG2).

These young people start from the idea that they "have to meet", wherever they are, and express that as the bars close "early", they go to flats where they get infected because they sit together and forget to wear masks. While acknowledging that it is practically impossible to keep a safe distance and keep a mask on when they are in a bar, young people insist on this idea that they are safer in these bars than if they go to other places.

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P1: If the bar had continued until one o'clock, maybe that measure would have combated some contagion.
P3: The fact that we are thrown out of a bar makes you go to a house and get infected.
P2: In a bar we were doing it outdoors and we were with the necessary measures, and in a flat it's closed, obviously and you're closer.
P4: You go to a bar and there is no distance of five feet, and no one has their mask on all the time, no one takes it off, drinks and puts it back on (DG2).

3.3. Communication students' perspectives on their professional future: lights and challenges

Regarding their professional future, the members of DG1, students of the *Audiovisual Communication* degree, were optimistic and expressed that they would

like to direct music videos, have or work in a production company, work in sports-related communication, be a scriptwriter, or manage social networks.

> P1: I love music. I would love to work as a music video director.
> P2: I would like to work in the organisation of sports events.
> P4: I would like to be either a film director or a screenwriter.
> P3: I want to work in an audiovisual company. I don't know what I will do yet, but I want to work in a company (DG1).

The members of the DG3, students of the *Advertising and Public Relations* degree, stated that, although many things can happen until it is their turn to work, they were also optimistic about their professional future. Moreover, these young people believe that there will always be a need for professionals who generate advertising communication.

> P2: I would like to manage social media, be a community manager and work in an agency on influencers.
> P3: I am very happy with my career because it has been a sector that is going in leaps and bounds, that does not end, and I consider that it has incredible opportunities.
> P4: I think our sector is not going to have it as difficult as others. I hope I'm not wrong, but I'm quite optimistic about the future of our career [...] (DG3).

Unlike the students of *Audiovisual Communication,* and *Advertising and Public Relations*, those of *Journalism* showed concern regarding their professional future and identified obstacles that they encounter in their incorporaton into the labor market

Finally, the participants of DG2, final year students of the *Journalism* degree showed concern about their professional future and identified obstacles to their incorporation into the labor market. Firstly, they complained about the difficulties they have in finding paid or unpaid internships in the media, as they explained that the media only hire interns who have completed the Master's degrees they organize. In addition, these students complained that some companies where they had done internships now offer the same internships in blended learning mode and with less remuneration.

> P4: Internships, if it was already difficult to get them to pay anything before, now they don't pay anything, it's impossible.
> P1: I did an internship in the first four-month period, and they paid three hundred euros and for the same work, as it was teleworking, they lowered it to one hundred.
> P5: I got a reply today, but they sent me an email again saying that there were no internships this summer either and that only the Master had internships (DG2).

Final-year *Journalism* students complain that both internship and job advertisements on job portals, a preferred resource for employers and job seekers (**Martínez-Nicolás** *et al*., 2024), and the most commonly used by graduates to find employment communication (**García-Galera** *et al.*, 2023), require them to have experience and professional skills related to corporate communication and marketing.

> P2: Looking for journalism, I find announces in which they ask for marketing and corporate communication, which I understand will have something to do with it because communication is also marketing and all that, but [...].
> P3: Journalism is now the way out for community managers. If you don't learn about graphic design or digital marketing [...].
> P1: And also, corporate communication. Many job announcements ask for knowledge of corporate communication.
> P2: And there are a lot of people. In InfoJobs there are many people, many applicants, they ask for experience that we don't have and in LinkedIn, the same thing (DG2).

4. Discussion and conclusions

This paper gathers the perspectives of young communication students in Spain on how they have experienced the confinement and its aftermath and on their expectations for their professional future in a post- Covid-19 society. The discussion groups showed that these young people were able to adapt to the confinement: they could not leave their homes, but they were able to adapt to their future in a post- Covid-19 society. They were connected online and interacted in the virtual environment by doing activities together: they did homework, watched movies, played games and even met people and regained friendships. The hard part came after the confinement, when some social restrictions were removed, but others remained, specifically the closing of the bars at an earlier time. It was difficult for these students to maintain social distance and they went to the bars with a *primus inter pares* bias from which they ignored the consequences of a possible Covid-19 contagion.

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At a time when vaccines make it possible to live normally, the analysis of young people's discourses provides results that need to be considered in the face of future pandemics. Firstly, it is necessary to develop health information with an educational purpose aimed at young people "to generate good scientific dissemination, move towards greater prevention and good citizen training" (**Peñafiel** *et al*., 2014, p. 149), incorporate them in the search for solutions (**Paiva** *et al*., 2021) and prevent them from acting from the *primus inter pares* bias.

Regarding the students' prospects for their professional future, while the *Audio-visual Communication* and *Advertising and Public Relations* students expressed optimism, the *Journalism* students were pessimistic, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the difficulties they have to do internships in the media, as these are almost exclusively reserved for those who are doing a Master's degree in the media. In addition, these students complain that they are required to have skills related to corporate communication and marketing. This coincides with the data obtained in recent studies that have analyzed the job market available in Spain for *Journalism* graduates in job portals (**Gómez-Diago**; **Martínez-Nicolás**, 2024) and is linked to the reconfiguration of a communication system where the media have lost their preponderant role and where companies can generate their own communication. Therefore, without neglecting the teaching of journalistic skills, university education must provide students with skills related to the field of corporate communication, thus helping to meet the needs of the labour market while promoting the employability of students (**Martínez-Nicolás**, 2023).

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