

*Article*

# Disinformation and responsibility in young people during the Covid-19 era

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the main variables which determines the relation between disinformation and the youth responsibility during the last stage of Covid-19 pandemic in Spain. The document presents relevant results on this subject. At the Introduction the reader will find the theoretical framework of the following concepts: disinformation, responsibility, credibility, and youth responsibility variables. The greatest interest, considering the authors specialization, falls in communication factors. The methods applied had been the reference review of the literature found about this subject, as well as a qualitative opinion research through discussion groups with young University students from Communication Schools in Madrid, both public and private. This recent study, held in June 2021, provide a very rich material for this paper. The main results and findings are the facts of being not satisfied with the information received about Covid-19; the knowledge about their most credible sources; the connection between information and responsibility, and some of the solutions said by youth to be more responsible in this context. As a conclusion, this paper confirms the first hypothesis of considering the disinformation as a variable which causes the lack of youth responsibility. Regarding the second hypothesis it is checked that young people consider communication as a solution for being more responsible.

**Keywords:** Disinformation; Responsibility in young people; Covid-19; Credibility; Social effects; Communication solutions.

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## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is affecting not only to the public health but also to the behavior of some social groups as youth. Their new way of communicating, their opinion about several information sources and their interaction social needs make them a target more vulnerable which has to be investigated. Young people are not yet vaccinated in Spain and the victims of the pandemic are younger than ever. However, their behavior is, in general, irresponsible with the health measures. This paper analyses the main variables which determines the relation between disinformation and youth responsibility.

The research objectives of this paper are: a) To know the more credible sources for young people nowadays; b) To analyze the best sources for young people to be informed about Covid-19; c) To know if they consider themselves well or bad informed regarding Covid-19 Information; d) To research the grade of responsibility of young people in this

Pandemic -with a self-knowledge point of view-; and e) To find out the best solutions suggested by young people to be responsible in this pandemic.

The authors identify two hypotheses in this research: 1) If the disinformation affects the grade of responsibility of the youth. They try to know the relation between these two variables -disinformation & responsibility-, and 2) To check if young people consider communication as a solution for being more responsible in the pandemic.

The connection between disinformation and lack of credibility comes from works from different authors: Nieves Estévez Delgado [1], in her final grade Work (TFG) studied the hoaxes and disinformation during the pandemic crisis. She mentioned the creation of *Fact-Checking* initiatives, as an institutional solution for searching and neutralizing fake-news. They are not the first *Rumor Offices* as it will be explained later. The second relevant paper for this research is the one published by Rafael Aleixandre-Benavent, Lourdes Castelló-Cogollos and Juan-Carlos Valderrama Zurián [2] - *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 in the different challenges created by this crisis stage, as health, economic, political and social ones. The information lives an exponential growth and the keys are dissemination and message veracity. In this context, communication professionals can help filtering out untruth information, using quality resources, and managing scientific information.

The next research was published by one of the authors of this paper, María Elena Mazo Salmerón [3], who analyzed the psychological variables of rumors, her main research line during the last 20 years. Covid-19 crisis has generated millions of rumors and disinformation, but they are not new. A rumor is the best example of an interpersonal and spontaneous message, nowadays more disseminated by social media. It is a peculiar and *insubordinate* type of message. Even, it could be said that, without an unknown source, has the role of *being credible* -the sender leads, paradoxically, without *credits*-. There are a lot of rumor cases in history but, as it has been mentioned before, the first modern *Fact-Checking offices* were created in the USA during the II World War -*Rumor Clinics*- in order to neutralize the fake-news spread by the media. Some years later, Leo Roster [4] directed the O.W.I -Office War Information- with a new approach: the importance of the sender credibility, the information's quality and the creation of confidence in communication professionals and its media. Another focused research related to this work is Mazo, M.E. [5] article *Rumor, a metamorphic message creating atypical reactions on the net*. The 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 this kind of messages are perverse but very seductive.

Regarding disinformation and responsibility Piper Liping Liu [6] set in his study *Covid-19 information on social media and preventive behaviors: managing the pandemic through personal responsibility* (2021), the relation between the disease information consumption on social media and preventive behaviors, including personal responsibility. He considers that social media provide vital information that might exert a positive influence on people's preventive behavior.

The youth responsibility variables are defined in several papers which analyze their environment and motivations. Firstly, Antonia Lozano-Díaz, Juan Sebastián Fernández-Prados, Victoria Figueredo Canosa and Ana M<sup>a</sup> Martínez Martínez [7] 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 had a strong impact on them, mainly in the psychological field, and that it must be considered the important role of the relationship developed with life satisfaction and resilience. Secondly, Wendy E. Elis, Tara M. Dumas and Lindsey M. Forbes [8] contribute with the statement of time engaging

with family was related to less reported depression among adolescents during the initial Covid-19 crisis. The young people share their time with social media, family, friends and physical activity. They spent more and more time with social media, even more than before the pandemic. Thirdly, E. Power, S. Huges, D. Cotter and M. Cannon [9] suggest in their study *Youth mental health in the time of Covid-19* that psychosocial effects of Covid-19 disproportionately affect young people: as short-term factors they mentioned social isolation and the loss of all their structured occupations; as longer-term mechanisms they said the strong effects on young people of the predicted recession -including mental health-. Finally, Rachel, I. Silliman and Emily Adlin [10] Bosk analyzed the factors of considering youth people as vulnerable publics in this pandemic.

After the mentioned literacy, where some main variables were found and discussed, this research try to hold, as a conclusion, the confirmation of the two hypothesis: to consider the disinformation as a fact which provoke a less level of youth responsibility, and the setting of the young people opinion who consider communication as a solution for being more responsible.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The materials used in this research had been, firstly, the reference review of the literature found about this subject. In the previous chapter, the Introduction, are explained the details.

Secondly, in order to keep the research objectives and to check the hypotheses mentioned, it has been implemented a qualitative opinion research through seven discussion groups, as a focused opinion research among young University students from Communication Schools in Madrid's Community (Spain). It has been selected two public universities (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos I and Universidad Complutense de Madrid) and a private one (Universidad CEU San Pablo) as control groups. This recent study, held in June 2021, provide a valuable updated material for this paper.

## 3. Results

The discussion groups were made up of 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 lead of the research and were addressed in four topics that analyze the main variables that determine the relationship between disinformation and youth responsibility.

The main results and findings are the fact of not being satisfied with the information received about Covid-19; knowledge about its most credible sources; the connection between information and responsibility, and some of the solutions that young people claim to be more responsible in this context.

### 3.1. Level of satisfaction of young university students with the information received from Covid-19

The first question asked to the participants is related to their level of satisfaction with the information received from Covid-19. The results showed that the large majority indicate their dissatisfaction compared to a small minority that affirm their full satisfaction or simply show indifference. They were asked if there were any comments they wanted to make, and different reasons were verbalized, revolving around the credibility of the

source of the information received. Some participants mentioned that there has been abundant information, but quite not scientific and rigorous due to the strangeness and ignorance of the subject. They questioned the reliability of the information and the lack of guarantee, considering it confusing and not very transparent, and reveal that their most credible sources were those of their relatives against mistrust the information offered by their friends and social networks.

### *3.2. Knowing the sources that young university students consider most reliable to inform about Covid-19.*

In order to detect the vulnerability of young people to the misinformation that the communicative management of the pandemic has generated, and to know the sources that they look up to stay informed, at this point interesting data was revealed that we have classified into three sections:

#### **3.2.1. Official Sources.**

Through the different institutional bodies dependent on the Government of Spain, they perceived them as reliable, and they consider that at some points during the pandemic they haven't been very successful, causing them certain confusion, although they didn't appreciate the information as a lie. A minority doubts about the informative role that official sources have had in the construction of the media discourse throughout the pandemic. Simplistic messages were together with a clear ideological orientation that have only generated frustration in Spanish society and have increased their distrust of them.

#### **3.2.2. The media.**

A vast majority express their reliability in the media and some of the main national and international newspapers are cited: the newspapers listed were: El País, El Mundo and Diario.es, considering these ones with more reputation. 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 radio, but they don't identify specific radio stations or programs. The most striking thing is to discover that the television medium in any moment has been pointed out, and it doesn't highlight any of the most informative programs that have been broadcasting throughout the pandemic and had authentic opinion leaders.

#### **3.2.3 Scientists and academics of recognized prestige.**

Young university students give this reference group the greatest credibility when it comes to being rigorously informed. The news that came from health workers, scientists and academics are the ones that guaranteed the greatest reliability. In all cases they were cited as the most reliable sources, although at no time is any of these professionals named or highlighted. They are only cited as a collective.

### *3.3. Connection between disinformation and lack of responsibility*

We found that young people feel restless about the extensive and inaccurate information coverage around Covid-19, causing confusion, misinformation and alteration in their behaviour that has produced negative effects both individually and socially. Their exposure to false information generates concern and the influence it has had and how they are accused of irresponsible behaviour. The new communication formats they use and their need to be socially connected make them more vulnerable to disinformation. More

than a half of the analysed group assumes their responsibility in this pandemic, but they justify it by the great informative exposure that has existed and the credibility that they have given to the news, not identifying their reliability. Some of the young people commented that sometimes they detected it due to the extravagance that the message conveyed or simply because it was massively disseminated on the WhatsApp messaging network and it generated mistrust. Most of them associate their irresponsibility to the misinformation that has existed during the pandemic and demonstrate the importance of the credibility of the sender as well as the quality of the information and the trust in communication professionals.

#### 3.4. *Proposals to improve Communication against misinformation*

The young participants pointed out that the Internet is a channel that amplifies disinformation and makes it spread quickly to any part of the world. 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 to socialize in a new environment. The pandemic has promoted the use of these networks to bring them closer together in the moments that were most isolated, but not for that reason they are digitally literate, and they discuss their ability to be experts in new digital technologies.

They all consider very important to promote education in the face of restriction. They feel themselves victims of a system that only restricts rights in the face of good training. Only then they will have the ability to have critical thinking, to find misinformation, to make rational use of the media and 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, so "disinformation seems to have found a new channel for them."

### 4. Discussion

After analysing the results of this research, it's disturbing to know the degree of dissatisfaction that young people indicate with the information that has been generated during the Covid-19 stage. The complexity of the pandemic, its origin, evolution, and impact that it has had exponentially multiplied the information, with the same proportionality in which the story of disinformation and its spread was constructed [11]. It is true that there has been an overload of information used on numerous occasions wilfully. False messages in a major health crisis like this one are influencing people's behaviour, which can alter the effectiveness of measures taken by governments [12], posing a serious risk to health. Its virilization is dangerous in a digital society 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 it confusing and not very transparent [13]. In this way, they confirm the dissatisfaction because they express feeling misinformed.

The vulnerability that young people suffer from disinformation guides an important stage of this work, as knowing the sources they trust and consulting how to stay informed is essential. It should be noted that the participants are university students who 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 select group is the one that guaranteed the greatest reliability in the face of the mistrust they felt towards official sources representing the government of Spain. This suspicion of citizens, and by extension of young people, towards institutions and their failure to manage the pandemic poses a new scenario. It is found that this crisis has multiplied the problem of

misinformation and in this new media and political ecosystem, institutions can lose power and citizens feel disoriented.

All the research's results that have been used in the field stage of this qualitative investigation confirm the importance of social networks for the participants and their need to be socially connected. This new digital society where everything goes viral creates a new phenomenon, the immediacy in sharing information, acquiring a new dimension, which makes them participants in both social and political decision-making [14]. In that way, young people assume their responsibility in the face of the pandemic, and justify it by the great informative exposure that has existed and the credibility that they have given to the news, not identifying the reliability in them or in contrasting the credibility of the sender or the quality of the information. This worrying phenomenon is already being addressed by the European Commission [15], 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 enhance education in the face of the restriction that has prevailed during the Covid-19 era. They feel victims of a system that takes away their rights and does not train them in critical and social thinking to make them better citizens.

Social networks are the main source of information that they use and in the face of this new reality they suggested some interesting solutions: to manage the information properly; to promote education and digital literacy in the face of the restrictions that is the option chosen by the governments; the best solution that young people gave were education to be responsible.

Finally, this paper confirms the disinformation as a variable which affects the lack of youth responsibility, and it is checked that young people consider communication as a solution for being more responsible.

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