



## Article

# The Invisible Suffering of Young People during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Spain and the Collateral Impact of Social Harm

Raquel Rebeca Cordero Verdugo <sup>1</sup>, Antonio Silva Esquinas <sup>1,2</sup> and Jorge Ramiro Pérez Suárez <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Social Sciences and Communication, European University of Madrid, Villaviciosa de Odón, 28670 Madrid, Spain; raquelrebeca.cordero@universidadeuropea.es (R.R.C.V.); antonio.silva@universidadeuropea.es (A.S.E.)

<sup>2</sup> International Doctoral School, National University of Distance Education, 28015 Madrid, Spain

\* Correspondence: jorgeramiro.perez@universidadeuropea.es

**Abstract:** This article seeks to demonstrate how the lack of institutional involvement with young people during the pandemic had negative effects, stemming from a lack of clear and precise rules for the adolescent population. The consequences manifested themselves in such important areas as social relations, physical and mental health, affective–sexual relations, self-image and overexposure to social media. We present the results of two complementary pieces of research that provided us with insight into the behaviour of young people during lockdown. The young people were divided into two groups based on age: (1) middle adolescents aged 13 to 18 and (2) late adolescents aged 18 to 23. We adopted an integrative methodological approach based on surveys, digital ethnography and focus groups to extract the results, which produced the following findings: (1) an increase in social inequalities due to the technology gap; (2) a growth in mental health risks stemming from hyperconnectivity and overexposure to social media in order to avoid social isolation; and (3) an assimilation of anti-normative behaviours as valid in the absence of any points of reference.



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**Keywords:** COVID-19; lockdown; adolescent; digital divide; social harm; mental health; anti-normative behaviour

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. COVID-19 and Adolescents in Spain

The state of alarm was declared in Spain on 14 March 2020 by President Sánchez, in accordance with Section 116 of the Spanish Constitution.

A state of alarm shall be declared by the Government, by means of a decree decided upon by the Council of Ministers, for a maximum period of fifteen days. The Congress of Deputies shall be informed and must meet immediately for this purpose. Without their authorisation the said period may not be extended.

It was implemented by Organic Law 4/1981, of 1 June, on States of Alarm, Emergency and Siege. A state of alarm represents the lowest level of intervention in terms of suspending constitutional rights. In line with article 4 of this Law, the state of alarm may be declared during health crises such as epidemics. In addition, Section 11 regulates the measures that can be adopted, including limitations on freedom of movement. It was under Royal Decree 463/2020, 14 March, declaring a state of alarm for the management of the COVID-19 health crisis that restrictions were imposed. Section 7 stipulated limitations on freedom of movement, with exceptions such as shopping for essential items, going to work or performing certain care-giving duties, while Section 8 suspended educational activities throughout the country and Section 9 ordered the closure of the majority of establishments open to the public, including restaurants and hotels. According to the Preamble to the Royal Decree,

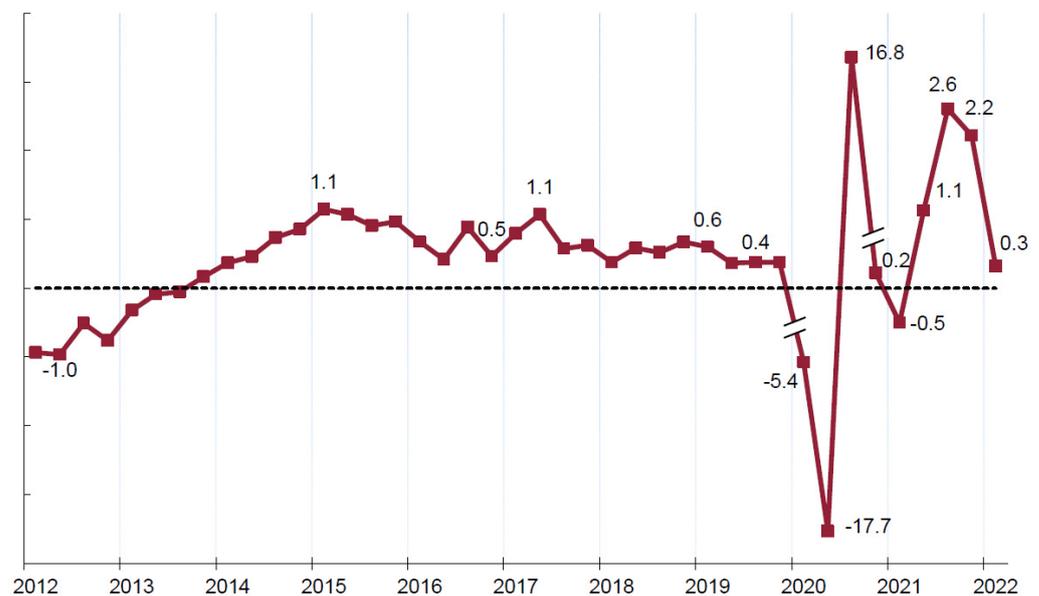
Such measures are part of the government’s resolute initiative to protect the health and safety of citizens, contain the spread of disease and strengthen health and social and care systems.

However, after a difficult period of turmoil and tense political situations (BBC 2021b; Cué 2021; Cantón and Gallelo 2020; Jones 2020), the Constitutional Court declared the lockdown (but not the full state of alarm) unconstitutional and null and void (BBC 2021a). According to the Spanish Constitutional Court ruling (Tribunal Constitucional 2021),

The partial unconstitutionality of Royal Decree 463/2020, of 14 March does not stem from the material content of the measures adopted, whose necessity, pertinence and proportionality we have accepted, but from the legal mechanisms through which certain fundamental rights were suspended. (p. 78)

The general picture in Spain is illustrated, firstly, by Banco de España (2021), which states that the macroeconomic aggregates “suffered a historical deterioration” (p. 61) in 2020, one that was “unprecedented in the recent history of the Spanish economy” (p. 63). Furthermore, the economic impact of the pandemic was highly heterogeneous and affected a wide range of sectors (p. 62). According to the Bank, Spanish GDP plummeted (−13.8%) during the first quarter of 2020 as a result of the first lockdown. It later began to recover, until the imposition of new restrictions (such as curfews and community lockdowns) had a further negative impact (pp. 62–63). In addition, according to INE (2022) “in year-on-year terms, the variation in GDP was −6.4%, a rate nine tenths higher than that of the last quarter of 2021” (p. 4). This economic situation helps in understanding the impact and extent of the pandemic in Spain, along with the data presented in this article.

shows the changes in GDP in Spain from 2012 to 2022.



**Graph 1.** GDP Spain. Chain-linked volume. Quarter-on quarter variation rates (%). Source: INE (2022, p. 4).

A further impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is a widening of the social divide (UN 2020). However, public authorities have carried out little in-depth research focusing on other major social issues, such as job insecurity, structural unemployment, migration, poverty, the digital divide and mental health.<sup>1</sup> Given this lack of research, in order to understand the social impact of the pandemic in Spain, in 2020 Mesa-Pedrazas et al. (2021) conducted an online survey on the “social effects and changes generated by COVID-19”.<sup>2</sup> They showed that the Spanish lockdown exposed and exacerbated problems such as loneliness, forced cohabitation, household size and space, work–family balance and economic

problems (p. 51). In dealing with some of these problems “second homes became a haven” (p. 52) and watching TV series and films became the most popular form of entertainment (p. 58). Needless to say, the aforementioned problems are intrinsically linked to the social divide between the privileged and the underprivileged.

The concept of the social divide, defined by [Cáritas \(2020a\)](#) as the difference between those who have more and those who have less, very largely focusses on economic issues and access to resources. In 2019 ([Consejo Escolar del Estado 2021<sup>3</sup>](#)), the poverty rate (AROPE index<sup>4</sup>) for people under 18 was 30.3% (p. 16), with the Autonomous Communities of Andalucía, Extremadura, Murcia and the Canary Islands having the highest rates of poverty or social exclusion among minors (p. 17).

In this regard, [Cáritas \(2020b\)](#), p. 3) states that, among the families they have supported:

- (a) There was a 136% increase in households receiving no income during the pandemic.
- (b) There was a 46% decrease in income earned by families from formal employment and a 70.08% decrease in income from informal employment (p. 8).
- (c) Extreme poverty increased by 30%, in some cases resulting in the inability to afford medicines or follow a proper diet.

The pandemic also brought us face to face with a generational social divide, at the two extremes: older people (the most vulnerable) and children and young people (supposedly the least vulnerable). These two groups have undoubtedly been the hardest hit. In the case of the former, we knew that their institutionalisation was based on market logic: cost-cutting, poor levels of care, scant medical resources, overcrowding and food of questionable quality ([Amnesty International 2020](#)). It is worth noting some of the statements made by care home staff included in the Amnesty International Report ([Amnesty International 2020](#)) entitled “Abandoned. The lack of protection and discrimination against older people in care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain”:

According to Mónica, a care worker in a public care home in Madrid, “we asked for face masks, but they told us that they scared the old people”. Flor, the receptionist at a publicly owned but privately managed public care home in Madrid, says the manager went so far as to tell one care worker that wearing a face mask “was clownish,” and that “the doctor at the care home had said they weren’t necessary because they would scare the old people”. (p. 26)

The bad practices adopted at the start of the pandemic meant many older people died in care homes. Despite a subsequent decline in deaths, the total number of people to die in care homes due to COVID-19 stood at 31,975 on 6 February 2022 ([IMSERSO 2022](#)).

Besides children, young people were also harmed by COVID-19, not so much physically as emotionally. While needing to socialise with their peer groups and find spaces for relaxation and affective–sexual relations,<sup>5</sup> they were instead stuck at home in lockdown like the rest of the population. No one had told them how to deal with matters as important to them as social relations, desire or family conflict when faced with such a scenario. Indeed, the tendency within the community was mostly to criticise their behaviour, even when their actions involved creative ways of alleviating the pressure they were feeling; they never had a space where this could be expressed. According to [UNICEF \(2021\)](#), young people had been, and still are, suffering from anxiety, depression, eating disorders, tendencies to self-harm, fears about the economic climate and ‘screen addiction’, among other things. The problems described here were exacerbated by the political sphere, which initially settled for superficial solutions, quick fixes dressed up in fine-sounding explanations devoid of content, taking advantage of the public’s state of shock ([Klein 2012](#)). According to [Cruzada \(2021\)](#), “The coronavirus thus becomes the ‘conceptual requisite’ that legitimises the transformation of daily life into a ‘hygienised’ and ‘biosafe’ scenario, to combat the contaminated and dangerous reality” (p. 44). He adds that

The coronavirus acts as a “total institution” of resocialisation at the sociocultural level surpassing the individual capacity to transform reality, and a cyclical spectre of “microbiopolitics” keeps reminding us that we are subjected to the fates where non-human entities, governmental apparatuses and human conduct overlap in the middle of a pandemic. (pp. 46–47)

This article seeks to demonstrate the negative effects that the absence of clear and precise rules had on the adolescent population in such significant areas as social relations, physical and mental health, affective–sexual relations, self-image and overexposure to social media. All of the above problems were due to the lack of involvement of public authorities, who considered the adolescent population to be less vulnerable. Such an approach could be identified as social harm (Hall and Winlow 2015), whereby there are behaviours that, without being classified as criminal offences or categorised as deviant, do indeed cause harm within the community. In this particular case, among young people.

### 1.2. On Social Harm

When discussing “social harm” we are forced to tackle the onerous task of finding working definitions and classifications that address all the philosophical connotations and implications of the term. According to Raymen (2019), “it is futile to search for an all-seeing, all-solving theory of human flourishing or social harm that is generated in the abstract, detached from the reality of social practices, social roles and their institutions” (p. 152). Hall (2012) recognises that the criminal justice system and “the political forces of change” (p. 16) need to address the problematic definitions and ontological considerations of social harms as this “would certainly prevent zemiology from collapsing into the standard utilitarian harm-prevention discourse that underpins risk theory and risk-management” (p. 16).

Hillyard and Tombs (2004) refer to “harms which are deleterious to people’s welfare from the cradle to the grave” (p. 18), resulting in a “harmed community” (p. 18), defined as “groups of people in some form of collectivity who are physically or financially harmed by whatever means” (pp. 18–19). Pemberton (2016) offers a criticism on Hillyard and Tombs’ classifications by indicating that

The principles established by Hillyard and Tombs (2004) specifically encourage the definition of harm to be an open-ended and ongoing process that moves back and forth between conceptualisation and empirical measurement to refine the definition of social harm. (chp. 2, para. 10)

According to Yar (2012) “such harms span those located in the domain of the interpersonal, the sphere of institutionalised action, and also arise from the unintended consequences of macro-level processes” (p. 58). In addition, Pemberton (2016), following Yar’s (2012) critique of the classifications and definitions of social harm in Hillyard and Tombs (2004) states that without a proper rationale for distinguishing the severity of the harms inflicted “we are left with a version of social harm that captures a host of grievances and is unable to distinguish between serious harms and minor personal hardships” (chp. 2, para. 12). Thus, in defining social harms, Pemberton (2016) emphasises their capacity to “compromise the fulfilment of human needs” (chp. 2, para. 25); he also suggests that harms, which are essentially side effects of capitalism, are “socially mediated” (chp. 2, para. 26). Thus, they “encompass avoidable events” (chp. 2, para. 26) and are preventable, because they are either foreseeable or the social relationships that they stem from are alterable (chp. 2, para. 26). Table 1 gives a brief overview of some of the classifications of social harm.

**Table 1.** Classifications of social harm.

Hillyard & Tombs	Pemberton	Hall & Winlow
Physical harms	Physical/mental health harms	Negative motivation for harm
Financial and economic harm	Autonomy harms	Positive motivation for harm— <i>special liberty</i>
Emotional and psychological harm	Relational harms: exclusion and misrecognition	
Cultural safety		

Sources: Hall and Winlow (2015, p. 91); Hillyard and Tombs (2004, p. 19); Pemberton (2016, chp. 2, paras. 37–43).

It must be noted, however, that this paper is not a theoretical exploration of the concept of social harm or zemiology, but a critical research approach to the suffering of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways in which they mobilised their feelings. This is one of the reasons why the concept of Pemberton's (2016) relational harms presented in Table 1 is highly relevant, classified as: (a) exclusion, linked to the lack of fulfilment of emotional needs (love, security, etc.); and (b) misrecognition, which "results from the symbolic injuries that serve to misrepresent the identities of individuals belonging to specific social groups" (chp. 2, paras. 42–43). Another important distinction is between Hall and Winlow's (2015) positive and negative motivations for harm. In this regard, the "negative form is the space created by the separation of the relatively rich and successful from the precariat, in which multiple harms can be inflicted" (p. 91) and the "positive form is *special liberty*, the dark side of liberal individualism, a sociopathic anti-ethos that consists of a sense of entitlement felt by an individual who will risk harm to others" (p. 91).

This field of social harm, or zemiology, is under-exploited in criminology (Raymen 2019), yet it is the approach best suited to explaining the phenomenon addressed here. In numerous other research projects, criminological ultra-realism sets itself the goal of studying existing relations between the harm an individual or group may experience, and the classification or definition of a criminal offence (Silva 2021). Accordingly, power continues to legitimise community norms from its various domains, and penalty or punishment is avoided where it is not profitable, as this helps maintain a strong and stable market flow (Wacquant 2012; Young 2007). In our case, the fact that institutions<sup>6</sup> decided not to adopt preventive/reactive measures or plans is due, among many other reasons, to their unwillingness to assign funds to such purposes. It was simpler to presume young people were adapting, rather than looking at the visible problem (physical suffering), as well as the unseen one (psychological suffering) (Galtung 2003). In doing so, a "deviant archetype"<sup>7</sup> was constructed in the collective imagination (Jung 2009), one that was even capable of producing secondary deviations (Lemert 1972) in the community of young people that did indeed comply with the norms based on the stigma (Goffman 2013) or labels imposed on them.

However, the debate about what "really" constitutes social harm is still ongoing. Raymen (2019) notes that, without a common ethical standpoint, all the different approaches to social harm could become another liberal mirage intoxicated by rampant individualism and subjectivity. He calls for a reconnection between morality and desire, in order to go beyond understanding rule-abiding as simply an act of normativity and to build shared values and communities, thus highlighting the importance of social practices in defining social harms.

## 2. Materials and Methods

To support our analysis, we present the results of two complementary research studies conducted in Spain: "Managing desire in times of COVID-19 (CIPI/20/159)"<sup>8</sup> and "Social networks and anti-normative<sup>9</sup> behaviour in young people aged 13 to 18. Detecting new forms of domination, addiction and relations in digital society", *CONFIDOM-INA2.NET*(CIPI/20/171).<sup>10</sup> These two studies that give us greater insight into the behaviour

of young people during lockdown in two very different age groups: (1) middle adolescents aged 13<sup>11</sup> to 18<sup>12</sup> and (2) late adolescents aged 18 to 23.

The first study, “Managing desire in times of COVID-19”, sought to determine what was happening during the strict lockdown in the first wave. The general objective was to identify the motivations leading individuals to use affective–sexual apps when stuck at home during lockdown, the kinds of practices they had engaged in and their impact on the spread or containment of SARS-CoV-2. In terms of specific objectives, we aimed to: (1) identify the different factors leading individuals to use affective–sexual apps during lockdown; (2) study the practices they engaged in in their relationships with the people they contacted, and the risk that these posed to public health; (3) understand their perception of risk and vulnerability; and (4) check whether the behaviour analysed is maintained in the “new normal” (Cordero et al. 2021b).

In the second study, “Social networks and anti-normative behaviour in young people aged 13 to 18. Detecting new forms of domination, addiction and relations in digital society”, *CONFIDOMINA2.NET* (CIPI/20/171), the general objective was to identify and define new forms of domination and social relations between users aged 13 to 18 on social media. With regard to the specific objectives, we set out to: (1) identify the new forms of domination, addiction and social relations present in digital society, through the study of social media; (2) define how these new forms of domination, addiction and social relations manifest themselves, what impact they have on individuals and their possible social consequences: crime, violence, aggression, harassment and/or abuse; and (3) establish mechanisms to prevent the assimilation and validation of anti-normative behaviour (Silva et al. 2022).

We used an integrative methodological approach (Creswell and Plano 2017) to extract results, taking into account the results of the survey among late adolescents (aged 18 to 23) carried out during lockdown as part of the research project “Managing desire in times of COVID-19”, together with those obtained from digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2015) and the focus groups established in the *CONFIDOMINA2.NET* project, with the intention of obtaining a comprehensive, insightful picture.

It should be noted that we decided to use two, a priori, very different methodologies, as we followed an organic logic in line with the principles governing the mixed methods approach (Creswell 2014). A previous study (Pérez et al. 2020) examined the affective–sexual narratives of millennials<sup>13</sup> in their social networks and the risks to their physical and emotional health. Thus, the first phase of research only involved using the previously discovered narratives to construct a robust survey from which more in-depth results could be obtained. We were already aware of the importance millennials placed on affective–sexual relations, and therefore desire, even as a socialisation mechanism.

In the second phase, an online questionnaire was developed that not only investigated prevalence and habits, but also perceptions, feelings and opinions. It is worth mentioning that although the questionnaire was purely quantitative, the use of Likert scales and open-ended questions meant the extraction of information could be linked more closely to the qualitative side of the research (ethnography and focus groups).<sup>14</sup> Snowball sampling was used and the participation rate was lower than expected ( $N = 393$ ).<sup>15</sup> However, we were aware that we would only obtain conclusive information on middle adolescents (13–18 years old) through the use of digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2015). In this case, we opted for a non-participatory (Angrosino 2007) open and multisite approach (Marcus 2001).<sup>16</sup> The field would be the social media platforms to which our young people connect, where we used discourse analysis. This avoided any ethical issues arising from interactions with minors. At the same time, the criteria and specificities of various ethical codes were followed at all times, thanks to the implementation of the M.A.R.V.E.L. protocol (Cordero et al. 2021a), which guided actions in the field in a reflective, analytical, dialogical and longitudinal manner.<sup>17</sup>

The ethnographic study analysed language, power dynamics, the prevalence of different prosocial or antisocial attitudes and the recruitment and engagement strategies of the social media platforms TikTok, Instagram and Twitch, these being the most representative.

It was important to understand how the subjects constructed their realities and ascribed meaning to the context of lockdown. The sample was guided by the ethnographer's adaptation in the field. Therefore, a total of  $N_1 = 10$  minors were selected and their activity on TikTok and Instagram was tracked in detail. Thirty days of content generated by  $N_2 = 4$  highly influential streamers on Twitch were also tracked. This involved the analysis of more than  $N_3 = 10,000$  videos posted between 2017 and 2022.<sup>18</sup> The methodology was established applying a gender lens throughout (Creswell 2014). Each sub-sample consisted of equal numbers of males and females and included different sexual orientations. Furthermore, demographically, the sample was drawn from across different cities in Spain.

However, we did not consider knowledge of young adolescents' networking behaviour to be sufficient. It was also necessary to complete the study with two focus groups composed of members of the educational community, including parents.<sup>19</sup> The sample size was  $N = 2$  groups of six people. The composition of the sample was mixed. It included six men and six women, divided into four men and two women for the first group, and two men and four women on the second. The participant profile was people in contact with the target population (young people aged 13–18): two psychologists, two educational counsellors, two compulsory secondary education teachers, two high school teachers, two fathers and two mothers, divided proportionally between the two focus groups. The methodologies of the different studies can be seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Methodological work structure. Prepared by the authors.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Below, we present some of the key themes to emerge from the research, directly related to the social harm framework (the digital divide, social isolation and rule-breaking behaviours). As stated above, this is not an exhaustive exploration of the concept of social harm, but an invitation to understand its relevance as a theoretical paradigm that could shed light on complex social realities. We acknowledge Raymen's (2019) discussion on the different ontologies of social harm and its contradictions, yet wish to demonstrate its richness as a framework for critical social analysis.

#### 3.1. The Digital Divide—A Twofold Inequality and a Manifestation of Negative Harm

Lockdown represented a new paradigm in education both in Spain and around the world. There was a shift from normative education centred on compulsory classroom attendance to a heterogeneity of online training models, which were essentially dependent

on the resources available to each school. This had a very negative impact on both students and their families and generated a “two-speed system” that created a divide in access to educational content and formal education between the privileged and the underprivileged.

Some students received their lessons regularly and simultaneously, and were guaranteed a good internet connection and multiple access channels (tablets, computers, smartphones, etc.). This was typically the case for the middle and upper social classes and students in private and/or state-subsidised schools.

Other students from working or lower-middle class households with less purchasing power,<sup>20</sup> attending either state schools or subsidised schools with fewer resources, found themselves with very different distance learning models. Some students received recorded classes, a lucky few had one simultaneous connection a week, others were sent homework to be completed by email and so on, with no pre-established order or logic other than the survival of the teacher and the school. In addition to these diverse criteria, where education always lost out, there were also social inequalities between classmates. Some had no internet connection, others did not have the technological tools allowing them to access classes and/or homework and some even had to prioritise care of younger siblings over their studies, if their parents did not work from home. These inequalities lead to three types of digital divide (*Consejo Escolar del Estado* 2021, pp. 18–19, citing Fernández Enguita 2020): (a) internet access, (b) time of use, (c) educators’ skills and availability of educational resources.

Kuric et al. (2021) also refer to this:

The loss of face-to-face attendance implies a breach of the equal opportunities that the education system should guarantee, placing on families a task that the institution should be able to provide. It is not news that the existence of social inequalities negatively affects educational development. However, lockdown has exposed the flaws of a system incapable of providing a coordinated response to the specific needs of each family. (p. 65)

Moreover, families had to make sacrifices in order to provide care. *Cáritas* (2020b) indicates that, in some cases, members of the household had to give up their jobs to take care of the children (p. 15). Conversely, some families admitted they had to leave their children (under 10) alone for periods of time or pay less attention to them (p. 15).

From this first point regarding inequality, we may deduce two negative factors for adolescents: poorer education and an acceptance of their level of inequality in relation to their peer group. In other words, the limitations faced by some young people, determined by household income, type of housing, family model, number of siblings, access to technology and so on, brought them back to a harsh reality. They were aware of their inferior position in relation to others, which generated low levels of self-esteem. Thus, they became victims of a state that should have guaranteed a fair and equal education for all. As Parker (2004) states, “the concept of harm to a child therefore goes well beyond the limited range of circumstances that calls for criminal, or indeed civil, proceedings” (p. 242). Even when discussing young people rather than children, harm has manifested itself in labyrinthine regulations (such as imposing curfews, travel restrictions and restrictions on visiting other households), differing school rules, different approaches to healthcare depending on the region and a constant barrage of images of risk (infection, danger, death) and misinformation (including fake news).

The second point regarding inequality associated with the digital divide relates to the power relations established on social networking sites themselves. Young people feel a need to connect, as they may otherwise be rejected by their peer group. However, becoming part of the network does not mean individuals establish symmetrical relationships with all members. For example, in a simple WhatsApp group, there are power relations between the administrators and the rest of the users, who can be punished by expulsion: another form of cyberbullying.

This was described by participants in the *CONFIDOMINA2.NET* focus groups, who considered that social media and digital communities could give rise to processes of

inequality through forced participation. Anyone who does not share this standard use of digital tools is condemned to ostracism. This highlights the processes of domination and subjugation that young people face in the digital world.

Then there is the frustration. I see it a lot with girls on Instagram, for example. In the old days, there was one popular, beautiful girl who was your role model, but now they have two hundred and fifty-three girls who are role models they want to be like, and that generates a brutal frustration in them, which is what I see in the consulting room. I said there used to be one pretty girl whereas now there are two hundred and fifty, but I could easily have said two thousand. [Man, 42, psychologist, F. G 1, Madrid 2021]

They entered an unknown world, one that we were unable to access. But they were born into it, forced into an unknown world. The question is, how much control can there be, what control can there be in that world, right? Sometimes there are no controls, the controls get out of hand. It's difficult for us, because as parents sometimes we have to control some things... because I think our role as parents doesn't... it doesn't end there. I mean, our role is also in the home, but how do we get to...to that social world. In the past, we could control our children's friends, now we don't even know who their friends are, because there are so many friends out there on the networks. So, it's like... like the other side is... how can we avoid the danger that they might face in that socialisation, and the other thing I see is, how they skip that process that needs to be completed, that... socialise by normal, adequate means, using appropriate language... like, like they are already involved in a vocabulary imposed by the networks themselves, in... in certain customs imposed by the networks, er... "If my friend has this, then why can't I have it too?". [Woman, 29, psychologist, F. G. 2, Madrid 2021]

Finally, it could be argued that a new precariat was formed: those who fail to comply with the diktat of digital capitalism. Consequently, new forms of domination began to develop, reshaping social interactions between social media users and the platforms themselves.

### *3.2. Overexposure to Social Media, Hyperconnectivity and Relational Harm. Alternatives to Social Isolation with Grave Risks for Mental Health*

The study sample showed a rise in TikTok postings during (or just after) the lockdown period. This could be explained by the fact that our study not only considered the general lockdown, but also subsequent local ones. Several boys in our sample even created TikTok videos during lockdown and gained most of their popularity between the months of April and November. One reason for this was that, in the first few months, they were very prolific, faced as they were with an absence of alternatives for socialising outside the digital world. At no time did they consider the consequences of such overexposure for their mental, physical and emotional health. According to field data collected during *CONFIDOMINA2.NET*,

Leto started by posting an average of 70–80 videos per month and then dropped to around 40; Vladimir started off posting 386 videos per month and then dropped to 90–100; Duncan came to post as many as 84 per month, then dropping to an average of 15; and Stilgar went from around 120 to 20. In the case of the girls, nearly all were more prolific than the boys. Although it is true that almost all of them started on this platform some years before, or even came from its predecessor (*musica.ly*). In any event, Irulan went from posting 40–50 videos a month to 90–110 and Chani from 90–100 to 250–290 a month. [Ethnographic note on frequencies. Antonio Silva's field diary]

In the absence of any formal emotional training from public institutions, young people relied on their own experiences to decide how they would express themselves on social media. The behaviour of middle adolescents, being less mature, made them much

more vulnerable than late adolescents. The latter were more capable of making decisions inasmuch as they did not feel as conditioned by their peer group. Undoubtedly, both middle and late adolescents found a form of escape in social networks, although with different results.

As the younger children were minors, and were obliged to connect to the Internet to be able to continue their studies, they were constantly required to participate in a social network, even if solely for educational purposes. This meant that “distance learning” itself was a risk for them. In other words, if a minor who suffered bullying at school found refuge at home, having to connect to an educational community from home meant they were in a constant state of tension, increasing their perception of risk and vulnerability.<sup>21,22</sup>

The level of harm these middle adolescents experienced depended on their level of exposure to social media. From this perspective, we can identify four groups:

1. Those who were creators of information and role models for their peer group (influencers).
2. Those who were both creators and consumers of information.
3. Those who were only consumers of information.
4. Those who only used the internet to follow their classes.

Out of these four groups, the most exposed and least isolated had the highest direct risk to their mental health. Thus, less exposure meant more isolation and less direct risk to mental health. Nevertheless, both cases may involve people whose mental health is indeed impaired, in some cases, due to the pressure caused by overexposure to social media, and in others, due to loneliness and sadness at not having anyone to socialise with. Both profiles can lead to depression and a tendency to self-harm.

The level of risk to mental health is shown by data from the Official College of Psychology of Madrid. In 2021, suicide attempts and self-harm among children and young people increased by 244% (*ABC de Sevilla* 2021) as a result of the pandemic. This sad reality is recognised by the psychologist Joaquim Puntí and psychiatrist Montserrat Pàmias, from the department of mental health at Parc Taulí Hospital. In their different contributions in the media and specialist journals, they explain that, in Catalonia alone, suicide attempts among young girls increased by 195% during the years of the pandemic (*Salud y Medicina* 2022). In addition, the Report “*Crecer saludable (mente)*” (*Save the Children* 2021) provides figures showing the increase in mental and behavioural disorders among young people, as well as the decrease in diagnoses among the adolescent and child population in times of COVID-19. The report compared data from the 2017 National Health Survey in Spain and an adapted survey carried out in 2021. Mental disorders among children aged 4–14 increased from 1.1% to 4% and behavioural disorders from 2.5% to 6.9% (*Save the Children* 2021, pp. 13–14).

A harsh conclusion can be drawn from all this, namely that public authorities did not establish preventive policies because they did not think the youth population would suffer in lockdown. In this regard, the concept of “social recognition” becomes highly relevant to understanding the social harm inflicted. According to [Hall \(2012\)](#); also citing [Yar 2012](#)) “the central problem is the refusal of social recognition in the denial of love, rights and esteem, which clears a huge space for the practice and justification of the full spectrum of harms” (p. 17). Without enforcing basic essential rights ([Yar 2012](#), p. 59) that protect human integrity and well-being, “social recognition” becomes merely semantic. The Spanish Constitution seeks to protect “human dignity” (s. 10), “equality” (s. 14) and “physical and moral integrity” (s. 15). How is that possible within the legal framework of a lockdown that was declared unconstitutional? Or when vulnerable children were being fed fast food for four months by the government of the Autonomous Community of Madrid? ([Ferrero 2020](#)).

In addition to the problems referred to above, we also wish to highlight a further set of problems indicative of the most difficult to detect form of social harm: problems that are a risk and/or potentially damaging to mental health, namely, insecurity, anxiety, addiction, false empowerment, fatphobia, eating disorders and even harassment of young

people within their own networks. In our research, we also found that the experiences and narratives of young people (and their perceptions of security) varied quite drastically depending on gender and sexual orientation.

The most significant cases of insecurities, anxiety and addiction would be Irulan and Chani. Their journey is a kind of excessively cruel emotional merry-go-round. First, they have a bad time because of a certain issue; then they let the community know how devastated they feel; and the more they communicate this, the more the community lashes out at them. There is a constant problem in not knowing whether the social network is really a social network, or a private environment, perhaps because of the number of hours spent on it. Sometimes they share very intimate things like WhatsApp chats, recordings of themselves crying during anxiety attacks, openly lamenting break-ups or pseudo-empowering reflections against criticism of their bodies. However, they then refuse to allow criticism that has anything to do with what they have shared, tell their followers that they do not know them, and that these people only see what they themselves want them to see. [Fragment from Antonio Silva's field diary]

However, in the case of late adolescents, less harm was done, even to the point of breaking paradigms. Let us look at the four groups we found in our research:

1. Those who used the networks to continue their pre-pandemic life and decided not to comply with the rules imposed during the pandemic.
2. Those who learned to filter the kind of relationships they wanted to have:

I discovered I didn't need to have sex to hang out.  
[Woman, 22, heterosexual. Managing desire, 2020]

3. Those who took advantage of the pandemic to meet new people through affective-sexual apps, asserting they did so because they wanted the company of others.
4. And finally, those who demonstrated a paradigm shift in their understanding of affective-sexual relationships: the archetypal "fastlove"<sup>23</sup> is discarded, and flirting, a type of love where romance has meaning in addition to the erotic and sexual dimensions, once again makes sense.

Meeting someone during lockdown (not via a hook-up app but through Instagram) transformed sexual desire and the desire to see each other into a bond of affection, as consummation wasn't possible, and we couldn't see each other. Up to then I'd never established such a deep relationship with someone as the one born out of lockdown. [Woman, 23, bisexual. Managing desire, 2020]

I lost interest in almost all the sex-affective bonds I had before lockdown and I started dating someone I hadn't had sex with yet, which is something new for me because I'm creating a bond that's based more on affection than on sex, and I wasn't interested in that before. [Woman, 23, heterosexual. Managing desire, 2020]

As can be seen here, the subjects of this study show a maturity in their actions that is not observed in younger people. Unfortunately, this is not born out of training, but as a result of previous, sometimes "bad", experiences.

Because of the suddenness of lockdown, I've learned not to waste time with people who don't treat me properly in my sexual relationships. [Man, 21, homosexual. Managing desire, 2020]

It must be kept in mind that, according to [Mesa-Pedrazas et al. \(2021\)](#), the things that people longed for the most during lockdown in Spain were family, friends and freedom (p. 62). However, some people were willing to sacrifice their rights and liberties to avoid future harm (p. 67).

Here, we need to return to the concept of relational harms ([Pemberton 2016](#)) in their twofold classification of exclusion and misrecognition harms. As already mentioned,

haphazard management of the different measures (restrictions to movement, work, use of face masks, curfews, etc.) during and post lockdown impeded young people from properly developing their rights and needs. Furthermore, as also mentioned above, many young people decided to break the rules (such as those who decided to meet people or to go out), which might be related to the fact that they suffered symbolic injuries for belonging to the group of young people. The following example (published as institutional advertising on the subway in Madrid) illustrates how young people were treated by the media and institutions (Télez 2020): “If you go out partying, the next stop might be the funeral home. If you avoid measures, those who you love the most will pay” or “That round of shots is a grave for Grandpa”.

### 3.3. *The Validity of Anti-Normative Behaviour in the Absence of Any Points of Reference, and the Manifestation of Special Liberty*

While we cannot say that the entire adolescent population systematically engages in anti-normative behaviour, we can affirm that many did consider breaking the rules imposed during the pandemic, as this was their only means of continuing to socialise in ways they were familiar with (bearing in mind no alternative was provided by public authorities).

Many criminological theories aim to explain adolescent rule-breaking behaviours. For example, Agnew’s (2013) *General Strain Theory* suggests that negative emotions might generate emotional stress and lead to crime, even as a coping mechanism (p. 654). Agnew (2013) also talks about the roles of social controls and the social learning of crime. From another perspective, Wikström et al. (2013) performed the longitudinal Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study (PADS+) by using Wikström’s Situational Action Theory (SAT). They explain crime as a contextual process of moral deliberation, originating from the interaction between the person and the environment (p. 11). They highlight the importance of collective efficacy (p. 207) and its relation to population structural variables, such as social disadvantage. They also consider factors such as days of the week and times crime was committed.

In our studies, the lack of alternatives for socialising and the strict rules imposed combined with the absence of influential points of reference external to the social networks themselves complicate the issue. Based on the results from the *CONFIDOMINA2.NET* focus groups, one could argue that they live in “a parallel reality with all the contradictions that reality generates in them” [Man, 58, lecturer, F.G.2, Madrid 2021].

For example, in the case of middle adolescents, in all the above-mentioned groups, we found young people willing to break the rules, but because they were minors, they were faced with the limits set by their parents or guardians, making it difficult for them to act. The exception is the case of influencers, who despite being young, make their image their business, which seems to lead to a relaxation of family rules and so to greater autonomy. Parental limits did not affect late adolescents, because they were of legal age.

With his parents’ permission, and to the astonishment of a large part of the community, Paul has used his status as an influencer to violate local lockdowns on many occasions. He tells us that as he is working, at the age of 15 he can go to Mallorca, Madrid, Seville etc. as often as he likes. Leaving aside the anomaly of child labour exploitation, this could be an understandable alibi. However, Duncan published a video of Paul going out with more than 12 people at a party in the middle of lockdown, something that had no repercussions for his subsequent “work outings”. [Fragment from Antonio Silva’s field diary]

After analysing the data from both samples (middle and late adolescents), we identified two clearly differentiated groups: (1) those who accepted lockdown and managed their needs and desires by avoiding physical interaction with others, and (2) those who, for different reasons, chose physical interactions, such as affective–sexual relationships, holding parties and recording videos or stories for group social networks. In an open questionnaire, the following respondent, who belonged to the latter group, told us about one of her outings during lockdown:

I won't be mad enough to travel to meet a stranger again. The problem was, we established a very strong bond after talking 24/7 by wpp<sup>24</sup>/phone, and having made it clear that I didn't want anything sporadic, when I spent a few days with him, he told me he wasn't interested in a serious relationship. [Woman, 23, heterosexual. Managing desire, 2020]

In the case of middle adolescents, posts also show a lack of respect for health regulations and recommendations during the months of general or local lockdowns. According to field data extracted from digital ethnography:

- Paul, as mentioned above, not only made constant trips during lockdown, but even held parties.
- Leto eventually stopped wearing a face mask when he was in contact with groups of people. This led to him catching COVID-19.
- Alia even travelled to Latin America during local lockdown periods.
- Alia, Jessica and other friends appeared in a video of another famous influencer cheering for the pandemic; none of them were wearing a mask.
- Vladimir, Jessica, Irulan, and others defended themselves against accusations of travelling, or not wearing masks. They argued that the public could only see what they were shown, not what was really happening behind the camera.

One could argue that the above examples are manifestations of *special liberty*. Even though Alia, Vladimir or Jessica do not match our idea of the privileged neoliberal elite (Hall 2012, p. 18), their actions might be considered as representing “a predictable outcome entirely in keeping with liberalism’s moral philosophical underpinnings” (p. 142). Their boastful and carefree attitudes, their skirting around the rules with a sense of entitlement and panache are problematic subjectivities (Hall 2012; Raymen 2019) that need to be addressed in the face of collective crisis. However, it could also be said (in keeping with the discussion on the criminalisation of young people) that the pandemic became a “hyper-carnavalesque time/space entanglement” for young people. Therefore, the actions described in the previous paragraph could be mere acts of over-mystified transgression from an adult-centric perspective. Presdee (2000), in explaining youth culture (made up of contradictions and inherently transgressive) from a cultural criminology standpoint, states that “it is this perceived ‘emptiness as a protest’ that prompts panic from ‘adult society’” (p. 114). From our point of view, theories such as Strain Theory (Agnew 2013) and Situational Action Theory (Wikström et al. 2013), mentioned above as an example, fail to address a situation where the limits of time and space have been deeply distorted and tension and malady became part of the fabric of the everyday life.

In addition, Mesa-Pedrazas et al. (2021) reflect upon the fact that there was no consensus about feelings (whether people felt angry or sad) during the lockdown in Spain (p. 68), going on to note “a society united around common ideas and emotions can manoeuvre more efficiently in a moment of crisis” (p. 68). Similarly, some families recognised that their emotional state had deteriorated (Cáritas 2020b, p. 22) and they had experienced “fear” (57.1%), “hope” (90.2%) and/or “concern” (86.1%). And there lies the rub: we seem to be lacking the ethical imagination for conjuring a shared future, “the type of lives we want to lead, the society we want to live in, and the subjectivities we want to cultivate” (Raymen 2019, p. 152).

To summarise the above discussion, in Table 2, we juxtapose (in no particular order) the major challenges faced by the Spanish population with the specific harms suffered by young people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From Table 2, we can conclude that young people suffered specific (albeit invisible) harms, but also faced many challenges shared by the Spanish population in general (including their families and loved ones).

**Table 2.** Challenges faced by the Spanish population and social harms suffered by young people.

Challenges Faced by the Spanish Population		Harms Suffered by Young People	
<b>Legal challenges</b>	Overabundance of legislation, rapid and confusing changes in regulations, inconsistencies between State and Autonomous Community rules, unconstitutionality of lockdown, stringent social control.	<b>Negative harm</b>	Digital divide and digital precariat.
<b>Political challenges</b>	Lack of agreement among political parties, rabid opposition to Government, nurturing of social unrest by political parties, proliferation of alt-right discourse.	<b>Relational harm</b>	Absence of emotional regulation and training, refusal of social recognition, mental health problems, symbolic injuries.
<b>Health challenges</b>	High death toll, uncertainty as to how to control the spread of the virus, lack of scientific consensus, extremely sanitised social life.	<b>Special liberty</b>	Problematic subjectivities, rule-breaking, hyper-individualism.
<b>Social challenges</b>	Housing problems, vigilantism, radicalisation of public protest, work and family reconciliation, seclusion, deterioration of social bonds and rituals, proliferation of fake news.		
<b>Economic challenges</b>	Unemployment, poverty, economic recession, business closures.		
<b>Emotional challenges</b>	Uncertainty, fear, loneliness, mental health issues.		

Prepared by the authors.

#### 4. Conclusions

The pandemic undoubtedly had a negative impact on young people aged between 13 and 24. Firstly, they were affected by the technology gap, which highlighted social inequalities and affected their education and socialisation. Continuing their studies required digital training, something not everyone had access to. At the same time, they were exposed to a dilemma: using social networking sites to socialise with their peer group or isolating themselves at home with only a minimum number of essential contacts.

As argued above, the authorities are open to criticism for not foreseeing that young people were going to suffer these harms. The emphasis was placed on preventing damage to the economy (by reactivating tourism during summer, for example) and the health (more specifically, physical health) of the general population. Young people and the elderly were generally overlooked. Could one argue that there was no sense of urgency because these groups do not comprise a substantial part of the electorate? Were their demands perhaps more subtle and expressed less stridently? Could it be that it was easier to create a moral anathema (young people partying like crazy, young people not caring, etc.) in times of spiritual withdrawal? All in all, young people were treated as a nuisance or problem that had to be solved and contained, not as citizens or people at risk.

For their part, institutions assumed young people were highly capable of adjusting to new needs, failing to consider that, in general, they had no training in emotional intelligence. Nor were preventive mental health policies, essential for this age group, established. Young people's image was constantly stigmatised by the media, the assumption being that the anti-normative behaviours of some were typical of all. In other words, young people were deviant simply because they belonged to that age group. Ultimately, a lack of foresight

regarding the needs of young people on the part of institutions ended up becoming a phenomenon of social harm affecting society as a whole.

This is precisely what we see once lockdown is lifted; these young people enter a state of anomie, where uncontrollable movements emerge:

- *Botellones*—large crowds drinking outdoors in the street.
- Attempts to transmit COVID-19.
- Group aggression.
- Confrontation with the police.
- Destruction of street furniture.
- Transfer of leisure activities to the home and noise pollution.

They have no sound alternatives to believe in or follow; they have just emerged from a period of oppression and are unsure as to whether they will soon be forced to go through it again. Life is coming to an end; there is no working future and illness could snatch life away tomorrow. *Carpe Diem* flashes into their minds in blazing letters. The institutions have failed them, not only in terms of not having known how to respond, but also in allowing them to be stigmatised. Healing the social harm that has been done will be a lengthy process. Addictions, personality disorders, loss of purchasing power and the breakdown of an academic career are not issues that can be solved with populist measures.

One fundamental reflection can be found in the following excerpt from one of the focus groups, when talking about risk online:

There needs to be a combination of the elements of caution, not fear, but caution, awareness and also intensifying the elements of trust between the family circles so that the children . . . in this regard . . . would be more transparent with parents so that they can sound the alarm; well parents, teachers . . . [Man, 50, lecturer, F.G.1, Madrid 2021]

Furthermore, by linking this with the issues of the digital divide, the digital precariat and problematic online subjectivities, a case could be made for bringing back utopian and humanistic Internet imaginaries. Instead of solely using social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Twitch for blatantly individualistic discourses and celebrity culture, brands and institutions (including law enforcement agencies), they could be used to create “communities that listen”. Young people could be invited to share their non-binding opinions on legal reforms, their feelings about urban planning projects and their experiences of online risk or new forms of victimisation. In this regard, one good example would be the Spanish National Police social media communication strategy, even though it is too vertical and unilateral.

Authorities must work together with the community to support and empower one of its most precious assets: young people. They need to be treated as political subjects and as agents of change. They are the future and without them there can be no prosperity. This does not mean establishing baseless cosmetic policies; it means committing to significant change: affective–sexual education that begins in childhood; inclusive and feminist education; budgets for the development of prevention and intervention plans for minors suffering from disorders and addictions arising from the use of digital media; committing to digital education for parents and guardians; urging social media platforms to establish real controls over activities that take place there; and greater efforts by the Public Prosecutor’s Office to control the parents of young people who start working at the age of 12, preventing them from receiving a full education.

To conclude, we must go back to the beginning—to social harm and perhaps to a re-consideration of the concept in these times of mercurial legislation and political uproar. We gasped for air in the primordial soup made up of the empty rituals that lockdown represented for many, facsimile lives dimly lit by windows and screens. In this scenario of exceptionality, the social harm framework may help us understand the impact of problematic liberal subjectivities in public policy, human rights or basic human needs. Instead of tending to the multi-faceted needs of the young (or the elderly, the infirm, or

those at risk) based on a common ethical roadmap, Spanish institutions (such as Central and Autonomous Community Governments, local authorities and educational institutions) favoured short-term risk management. Our final reflection should be that, even though the social harm approach requires sophisticated theoretical elaboration and discussion in order to reach common conceptual grounds, it can invite us to:

- (a) Foster ethical debate in relation to criminology, public policy, human rights, and policing.
- (b) Understand the social impact of individualistic liberal idiosyncrasies.
- (c) Build visions of communities and political subjects.
- (d) Move beyond over-legalised constructions of crime.

In memoriam of all the people that passed away during the pandemic.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Of note among the few research studies on mental health in Spain during lockdown is the one carried out by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS 2021).
- <sup>2</sup> This study included respondents aged 20–69.
- <sup>3</sup> State School Council.
- <sup>4</sup> At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion.
- <sup>5</sup> The spectrum of interpersonal relationships forged with a spiritual, emotional, romantic and/or sexual connection or attraction. Regardless of the depth of the feelings and of gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. It must be noted that these relationships do not only refer to penetrative sex.
- <sup>6</sup> In Spain, the intricate matrix of devolved constitutional competences (art. 148–149 Spanish Constitution) exacerbated the problems that young people suffered because of the pandemic and lockdown, with different approaches to health and education, measures and restrictions (including travelling restrictions and local lockdowns) that varied between Autonomous Communities after the national lockdown, along with tensions between the Central Government and the Autonomous Community Governments (BBC 2021b).
- <sup>7</sup> It could be argued that a folk devil is conjured up here (Cohen 1972), in this case represented by the idea of hot blooded and unruly youngsters; a sign of the times. However, Horsley (2020) helps us to understand that, at present, this theory does not provide an adequate fit.
- <sup>8</sup> This project is registered at the European University of Madrid.
- <sup>9</sup> Anti-normative behaviour is a literal translation of the Spanish term “comportamiento anti-normativo” which is similar to the concept of anti-social behaviour used in the UK (Section 2 Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014), but which lacks a legal definition. The reason for using the term in this article is that it is closer to the original titles of the studies, categories and codes.
- <sup>10</sup> This project was funded by *Banco Santander*. Funding was obtained through a competitive call. It was managed and registered by the European University of Madrid.

- 11 We exclude early adolescents—under 13 years of age—from the analysis, as they are at the beginning of their maturation process, and attach more importance to family than to peer group.
- 12 Information we obtained through the research paper “Social networks and anti-normative behaviour among young people aged 13 to 18. Detecting new forms of domination, addiction and relations in digital society”, *CONFIDOMINA2.NET*(CIPI/20/171).
- 13 In this study, millennials were aged 18–35. It should be stressed that the study also included more than 30 in-depth interviews with young dating app users of all genders and sexual orientations.
- 14 The questionnaire measured socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, sexual orientation, marital status and home environment. Subsequently, other thematic blocks were explored in greater depth, such as the use of affective–sexual apps during lockdown and the use of contraceptive measures in affective–sexual relationships. The only criterion for inclusion in the survey was having used dating apps during lockdown, so a sample of respondents from a range of ages, genders, etc., was expected. As this is an exploratory and descriptive study, we did not aim to obtain a statistically representative sample and there is no official data on this subject. Non-probability snowball sampling was used for convenience, sharing it on all types of social networks (Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) and asking for collaboration in its dissemination. Strategies to try to correct possible bias or over-representation were used and we took into consideration the fact that it might be answered by Spanish speakers who are not necessarily Spanish nationals. In short, it was an online questionnaire that sought to obtain a general overview and lead respondents to reflect on issues such as love and sexuality, always in a warm, sensitive and human way, to obtain quality information based on the protagonists’ experiences.
- 15 We attribute this to the fact that the population is fed up with surveys, as the market is saturated with them (Pérez et al. Forthcoming).
- 16 All the profiles analysed were public and we followed them using the Research Group’s neutral social media accounts (Instagram, TikTok and Twitch). The Research Group’s accounts are public, identifying the name of the Group and providing a link to the Research Group’s site ([www.criminologia.hypotheses.org](http://www.criminologia.hypotheses.org), accessed 25 July 2022). This is why we use the term open multisite digital ethnography.
- 17 One of the core strengths of the protocol is that it allows for a priori, simultaneous and a posteriori ethical reflection.
- 18 Without taking into account the more distanced analysis of other users, the structure of the applications, etc.
- 19 Parents were invited to the discussion because of their importance in the educational community, but also to understand the ways in which they negotiate the digital and generational divide between themselves and their children, in terms of their knowledge (or lack thereof) of the platforms their children use, their educational practices and their fears regarding the rapid development of technology and social networking sites. In this regard, parents are key stakeholders.
- 20 Many media outlets reported on the huge social inequalities in this regard during the pandemic (*La Vanguardia* 2021).
- 21 It should be pointed out that cyberbullying is not endemic to lockdown, or to the pandemic, but it has been driven and magnified by the digitalisation of processes.
- 22 Among the ethnographic sample, Leto, Paul and Siona in particular alluded to this.
- 23 “Fastlove” is the concept we use throughout the article to refer to those forms of online affective–sexual conquest. Our intention is to distinguish between “traditional love”, where analogue courtship predominates, and “digital love”, which is based on digital courtship. “Fastlove” is linked to Bauman’s (2003) theories of liquid love and Lipovetsky’s (2005) hypernarcissism and hypermodernity.
- 24 Abbreviation of WhatsApp.

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