The role of media in health crisis situations. The perception of society on social control and norms during the COVID-19 pandemic

El papel de los medios de comunicación en situaciones de crisis sanitaria. La percepción de la población en torno al control y las normas sociales durante la pandemia del COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
Introduction: This study focuses on the analysis of the perception on the roles of mass media during the health crisis derived from the COVID-19 pandemic. It also studies how people adopt specific roles oriented towards the legitimation and implementation of control and social norms. **Methodology:** A questionnaire was designed based on a set of Likert type answers responded by 704 people from different regions in Spain. Data were analyzed using SPSS software package. **Results:** Results indicate that sex and age are determining variables in the legitimation and implementation of social control between peers. Results also indicate that there is a relationship between the way people perceive the role of media and their predisposition to abide by and exercise social norms and control.

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Discussion and conclusions: Both the literature and obtained data show that there is a relationship between the role of media in situations of social alarm and health crisis, and the processes of construction and legitimation of cosmovisions of "reality" derived from disinformation, hoaxes and noise information.

KEYWORDS: Media; social control; disinformation; health crisis; COVID-19.

RESUMEN
Introducción: El presente trabajo se centra en el análisis de la percepción de la población en torno al papel desempeñado por los medios de comunicación durante la crisis sanitaria derivada de la pandemia del COVID-19, y cómo las personas adoptan determinados roles orientados a la legitimación e implementación del control y las normas sociales. **Metodología:** Para la consecución del mismo, se diseñó y distribuyó una encuesta de tipo Likert que fue respondida por 704 personas de distintas regiones del Estado español. Los datos han sido posteriormente analizados mediante la herramienta de análisis estadístico SPSS. **Resultados:** Los resultados indican que el sexo y la edad fueron variables determinantes en la legitimación e implementación del control social entre iguales durante el confinamiento. Los resultados también han puesto en relieve la relación existente entre la forma en la que las personas perciben el rol de los medios de comunicación y su predisposición a acatar y ejercer el control y las normas sociales. **Discusión y conclusiones:** Tanto la literatura como los datos obtenidos para la realización del presente estudio, muestran la conexión existente entre el rol desempeñado por los medios de comunicación en situaciones de alarma social y de crisis sanitaria, y los procesos de construcción y legitimación de cosmovisiones de la "realidad" derivadas de la desinformación, los bulos y los ruidos informativos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Medios de comunicación; control social; desinformación; crisis sanitaria; COVID-19.

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Translation by **Carlos Javier Rivas Quintero** (University of the Andes, Mérida, Venezuela)

1. Introduction

In December 2019, the outbreak of an unknown respiratory disease occurred in Wuhan (capital of Hubei Province, China), which subsequently spread throughout the country, drawing the attention of the entire world (Wang *et al*., 2020). International concern focused on a new strain of coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, with a high human-to-human basic reproductive rate. The disease, called COVID-19, causes especially dangerous symptoms in elderly people or with previous pathologies.

A month after being discovered, on January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of international concern (Guo *et al*., 2020), urging all the affected countries to take measures to contain and stop the spread of the virus (Grasselli, Pesenti and Cecconi, 2020). Thus, local health authorities began to establish different containment measures

based on a varied set of strategies adapted to each context. In China, ground zero of the outbreak, health authorities launched a campaign that initially included isolating infected people, monitoring of citizens, and data collection from patients to characterize and control the disease (Wang *et al*., 2020). Meanwhile in Europe, the spread of the virus occurred very unevenly in each country, with Italy facing the worst panorama, where the first measures of home isolation for the whole country were implemented, and, shortly after, in Spain (Yuan *et al*., 2020).

On March 15, 2020, the Spanish Government declared a national emergency, establishing a nation-wide lockdown over a 15 day period (Legido-Quigley *et al*., 2020), which was subsequently extended until June 21, 2020. In this situation, the centralization to manage this health crisis in a Country constituted by 17 very diverse Autonomous Communities, has generated great controversy. In response to the spread of the virus, the Spanish Government approved the Royal Decree (463/2020) to assume new powers and competencies over health services, transport, and internal affairs, including giving powers of law enforcement to the Armed Forces and State Security Bodies (Legido-Quigley *et al*., 2020). Different social distancing and travel restriction measures were implemented throughout the entire Spanish territory.

In addition to the generalized concern due to the disease and its health consequences, several studies have echoed the social impacts of the pandemic, especially regarding mental health during and after lockdown (Berasategi *et al*., 2020; Ozamiz, Dosil, Idoiaga and Picaza, 2020), the long-term psychological consequences, such as fear (Pakpuor and Griffiths, 2020) or the large-scale social behavior change that this situation has caused all around the world (Van Bavel *et al*., 2020).

This article aims to highlight the role of mass media as tools for social control (Roman, 2018) during global health crisis situations. Mass media are tools that legitimate social, cultural, and political normativization due to their capacity to define and establish socially what is right and wrong (Juris, 2003). Therefore, they often replicate those meanings that serve dominant interests (Bowman, 2003; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Based on the data obtained from the surveys conducted in various Spanish regions, a reflection about social control strategies, social norms, and the role of mass media during the COVID-19 crisis is made.

1.1. Social control, social norms and surveillance in social alarm situations

Just as the literature shows, during emergency situations related to health alarms, armed conflicts, natural disasters, or similar others, governments and government institutions have traditionally used strategies and tools aimed at promoting social control (Roman, 2015; Bowman, 2001; Juris, 2008). Social control is a widely studied concept from different disciplines (Cohen, 1985), hence, difficult to confine to a single research field. From the perspective of sociology, Giddens and Sutton (2015) define it as "all of the formal and informal mechanisms and internal and external controls that operate to produce conformity" (p. 241). According to Ross (2017), social control systems can be organized based on two aspects: morality, regarding the influence of social and cultural expressions; and the organizational or more normative ones, what the author defines as the political aspect. Castillo (2015) also adds that the strategies an individual or group with some authority use are the ones that define what social control is. Authority, in this regard, would refer to the police and military corps of a Nation or region that are officially authorized to exert such control. The strategies that determine the social control these corps impose would therefore be established to maintain a certain type of social order.

According to Swader (2017), social control is how social norms influence people's behavior; hence their behavior is defined by bureaucratic procedures, norms, and police power. Other social control

strategies include the use of control systems such as surveillance video cameras or Global Positioning System (GPS). GPS can be used to measure and monitor the activity and movements of a certain population (Sheikh, Sheikh, and Sheikh, 2020). In some situations, such data can be utilized by governments to monitor whether a group of people or a certain person has complied with their civic duty, through state security forces. Studies such as the one conducted by Bevan (2019), which focuses on the surveillance systems school institutions are adopting in the "era of mass shootings", show this trend towards surveilled flow, which is gaining ground from traditional measures such as metals detection or increase in police presence. Over time, the normalization of these control strategies by people promotes, according to Laca (2011), a "fear-based culture", which is used as a power and social control tool.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2006) add that this social control is possible thanks to language, since it allows describing reality through certain cosmovisions. That is, through language in its different forms, such as verbal or non-verbal ones, referring in this case to that which can include ritualized and performative gestures (Bloch, 1975, 1989, 1998), and even the use of physical force can convey a message of domination from the forces authorized to exert certain type of performative power and violence (Juris, 2003). Therefore, according to the legal frameworks, the corps and forces of a Nation or region can exercise this power on the pretext of ensuring compliance with the norms of a given society (Juris, 2008). Ensuring compliance with norms entails, in this case, the use of a certain type of language that exerts power from the law on ordinary citizens. Corps such as the police or the army would be entitled to exert this power and would have the legal authority to penalize citizens who do not comply with the legislation that the Nation or region has established.

One of the most controversial issues regarding social control is linked to the justification of the norms and the very system authorized to exercise said social control (Gau, 2015). Chakraborty (2020) also refers to this fact, focusing on the process of social amplification of the media during the COVID-19 pandemic. As it will be shown in the following sections, the media have occasionally contributed to public risk perceptions being poorly adjusted to reality. In addition, the policies that have been implemented around the world have not been adequately informed in many cases. The intersection of disinformation and the lack of scientific rigour in many of the political decisions and social control measures proposed by certain countries, gave rise to a public perception of the pandemic that did not correspond to the events that were being experienced. On another note, Igartua, Ortega-Mohedano and Arcila-Calderón (2020) state that communication in general has played an essential role in transmitting preventive information around the coronavirus. However, audiovisual social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube did not have a remarkable impact in this regard. Conversely, Ramón Fernández (2020) highlights the negative influence of disinformation and fake news during the pandemic, as well as the resulting social consequences. Ultimately, the author advocates the approval of laws against fake news to prevent these types of problems.

Other studies regarding the COVID-19 pandemic focus on aspects concerning social control, related to the compliance with health regulations imposed by governments. This is the case of Sibley *et al*. (2020), a study conducted in New Zealand. The authors analyzed the perceptions of a sample made up of 1.003 individuals, before and after lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results found that when people trust the social control measures adopted by the State and consider the virus a common enemy, a sense of social connectedness is generated, promoting the establishment of affective relationships and resilience. Furthermore, just as stated by Blair, Morse and Tsai (2017) in their study of citizen's compliance with public health policies established to contain the spread of the Ebola virus disease in Liberia, trust in local governments had also promoted the adherence to social control health measures. Likewise, according to Gino, Norton and Weber (2016), citizen's

engagement to comply with measures taken in emergency situations is enhanced when people consider themselves capable of overcoming such crisis, and, in addition, they see that their behavior has a positive direct impact on other people, as well as on the improvement of such situation.

The social control addressed in this section has also had an important impact on several groups that are in situations of greater vulnerability, such as women, migrants, and people with no resources, among others. In this sense, recently published studies highlight that women are exposed, to a greater extent than men, to suffering the consequences derived from this type of extreme situations (Bradshaw, 2015; McLaren, Wong, Nguyen, and Mahamadachchi, 2020). These consequences are linked to the social structure, especially in the caregiving context, which puts people who do these jobs, mostly women, at a greater risk of COVID-19 infection (Wenham, Smith, and Morgan, 2020) and in situations of greater exposure to surveillance and other control strategies, since the tasks related to healthcare require a greater number of travels outside the home to supply essential goods or to accompany medical services and other utilities. Several statistical studies conducted by the National Statistics Institute (INE) prove this. For example, in the data regarding the care of dependent people, there are 8.6% women compared to 5.1% men who do these tasks (INE, 2020). In the case of single-parent families, those headed by women quadruple those headed by men (INE, 2019). Furthermore, according to Wenham, Smith and Morgan (2020), under exceptional circumstances such as the current one, this burden has increased disproportionately.

Gausman and Langer (2020) state that the measures established by governments have failed to include any consideration in this regard, by not establishing work-life balance policies to prevent additional burdens on women; this has led to greater emotional exhaustion and worsening of women's general well-being during the pandemic (McLaren, Wong, Nguyen, and Mahamadachchi, 2020).

1.2. Media and Social Control

Social control and the role of the media has been a recurring subject of analysis at the heart of various academic disciplines during much of the 20th and the 21st centuries (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2006). Experts have regularly studied cases which have been paradigmatic and highly representative of the role of the media and social control, basing on past and current experiences, all of them highly significant regarding the influence of mass media and their more direct and immediate consequences (Roman, 2018).

The opportunist exploitation of and control over the media for their implementation as social control tools, has traditionally occurred during armed conflict situations, especially in those places where the ethno-cultural aspect has been an essential element (Roman, 2015, 2018), or during situations of social alarm or health crisis in which information has also been used as a social control tool. In this context, disinformation and manipulation of information become effective tools for social control, which are often used in an organized way for the sake of achieving a set of economic, social, cultural, or political objectives. In the words of Rodríguez (2018), "disinformation is a thoroughly organized, structured, and planned form of manipulation, based on a specific strategy and very clear political objectives". In this sense, Rodríguez-Fernández (2019a, 2019b) also indicates that disinformation and fake news currently represent one of the big problems around the media and social control. Rodríguez-Fernández (2019b) also points out that these problems are especially visible in contexts in which there are attempts to discredit a political adversary through smear campaigns based on hoaxes, noise information, and all kind of disinformation in general. According to Salaverría, Buslón, López-Pan, León, López-Goñi and Erviti (2020) this type of disinformation gets worse during pandemic situations such as the current one derived from COVID-19, through the

creation and dissemination of hoaxes, classified by these authors into four categories according to their severity: joke, exaggeration, decontextualization, and deception. The influence and consequences each of these categories entail at the heart of society are based on "the actual number and dissemination rates of each type of hoax, without the filtering of fact-checking platforms" (p.13).

As stated by Gitlin (1980), security forces and governments can manipulate certain images and situations, and place them in new contexts in which certain movements and attitudes are depicted as dangerous and subversive. Mass media have thus become core systems for the distribution of ideology.

According to Juris (2003), mass media are effective tools for social, cultural, and political normativization, since they are capable of dictating, in a highly effective way, which behaviors ought to be accepted and which frowned upon. In this sense, the media are actively engaged in the production of social reality basing on their own informational interests and objectives. In Juris' opinion (2008), the economic elites are behind the media discourses through the concentration of ownership of the media, the entertainment system, bonds with government experts, and businesses. Due to these powerful ideological filters, mass media tend to replicate the cultural meanings that serve society's dominant interests through the construction of certain rhetorics of identity (Bowman, 2001, 2003), which will set the limits that citizens cannot overstep.

Today's media can be considered as the most efficient and massive tool for one-way transmission of information (Roman, 2015), giving rise to the hegemony of information dissemination which has further intensified over the past recent decades. Authors like Golovina (2014) also highlight the prominence of mass media in the development of aspects such as the immediate and massive dissemination of information. Castillo (2009), on the other hand, affirms that mass media have largely become sources of power that serve the interests of current political, social, or economic hegemonies. Having control over the mass media quite often leads to the establishment and systematic replication of cosmovisions and value systems that serve the hidden interests of their owners, and, on many occasions, can also be interpreted as the symbolic creation of real or fictitious ideological adversaries (Bowman, 2001, 2003) and of political, social, or ethno-cultural otherness (Hage, 1992).

As stated by Stuart Hall (1982), the media are responsible for selecting, presenting, structuring, and shaping the information they transmit. This way, they attribute meaning to things (Gitlin, 1980). Therefore, media tools are based on a set of knowledge and interpretation patterns, which would ensure certain symbols aimed at organizing discourses, both verbal and visual.

Hegemonic media frameworks tend to assess social protest and the divergences that cast doubt on the standardized social Status Quo, particularly when these question their basic presuppositions about the market and the State, as something conducted by dangerous and criminal individuals (Juris, 2003). We must not forget, in this sense, that binary rhetorics are effective mechanisms for social control (Yong Tao, 2000) in which those binary images that confront an "evil world" and a "civilized world", or "us" and "them", do not leave room for a neutral thought or stance. Any type of dissidence, that questions the hegemonic and standardized discourses of the media, is likely to be considered an attack on the Status Quo and on the hegemonic ethno-cultural "Us", with the consequence risk of being socially stigmatized. Once the enemies of the social hegemony are established, it is reinforced on the pretext of fighting against something dangerous that threatens the well-being of the society or community in question.

Roman (2015) reminds us that the media are largely behind that stigmatization to which we refer, and that affects directly certain people and social groups. Mass media are, on numerous occasions, behind the construction and diffusion of stereotypes, prejudices, and stigmatizing ideas about certain groups in vulnerable situations or who have opted to oppose the mainstream socio-political and ethno-cultural status. The media have performative power (Austin, 1982; Bourdieu, 1985) capable of distorting the "reality" of certain contexts and groups, disseminating information that arouses fear and rejection of certain ideas and people. This same idea has been collected in different studies that highlight the ethnocentric component linked to infectious diseases (Van Bavel *et al*., 2020), as was the case of the bubonic plague (Cohn, 2012) during which the origin or social class were motives for multiple murders throughout Europe; or as it has been demonstrated in the Coronavirus case (Russell, 2020), with evidence of physical attacks on the Asian community, or statements made by various government figures and entities referring to the COVID-19 disease as "the Wuhan disease" or the "Chinese virus".

In times of health crisis, the identity component is directly related to cooperative behavior. Peer support and concern for the "other" is considerably higher when identity bonds exist (Drury, Cocking, and Reicher, 2009). In this sense, the role of the media is crucial, since they can disturb this predisposition and generate individualistic selfish behavior, as has happened with the broadcasting of empty shelves images in supermarkets, which caused a wrong and hazardous perception of a supposed lack of supply (Van Bavel *et al*., 2020).

2. Objectives

This study's general objective is to analyze people's perception of the role of the media during the health crisis derived from the COVID-19 disease in relation to the predisposition of the population to comply with and replicate social control strategies.

The specific objectives that emerge from this general purpose are:
- To delve into the role of mass media and their influence on the Spanish population in the legitimation and implementation of social control between peers during the state of alarm.
- To explore people's perception of social control and norms linked to the influence of the media according to sex and age variables.
- To describe the processes by which the media construct social "reality" and specific cosmovisions based on disinformation and noise information.

3. Methodology

In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, a questionnaire aimed at the general public was designed to inquire into the relationship between the media, social control, and the perception of certain social norms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1. Design and procedure

The questionnaire was sent through the research group KideON (@kide_on) Twitter account to different associations of the third sector and the general public. In this tweet, they were invited to participate in the study following a link where the questionnaire could be answered. Once the questionnaire was completed, the person invited had no chance of answering the questionnaire again, ensuring, this way, that each person could only answer the questionnaire once. It was a probability sampling so that every person had the opportunity to participate in the study, and thus guarantee randomization.

The questionnaire was answered by 952 individuals. After analyzing the data in Microsoft Excel (https://products.office.com/), the questionnaires answered revealed a pattern of a lack of responses in more than 50% in several sections. As a result, we decided to exclude all the questionnaires having less than 50% of completed items, hence 248 questionnaires were removed. The study complied with all the provisions of the Organic Law 15/1999 on Protection of Personal Data; in addition, it informed of the voluntary participation and the necessity for participants to give their consent before starting to answer the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was published on April 1, 2020, coinciding with the first extension of the state of alarm after the two weeks that were initially decreed at the beginning of the health crisis in Spain, and the third week of lockdown. The last answer was registered on May 23, 2020, shortly before reaching the halfway point to total lockdown.

3.2. Instrument

Ad hoc Questionnaire: This instrument collects information about participants' age, sex, nationality, chronic diseases, and possible contact or not with people infected with COVID-19.

Regarding the research instrument, a 43-item questionnaire divided into 3 thematic sections was designed. The first section was comprised of 17 items describing the social norms with dichotomous answers. The second was made up of 11 items related to rights and social control. The last section was centered on the media and the social alarm, for which 15 items were designed. Both sections were analyzed with Likert-type responses from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For this study only the Likert-type response 3 (slightly agree) was analyzed. Hence the results do not indicate 100% of the cases, since the remaining cases indicate other Likert-type responses.

3.3. Participants

704 people from different Spanish regions participated in this study, being 75.3% (n = 530) women, and 24.7% (n = 174) men. Regarding age, 16.2% (n = 114) were young people from 18 to 25 years of age, 42.9% (n = 302) were people from 26 to 39 years of age, 30.8% (n = 217) were adults from 40 to 55 years of age, and, finally, 10.1% (n = 71) were people over 56 years old (*M* = 37.9; *SD* = 14.9), being the youngest participant an 18-year-old and the oldest 74 years old.

3.4. Analysis of data

SPSS statistics software package v.25 (INC., Chicago, IL) was used to analyze the data. Descriptive analyses of the sociodemographic variables, chi-square, and analysis of the effect size between variables were conducted.

4. Results

4.1. Social norms according to sex and age

Table 1 shows the questions that were answered affirmatively by the participants in this study. Specifically, the people who do believe that staying at home in lockdown was necessary to overcome the coronavirus pandemic, showed a statistically significant association, x^2 = 4.70, *p* = .10, *Cramér's V* = .08, with a small effect size regarding sex, being 72% (n = 507) women and 22.6% (n = 159) men. Similarly, the participants indicated that they do think that controlling the people who

violate lockdown helps society, showing a statistically significant association with sex, $x^2 = 12.18$, $p = .001$, *Cramér'sV* = .13, being 13.9% (n = 98) women and 7.7% (n = 54) men who answered yes.

Table 1. *Social norms according to sex*

Social norms	n (%)		X^2	Cramér'sV
	Woman	Man		
I believe that staying at home in lockdown is necessary to overcome the Coronavirus pandemic.	72% (n = 507)	22.6% (n = 159)	4.70*	.08
I think that by controlling the people who violate the stay-at-home order I am helping society.	13.9% (n = 98)	7.7% (n = 54)	12.18***	.13
I think society in general wants me to reproach or report the people who violate the stay-at-home order.	26.6% (n = 187)	10.9% (n = 77)	4.50*	.08

According to age and social norms, the people who answered yes to the questions: I think that by controlling the people who violate the stay-at-home order I am helping society; I think that politicians want me to reproach or report the people who violate the stay-at-home order; I think the police want me to reproach or report the people who violate the stay-at-home order; and, I think society in general wants me to reproach or report the people who violate the stay-at-home order; showed statistically significant associations, being 26- to 39-year-olds the ones who exhibited the highest percentages (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Social norms according to age*

Social norms	18-25	26-39	40-55	>56	X^2	Cramér'sV
I think that by controlling the people who violate the stay-at-home order I am helping society.	2.1% (n = 15)	8% (n = 56)	7.7% (n = 54)	3.8% (n = 27)	19.17***	.17
I think that politicians want me to reproach or report the people who violate the stay-at-home order.	7.7% (n = 54)	13.5% (n = 95)	10.2% (n = 72)	3.7% (n = 26)	9.71*	.12
I think the police want me to reproach or report the people who violate the stay-at-home order.	9.2% (n = 65)	16.2% (n = 114)	11.9% (n = 84)	4.1% (n = 29)	13.77**	.08
I think society in general wants me to reproach or report the people who violate the stay-at-home order.	8.4% (n = 59)	14.1% (n = 99)	11.1% (n = 78)	4% (n = 28)	13.09**	.14

*Note***p<.001**p<.01; *p<.05*

4.2. Social control according to age

The people who answered that they slightly agree with implementing stricter social control measures, even if it meant the Government and police corps having more access to their private life, showed a statistically significant association with age, $x^2 = 19.17$, $p = .001$, *Cramér'sV* = .17, with a small effect size. Likewise, there was a statistically significant association with age in the people who answered that they slightly agree that other political groups would have handled the crisis better, $x2 = 9.71$, $p = .005$, *Cramér'sV* = .12, also with a small effect size. Again, in this case, the age group with the highest percentages was 26-to-39-year-olds.

Table 3. *Social control according to age*

Social control

	18-25	26-39	40-55	>56	X^2	Cramér'sV
I think stricter social control measures must be implemented, even if that means the Government and police corps having access to my private life.	2.1% (n = 15)	8% (n = 56)	7.7% (n = 54)	3.8% (n = 27)	19.17***	.17
I think other political groups would have handled the crisis better.	7.7% (n = 54)	13.5% (n = 95)	10.2% (n = 72)	3.7% (n = 26)	9.71*	.12

Note***p<.001**p<.01; *p<.05

4.3. Media according to age

Regarding the items about the media in times of pandemic, there were statistically significant associations with the different age groups (from 18 to older than 56), with the highest figure being in the following item: I think the media report so much on the Coronavirus to make society feel fear, x^2 = 39.20, p = .001, Cramér'sV = .14 (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Media according to age*

Media						
	18-25	26-39	40-55	>56	X^2	Cramér'sV
I think the media report so much on the Coronavirus to make society feel fear.	3.7% (n = 26)	11.5% (n = 81)	8% (n = 56)	3.3% (n = 23)	39.20***	.14
I think that the media should report more on other type of news not related to the Coronavirus.	4.1% (n = 29)	11.6% (n = 82)	8.2% (n = 58)	4% (n = 28)	38.85***	.14
I think the media are being sensationalist as how they are treating the Coronavirus pandemic.	5.3% (n = 37)	9.2% (n = 65)	10.1% (n = 71)	2.8% (n = 20)	38.45***	.14
I think the media report so much on the Coronavirus to make society feel more concerned than normal.	4.4% (n = 31)	13.1% (n = 92)	8.4% (n = 59)	2.8% (n = 20)	30.75**	.12
I think the media compete with one another to see which one provides the most sensationalist information to attract greater viewership.	3.8% (n = 27)	8.5% (n = 60)	7.5% (n = 53)	2.6% (n = 18)	26.03*	.11

Note***p<.001**p<.01; *p<.05

4.4. Levels of anxiety and fear depending on age

Table 5 shows the statistically significant associations, for the "slightly agree" answer, with the variables related to anxiety and fear according to the age groups. The highest percentages, in comparison to the other age groups, can be seen in the ages ranging from 26 to 55 years.

Table 5. *Anxiety and fear according to age*

Anxiety and fear						
	18-25	26-39	40-55	>56	X^2	Cramér'sV
Staying at home in lockdown makes me anxious.	10.4% (n = 10)	27.5% (n = 36)	19.5% (n = 16)	6.5% (n = 5)	49.57***	.15
Not knowing how long the lockdown will last makes me anxious.	18.6% (n = 22)	49.3% (n = 57)	35.4% (n = 31)	11.6% (n = 10)	44.80***	.14
I think my work situation before the crisis will change considerably after the resolution to the Coronavirus crisis.	17.3% (n = 20)	45.9% (n = 48)	33% (n = 25)	10.8% (n = 10)	19.99***	.10

Note***p<.001**p<.01; *p<.05

4.5. Associations between social norms, social control and media variables

Table 6 shows some of the questions that have exhibited statistically significant associations between them. Specifically, the association occurred between the following variables: "I have sometimes rebuked from my home the people who are not abiding by the stay-at-home order" and "I think the media report on the Coronavirus responsibly", $x^2(5) = 14.30$, $p = .014$, *Cramér'sV* = .14, with a small effect size.

Table 6. *Associations between variables*

	X^2 *(df)*	*p*	*Cramér'sV*
I have sometimes rebuked from my home the people who are not abiding by the stay-at-home order * I think the media report on the Coronavirus responsibly.	14.30*(5)*	.014	.14

* Variables associated with each other

5. Discussions

The data collected for the realization of this study revealed evidence that validates some of the aforementioned theories. After analyzing the quantitative data, we noted certain homogeneities regarding the questions asked and analyzed based on the variable age and, in the case of social norms, also sex.

Bearing the differences between women and men in mind, it is striking that none of the questions directly related to social control or the media showed statistically significant associations between both groups. However, we did note three questions regarding social norms in which gender differentiation was considerable, being women the ones who answered more affirmatively than men, claiming that staying at home in lockdown was necessary and that reproaching people for inappropriate behavior was beneficial to fight the pandemic. According to Litton (1977), these types of responses would be expected since, in this context, social norms subtly alter and direct women's behavior on grounds of collective benefit and care. In addition, and as stated by this same author, the set of social norms that replicate certain features of femininity such as the predisposition to acceptance, discretion, or resignation, are expected to receive a more positive response from women, both abiding by them and exerting control over other people using these norms. In this same line, the role of the media is relevant in terms of the legitimization of these social norms (Juris, 2003), through the images they portray of women and their responsibilities towards society (Galarza, Cobo, and Esquembre, 2020; Radl, 2011).

As for age, it is important to highlight that the central groups (26-to-39 and 40-to-55-year-olds) were the ones who exhibited the highest percentages regarding the perception of social norms. In addition, with regards to their perception of these norms, they stated to a greater extent, compared to the rest of the age categories, that politicians, police corps, and society in general wanted them to report the people who violated the stay-at-home order.

Regarding the comparison between the younger age groups with the older ones, there were some similarities with the study conducted by Useche *et al*., (2018), which states that people under the age of 25 have lower perception levels of social norms compared to older people. This study concludes that young people exhibit risky behaviors because they perceive social norms more flexibly. Our article follows this same line by showing that younger people perceive social control in a more lax way. In other words, central age groups, that is, 26-to-39 and 40-to-55-year-olds, perceived to a greater degree the control exercised by certain social structures such as society in general, police

corps, and the Government during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that these age groups think they help society by controlling people could be the result of this perception of social control.

Regarding the content related to social control, similar trends were observed in the answers given by the two central age groups (26-39/40-55), on the one hand, and by the age groups of the two ends (18-25/>56) on the other. This same trend was also observed in the results regarding social norms. The data somehow indicate that the central age groups respond to some of the logics related to the behaviors and cosmovisions highlighted by Laca (2011), according to which the prolongation and normalization of the social control measures ruled by competent political authorities, disseminated and legitimated by the media, and implemented by the security forces, would lead to a "fear-based culture" as a consequence of the use of power and social control for specific purposes. This fear-based culture has evident similarities with the symbolic violence concept used by Bourdieu (1991, 1997), who defines it as the establishment of a type of domination at an intimate level of certain social groups, through their recognizing of these structures of power, additionally collaborating in their own oppression every time they perceive and assess social order through categories that make it seem natural and evident by itself, just as aforementioned regarding women having a higher predisposition when it comes to abiding by social norms. According to Gitlin (1980), governments and security forces can manipulate certain situations to place them in new contexts so that society perceives and legitimates a "reality" infested with subjectivities. Mass media in their role as core systems for the distribution of ideologies, behaviors, and norms (Swader, 2017), have had a greater influence on 26-to-39-year-olds and 40-to-55-year-olds. The analysis of the data also revealed these two groups exhibited higher levels of anxiety and fear because of being in lockdown. Based on this information we could deduce that the higher the anxiety and fear levels in the face of a social alarm situation are, the greater the normalization and acknowledgment of social control measures as part of the normalized behavior within a certain social group or a certain collective will be, as demonstrated in previous studies (Laca, 2011). In this same line, Bowman (2001, 2003) states that certain societies can act in alliance with current governments and security forces, supporting and legitimating the measures they rule, if a real or imaginary hazard that threatens the very survival of the group in question is perceived.

We also observe that the two central age categories (26-to-39 and 40-to-55-year-olds) are more critical with the informative role of the media during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, it is remarkable that even if the two central age groups perceive that mass media are being sensationalist about the information provided on COVID-19 and that these would sometimes inform to cause fear, they also affirm, as aforementioned, that it is necessary to implement stricter social control measures, even if that means the Government and police corps having access to people's private lives. In this sense, it is observed, just as affirmed by Juris (2003), that mass media are effective tools for social control and normativization due to their capacity to define what is right and what is wrong in terms of sociocultural normality. Once more, it should be underlined, at this point, the higher levels of anxiety and fear these two age groups (26-39 / 40-55) experience due to the possibility of the economy affecting their well-being after lockdown, as the media themselves have been pointing out daily. In addition to the overall sensationalist treatment of the news, including those of the economic field, pointed out by the two central age groups, they also coincide to a greater extent than the other age ranges, on the fact that the media inform so much on the Coronavirus on grounds of making society feel fear. These age groups exhibit again higher levels of anxiety and fear in the face of possible social and economic consequences. In this case, we would have an opposite panorama to the one presented by Witte and Allen (2000), since the general public, especially that portion corresponding to the central age categories, consider that they will have serious problems in coping with the direct consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, their perception of the Government's competence decreases exponentially, and by extension, their trust in it to overcome

this crisis successfully. On another note, the central age groups consider that their behavior has a positive impact on other people, either through the acceptance and legitimation of social norms and laws imposed, or by defending or implementing them. At this point, it is important to consider again the informative and normative role of mass media, as well as their influence on the general public to impose a hegemonic cosmovision of "reality". As stated by Juris (2008), we must not ignore media's capacity to normativize highly performative messages and rhetorics (Bourdieu, 1991, 1997) capable of dictating effectively which behaviors must be accepted and which ones must be condemned. The aforementioned would lead again to the idea that mass media are primary agents in the construction of social reality, always according to their own interests and strategic purposes.

The associations between the variables related to social norms, social control, and the role of the media, corroborate some of the arguments stated before, from which we could interpret, as it happened in previous sections, that there is a direct relation between trust in the information given by the media and their influence on some groups and age categories when it comes to exercising certain social control over the rest of the population (Blair, Morse, and Tsai, 2017). In this sense, we should recall Juris' words (2003), who emphasizes that mass media tend to replicate social, cultural, and political meanings that serve the dominant interests of society through the construction of a set of discourses aimed at establishing which norms shall be obeyed and which limits cannot be overstepped.

6. Conclusions

Both the literature used and the results obtained in this study confirm the profound influence the media have on the construction processes of social roles (Bowman, 2001, 2003; Hage 1995; Juris, 2003, 2008; Roman, 2015, 2018) and on how people develop their own cosmovisions of the social "reality" surrounding them. Occasionally, society can, consciously or unconsciously, end up exercising certain social control over its fellow citizens, as a result of the performativity of the messages articulated by the media. Mass media, aligned with the interests of the political and police forces, and as guarantors of the interests of the economic powers monopolizing the very media ownership, can determine what norms must be obeyed and what limits cannot be overstepped (Gitlin, 1980).

Disinformation, its manipulation, fake news, and hoaxes can substantially influence how people perceive and interpret social and political "reality", and consequently, how they act. The influence that mass media have on society is noticeable and even more in the communication era, in which information is practically given in real time and in a global way. The media are actively engaged in the production of social "reality" and can implement binary rhetorics and discourses intended for the whole society to obey, legitimate, and enforce a set of social norms aimed at implementing and defending certain personal interests (Yongtao, 2010), which generally coincide with the interests intrinsic to the ruling classes and the political and police power (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

This phenomenon appears to a greater extent within certain social groups, collectives or ages, to whom, due to different reasons such as anxiety, fear or individual interests related to economy, politics, culture, or other ethnocultural components (Roman, 2015), the influence of the messages broadcasted and disseminated by the media affect more noticeably. Sex is another determining factor in the exposure and legitimation of control through the social norms linked to the COVID-19 pandemic (McLaren, Wong, Nguyen, and Mahamadachchi, 2020), stipulated and approved by political forces, implemented by security forces, and legitimated and massively disseminated by the media (Galarza, Cobo, and Esquembre, 2016). Similarly, and regarding the role of mass media in the dissemination of normative and performative recommendations, the data collected show that central

age groups, differently from what younger and older people opine, consider necessary implementing social norms aimed at handling the pandemic. In the same way, they stress the need to toughen the punitive actions imposed for their violation. In this sense, a clear connection related to age and sex was observed between the informative role of the media and their influence when legitimating the claims of political and police forces, and the levels of anxiety and fear derived from the consumption of the information received from those media.

In this regard, we could interpret that during social alarm situations in which the typical mechanisms a society has for its proper functioning, some media would implement discursive and rhetorical strategies oriented to specific purposes. These purposes could be, at the same time, linked to personal interests that would directly affect certain groups, promoting the advent and normalization of a "culture of fear", probably resulting in a future in which exclusion, lack of social protection, and fear prevail, as a consequence of media's informative role aligned with the interests of the market and the political class (Laca, 2011).

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