

# Government communication and emotions in the Covid-19 crisis in Spain

## Comunicación gubernamental y emociones en la crisis del Covid-19 en España

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** The impact of the information on COVID-19 on the Spanish population is analyzed to identify the effects and emotions related to the channels and sources of information consumption during the first phase of the pandemic, which coincided with the first days of the state of alarm.

**Methodology.** To this end, a survey administered via the Internet (n=1823.) was distributed during the second and third weeks of confinement (from March 23 to April 8, 2020) to the entire elderly population resident in Spain and with access to the Internet. **Results.** Among the results obtained, it is worth noting that news about the pandemic generated different negative emotions during this period - sadness, anxiety, fear, confidence, and anger - which varied depending on the channel of information consumption. Among the topics that were of more interest to those surveyed were data on the evolution of the pandemic, protective measures, and forms of infection, while the most credible sources were organizations and official authorities, health personnel, and the media.

**Conclusions.** It is shown the importance of emotions - especially negative ones - in the population's perceptions in crisis contexts such as the Covid-19 in Spain. Specifically, Emotional Support is the second most valued and official message, empathy, the most outstanding feature of the information received. The Government's ability to "understand" and "put itself in the place of the citizenry" ahead of any other aspect is positively appreciated.

**KEYWORDS:** communication; emotions; crisis; covid-19; media; disinformation; fake news; crisis communication; corporate communication.

## RESUMEN

**Introducción.** Se analiza el impacto de la información sobre el COVID-19 en la población española para identificar los efectos y las emociones relacionadas con los canales y fuentes de consumo informativo durante la primera fase de la pandemia, que coincidió con los primeros días del estado de alarma. **Metodología.** Se realizó una encuesta administrada a través de Internet (n=1823.) que se distribuyó durante la segunda y la tercera semana de confinamiento (del 23 de marzo al 8 de abril de 2020) a toda la población mayor de edad residente en España y con acceso a internet. **Resultados.** Entre los resultados obtenidos destacan que, las noticias sobre la pandemia generaban en ese periodo diferentes emociones negativas -Tristeza, Ansiedad, Miedo, Confianza e Ira-, que variaban en función del canal de consumo informativo. Entre los temas que más interés tuvieron para los encuestados destacan los datos sobre la evolución de la pandemia, las medidas de protección y las formas de contagio; mientras que las fuentes más creíbles fueron las organizaciones y las autoridades oficiales, el personal sanitario y los medios de comunicación. Se aprueba la gestión de comunicación de crisis realizada por el Gobierno, que obtiene una nota media de 7,5 durante esta primera fase de la crisis. Se demuestra una circulación amplia de noticias falsas y de desinformación. **Conclusión.** Se demuestra la importancia de las emociones -en especial, las negativas- en las percepciones de la población en contextos de crisis como la del Covid-19 en España. En concreto, el Apoyo Emocional es el segundo mensaje oficial mejor valorado y, la Empatía, la característica más destacada de la información recibida. Se aprecia positivamente la capacidad del Gobierno por “entender” y “ponerse en lugar de la ciudadanía” por delante de cualquier otro aspecto.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** comunicación; emociones; crisis; covid-19; medios de comunicación; desinformación; fake news; comunicación de crisis; comunicación corporativa.

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Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

### 1. Introduction. Emotions, communication, and audiences

There is a strong subjective component in the way that people interpret crises, how they can affect them, and how to protect themselves against them. This set of perceptions handled by the public is decisive for crisis management and must be considered at all times in decision-making. In fact, research in recent years reminds us that crises are what audiences think about them and not so much the facts themselves. Thus, Coombs (2007) affirms that the crisis “(...) can be seen as the perception of an event that threatens the public and even the organization's performance. Along the same lines, crises are largely perceptible. If the public believes there is a crisis, the organization has a crisis, unless we convince them otherwise (...)”. Similarly, Kleinnijenhuis *et al.* (2015) assure: “(...) It can even be stated that, although crises have a real origin, in the end, they are constructed from the interaction between various actors, whose perceptions produce real consequences”. And Utz *et al.* (2013): “In this era of socially mediated communication, audiences determine the relevance, interest, and credibility of the information they receive”.

This group of perceptions that shape what the public thinks about crises has two types of elements: rational and emotional. In fact, this second group is decisive in the mental construction of the population, as confirmed by Slovic and Burns (2012) for whom, during crises, “the recipients not only trust what they think about a topic but also how they feel about that topic”. In fact, according to Dunlop *et al.* (2008), “individuals need to associate some kind of emotional label to a problem to feel risk for it”. According to Pang, Jin, and Cameron (2009), “in a crisis, as the conflict between the public and the organization intensifies, emotions are one of the anchors that audiences use to interpret what is happening.” The emotional charge in a crisis, as Van der Meer *et al.* (2014) recall, is present in a wide group of audiences, not only in those directly affected: “(...) a crisis can not only be an emotional experience for the public, but also the entire organization and its members”.

Research in recent years shows the substantial weight that emotions have on the mental processes activated by citizens in times of crisis (Losada, 2018). Emotions are present in the interpretation of the events that generate the crisis, but, in the same way, they condition the interpretation that the public makes about the responsibility in those events and, of course, the institutional response that the organization adopts at all times. This set of emotional interpretations ends up having a substantial weight in the evolution of the crisis, due to the direct connection between these perceptions and the final behaviors that citizens decide to adopt. For Choi and Lin (2007), Kim and Cameron (2011), or Van der Meer *et al.* (2014), “the communicated emotion can affect the interpretation of the public and, as a consequence, the effectiveness of the response to the crisis”.

The connection between the emotions of the public and their reactions is reflected in several works focused on the attribution that the public makes on the responsibility of the crisis, such as those led by Coombs (2004), Coombs and Holladay, (1996), (2001), and (2004), and the SCCT (Situational Crisis Communication Theory) model. To the extent that an organization's responsibility in a crisis is demonstrated, feelings of anger and anguish intensify and those of sympathy diminish, which can end with a direct attack on the organization, both in the narrative that they do about it (the «word of mouth» among individuals that has gained so much importance with social networks) and in the rupture of relationships with the brand. Or, even, in the disposition to carry out conducts that go against the will of the organization or even against the own safety of those affected. But, the attribution of responsibility in crisis is not the only option in the construction of emotions and many other scholars distinguish further between emotions independent of attribution and those dependent on attribution in the context of organizational crises (Choi and Lin, 2007).

A good number of research is focused on locating the most common emotions in crisis contexts. One of the most relevant contributions is that of Jin, Liu, Anagondahalli, and Austin (2014), who proposed a scale to measure the emotions of the public in a crisis. The results were a list of 13 specific emotions, almost all of them negative: anger, anxiety, apprehension, confusion, contempt, disgust, shame, fear, guilt, sadness, embarrassment, surprise, and sympathy. These emotions would be triggered in different ways, depending on how audiences approach responsibility for the events: some of these emotions were independent of any type of attribution (such as anxiety or fear), others depended on external attribution of responsibility, that is, to a company (such as anger, contempt or sadness ...) and others, finally, were activated mainly from an internal attribution of responsibility – to themselves- (such as feelings of guilt, shame, or embarrassment).

Previously, Pang, Jin, and Cameron (2010) reduced the main emotions that are set in motion in primary audiences in a situation of this nature to four. These emotions would be *Anger*, *Fear*, *Anxiety*, and *Sadness*. *Anger* would be activated, according to these authors, because people feel threatened by an organization that goes against them and their well-being, for which the company is blamed for the harmful actions, which could have been controlled or prevented at the time. For this

reason, people increase this "anger", which can easily turn into belligerent behavior against the organization; on the other hand, *Fear* would be activated by the uncertainty of the public, who are not sure how to react and how the organization will handle the situation (in fact, many times, depending on their resources and their power, they can choose to avoid or escape the crisis); As for *Anxiety*, this emotion would be derived, according to Lazarus (1991), from the presence of immediate and concrete danger. The public may be overwhelmed by the situation and seek immediate solutions. In the same way, they may or may not blame the organization according to other variables; finally, *Sadness*, which would emerge when the public suffers a tangible or intangible loss or both (esteem, moral values, ideal, people and their well-being, etc.), for which they cannot blame anyone, for which they will need some relief or consolation, although it is true that, if the loss can be restored or compensated in some measure, *Sadness* can come to be associated with hope. This will depend, above all, on the measures that the organization takes. In any case, most of the studies focus on negative emotions, which seem to play a more important role than positive ones in crisis contexts. Along these lines are the works focused on *Anger* (Utz *et al.*, 2013 or Van der Meer *et al.*, 2014), *Shame* and *Regret* (Wesseling *et al.* (2006), or *Fear* (McDonald *et al.*, 2010).

In all cases, the different authors highlight the importance of contemplating the emotions arising in a crisis strategically and not as a mere threat. Pang, Jin, and Cameron (2009 and 2010) ensure that properly managing negative emotions can reverse the initial situation and even improve the commitment between the organization and its audiences. They may feel any of these emotions or they may go from one to another depending on various factors. The most visible way in which the organization can manage negative emotions and counteract them will be with its response from the first moment, its management, and its communication. For this, they must be especially sensitive to the real situation, communicating with "compassion, concern, and empathy" (Heath, 2006).

### **1.1. Emotions in crisis communication management of organizations**

Álvarez (2009) highlights that modern crisis management goes, above all, through the study of the public, placing the focus of attention on their perceptions and the way they receive the information that reaches them, emotionally channel it, interpret it, and, accordingly, behave. It is an opinion that is also supported by Schwarz (2019), for whom the quality of relations with the public between an organization and its stakeholders has a substantial impact on the evaluations and attributions of responsibility towards an organization.

In a crisis, the public has a high predisposition to feel "mistreated" if they do not feel cared for, activating all the springs that make that feeling visible. Hence the need to show a special sensitivity to these groups, which are the basis on which they build the most solid and general perceptions about the events that occur and which, to a large extent, will give a form and a measure to the crisis. To do this, the organization must focus on concrete action proposals from three fronts: towards the mind, employing persuasive strategies towards the public and parking the "defense" strategy against any attack; towards the body, insofar as they can satisfy people's physical needs during crises; and, above all, towards the hearts of the public, trying to understand the emotional disorders of those audiences (aware of the decisive role that emotions play during crises, to which we have already referred). It seems essential that the organization acts transparently in the three axes and, in this way, the public can perceive a constructive and positive attitude from the organization in the resolution of the crisis and the protection of citizens, based on various action possibilities (Coombs and Holladay, 2008; Schultz *et al.*, 2011).

At the same time, companies must be prepared to receive and process "felt" information -of a more sentimental nature- from their audiences. In other words, listening and monitoring their perceptions

through a wide set of tools, especially virtual ones, as recognized by Macias et al., 2009: “the set of digital possibilities especially favor the exchange of information, opinions, and emotional expression about crises”, formulas that go beyond traditional public relations communication tactics, such as press releases or public statements (Wang et al, 2010) and allow a direct, immediate, and personal exchange”. “During crises, audiences turn to social media for a wide variety of information and support, especially emotional” (Hilyard and et al. 2010; Stephens and Malone, 2005).

Another complementary formula by which an organization can adequately manage social emotions during these crisis contexts is to share experiences, an opportunity that becomes a form of personal relief that the public needs and to which the company cannot remain alien. When they share, people consider themselves closer to those who suffer and, to some extent, feel closer to the solution, a fact that Wendling (2013) refers to: “When people suffer the impact of a crisis, but at the same time are assigned the active role to share information, they can feel empowered and involved in the response. They go from being passive observers or victims to becoming actors”. As Stephens and Malone (2012) point out: "In essence, all people want is to share their experiences."

The organization must participate in this condition, that of sharing, opening its media to the different opinions of its own and those of others, and making an effort to eliminate any barrier that prevents people from talking, both through its resources and through the "won" tools. And to achieve this end, social media become powerful instruments that make easier and more operational the way how companies and audiences share information (Lachlan et al. 2016), as confirmed by Macias et al. (2009): “(...) social networks can facilitate the exchange of information, opinions, and emotional expression about crises”. Although, as Liu *et al* (2015) claim, “there is no single way to use social media to disseminate information during a crisis, but there needs to be a continuous investment to ensure that many different forms of communication are used”.

## 2. Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this work is to analyze the influence of official information on COVID-19 in the Spanish population during the first weeks of the State of Alarm (March-April 2020), trying to identify the emotions related to the channels and the sources of informational consumption. As specific objectives, the following are proposed, among others:

- Identify the communication channels most used by the population to follow information about COVID-19
- Locate the topics that aroused the most interest about COVID-19
- Point out the most credible sources for the population, as well as the role of official information
- Know the assessment of the Government's communication management in the crisis
- Analyze the audience's behavior in the face of fake news and the actions taken to contrast the information

As a methodological technique, the survey was used, a useful instrument to describe the relationships between different variables in a population -which becomes a representative example of the whole- (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2020), aiming to investigate and draw conclusions about general phenomena -in this case, the reaction of Spaniards to the information they received about the pandemic-, with the support of statistical procedures that define representative samples of broader universes, in turn generalizable, and that offer a reliable still photo of a specific moment (Eiroa and Barranquero, 2017). Specifically, we opted for a survey administered through the Internet (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2020; Eiroa and Barranquero, 2017).

It is a format used more and more frequently, and which main advantages are that it does not require the assistance of the interviewer and that it can therefore be carried out with few resources, in a short period, and on a large scale if there is a group of researchers who contribute to its dissemination since it can be quickly shared through social networks and other digital channels. This type of technique allows an automatic filter in the design of the sample and even when responding in anonymity and privacy, facilitates the sincerity of the respondent (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2020).

The survey, “quantitative technique that attempts to measure facts, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of the population, based on the use of standardized questionnaires in which verbal or written testimonies are collected from a more or less representative sample of subjects regarding a broader population” (Eiroa and Barranquero, 2017) requires important work in its design and definition, both in the sample and in the posing of the questions and the moment in which they are made.

This exploratory work studies the effects in the Spanish population of the communication of the Government and the information disseminated through the different offline and online channels, during the first weeks of confinement of the population, a few days after the announcement of the State of Alarm by the Government of Spain. The work tries to analyze the main variables of the consumption of information by the population and the, especially emotional, perception that the information received provided, considering the different channels used at all times, the credibility of the sources to which they had access, and the importance of aspects of the information they received.

An online survey was designed through the Google Survey tool, structured in ten questions: Communication channels used by the population to learn about the pandemic, Topics that were of most interest, Most credible sources at this time, Assessment of the communication management by the Government, as well as Elements that influence this assessment of official information, Importance of the types of messages, Emotions generated by the official information received, and, finally, Behavior in the face of false news. These questions were completed with the Sociodemographic Data of the respondents -Age, Education, and Autonomous Community of residence in Spain-.

**Table 1.**

QUESTION	POSSIBLE ANSWERS
<b>What are the communication channels that you are using the most to find out about the Coronavirus/COVID-19 crisis? (check 3 options maximum)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Facebook</li><li>- Instagram</li><li>- Twitter</li><li>- Youtube</li><li>- WhatsApp</li><li>- Television</li><li>- Radio</li><li>- Press</li><li>- Blogs</li><li>- Official websites</li><li>- Contact telephone</li><li>- Other</li></ul>

<p><b>What are the topics about this Crisis that interest you most? (check 3 options maximum)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Form of contagion</li> <li>- Self-protection</li> <li>- Symptoms of the disease</li> <li>- Actions prohibited and permitted in the decree</li> <li>- Evolution of the pandemic: data</li> <li>- Social information and entertainment</li> <li>- Monitoring the pandemic in other countries</li> <li>- Others</li> </ul>
<p><b>What are the most credible sources of information for you at this time? (check 3 options maximum)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family and friends</li> <li>- Official organizations and authorities</li> <li>- Media and journalists</li> <li>- Health personnel</li> <li>- Opinion leaders</li> <li>- Experts and scientists</li> <li>- WHO</li> <li>- Others</li> </ul>
<p><b>How do you think the Government is managing communication in the COVID-19 crisis? (Rate from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest mark)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1-10</li> </ul>
<p><b>Assess the following aspects of the official information that is reaching you, if you: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clarity of information</li> <li>- Veracity</li> <li>- Transparency</li> <li>- Quick information</li> <li>- Empathy from authorities and the media</li> </ul>
<p><b>Rate the importance of this type of message you are receiving (Rate from 1 to 7, 1 being less important and 7 more important)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information about what is happening</li> <li>- Solutions about what is happening</li> <li>- Emotional support</li> </ul>
<p><b>What emotion/s does the information you receive from official sources about the coronavirus generate in you?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sadness</li> <li>- Fear</li> <li>- Trust</li> <li>- Rage</li> <li>- Tranquility</li> <li>- Pride</li> <li>- Distrust</li> <li>- Joy</li> <li>- Uncertainty</li> </ul>
<p><b>Are you aware if any hoax or fake news has reached you during the current crisis?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yes</li> <li>- No</li> <li>- Does not know/No answer</li> </ul>
<p><b>Through what means do you contrast the information? (Check 3 options maximum)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family and friends</li> <li>- Official organizations and authorities</li> <li>- Media and journalists</li> <li>- Health personnel</li> <li>- Opinion leaders</li> <li>- I do not check information</li> <li>- No answer</li> </ul>

<p><b>In case of doubts, have you sent inquiries or questions through the official communication channels that exist? (Check 3 options maximum)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Telephone</li><li>- Social media</li><li>- Email</li><li>- Whatsapp</li><li>- Telegram</li><li>- APPs</li><li>- I have not requested information</li><li>- Others</li></ul>
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**Source:** Self-made

A non-probabilistic procedure was chosen -people with Internet access-, established following the opinion of the researchers, using “snowball” sampling, which means that the questionnaire was shared online through social networks (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram from the profiles of the authors, which add up to a community of 18,334 followers), through email, and the WhatsApp electronic messaging system (of practically universal access in Spain), explaining the motivation of the questionnaire and requesting to the respondents who will pass on to their contacts, family, and friends. (Baxter; Babbie, 2004). Previously, the survey was tested by sending it to 15 people to verify that the wording of the questions was understandable and did not generate confusion.

Some experts have expressed concern about the low response rates in this type of survey in the field of Communication and Public Relations (Kent, Taylor, and Turcilo, 2006; Van Ruler and Lange de, 2003; Karadjov, Kim, and Karavasilev, 2000; Wu and Taylor, 2003), therefore some authors, such as Wu and Taylor (2003: 475) suggest additional actions to complete the data. This issue was resolved in the current study with the use of the WhatsApp electronic messaging system, as we have mentioned, which facilitated an increase in responses, which can be considered within the acceptable margins for obtaining significant results for similar studies (Karadjov *et al.*, 2000; Kent *et al.*, 2006; Venter, 2010; Wu and Taylor, 2003).

The response period was shortened between March 23<sup>rd</sup> and April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020. In total, 1,952 responses were recorded that were subjected to filtering, according to Morrow and Skolits (2014), to eliminate those issued by residents outside of Spain and by minors. The sample was therefore reduced to 1,823 people, between 18 and 82 years old, with residence in Spanish territory and internet access.

Subsequently, the data were processed in an Excel file, to count the response frequencies and, besides, a cross was made between the question about the emotion generated in the public by the official information with the question about the preferential use of information sources, aiming to identify the differences in the effects of the information that arrives depending on the reception channel and thus confirming the trust of these media.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. Profile and information consumption of the respondents**

The average profile of the respondent is a person between 35 and 54 years old (45%) with university studies (74.6%). Their priority channels of information on the Covid-19 crisis are television (72.6%), the press (48.9%), and official web pages (31.2%). They are followed by Twitter (30.3%), radio (29.4%), WhatsApp (26.3%), and Facebook (21.3%). Other social networks such as Instagram (5.87%) or YouTube (4.2%) have less impact, as well as blogs (1.4%) or contact phones (1.7%), which represent a not very significant sample. However, social networks continue to gain relevance



as information channels in crises. Thus, 88.24% of those surveyed indicated among their responses a social network to find out about the pandemic.

It is observed that institutional information is highly valued during the analyzed crisis phase: official web pages appear as the third most used information channel, but, besides, 70% identify official organizations and authorities as the most credible sources of information. Health personnel (68.3%), the media (52.8%), family and friends (8.3%), and opinion leaders (6.8%) are added.

Regarding informational interests, the evaluation of the pandemic and its data (76.6%) is registered as the first concern, as well as protection against the virus and that of its environment (62.4%), the forms of contagion (41.7%), and the symptoms of the disease (41%). In the background would remain the actions prohibited and allowed by Royal Decree 463/2020 Decree (39.6%) that regulated the State of Alarm, the monitoring of the pandemic in other countries (27.9%), and related social and entertainment information (9.7%). The possibility of free response was also included, collecting 1.4% of respondents who spontaneously included the economy among their main concerns.

Given that disinformation has been one of the most controversial issues during this crisis and one of the challenges that must be addressed by communication professionals (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019), it was considered pertinent to add this question, also identifying the verification mechanisms used. 93% of those surveyed, claim to have received fake news or hoaxes during this phase of the pandemic, a very high percentage indeed. When consulting the sources used to contrast the information, 70% indicated the official organizations and authorities in the first place, the media (65%), health personnel (50%), and opinion leaders with a greater distance (7.85%), and family and friends (5.60%). Only 3.18% of the sample acknowledged that they did not contrast information. This percentage is very low, especially when compared with the consultation mechanisms in case of doubts, a question in which 68.94% of those surveyed acknowledged that they did not consult official channels, while those who did, tend to use WhatsApp (13.28%), the telephone (12.29%), social networks (10.65%), and email (6.15%).



**Image 1:** Summary infographic of the average profile of the respondents and their informational interests during the pandemic.

**Source:** Self-made (Canva).

### 3.2. Emotions related to the pandemic and the media

The scale of this pandemic makes this crisis a historic milestone at all levels and, so far, unprecedented. The State of Alarm decreed by the Government and the confinement of the population derived from it added to a situation of uncertainty in which information is a basic need, directly affects the emotions of the population. This is demonstrated by the current survey. *Sadness* (51.5%) is the feeling most mentioned by those surveyed, followed by *Anxiety* (43.5%) and *Fear* (42%). No less significant is finding *Trust* (23.9%) as the fourth most cited emotion. Finally, in fifth place, would be *Anger* (20.4%), followed by *Tranquility* (11.1%), and *Pride* (8%). The interpretation of these data must be contextualized in its collection phase that occurs during the first phase of the crisis, since the confinement began on March 14<sup>th</sup> and this study began 9 days later, on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, extending until April 8<sup>th</sup>. Likewise, and as Igartua, Ortega-Mohedano, and Arcila-Calderón point out. (2020: 12) "likely, exposure to news about the number of victims of the coronavirus stimulates negative emotions (such as sadness or fear) and this, in turn, influences the memory of the information or the perception of the severity of the illness".

Given that information consumption can be linked to the feelings of the population at all times, it was decided to deepen this aspect by crossing some of the variables involved, in particular, the one that linked these emotions with the information channel used. *Fear* is associated as the predominant emotion with most of the analyzed media (television, press, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram), except on official pages and radio, where *Tranquility* is recorded, and on Twitter, a network in which *Distrust* is identified.

*Pride*, the least mentioned emotion by those surveyed, is also the feeling least associated with half of the channels (press, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook). While television consumers feel *Distrust* to a lesser degree, radio listeners are disengaged from *Sadness*, and users of official websites are away from *Anger*. The case of Instagram is striking, whose users have *Trust* as the least linked emotion.



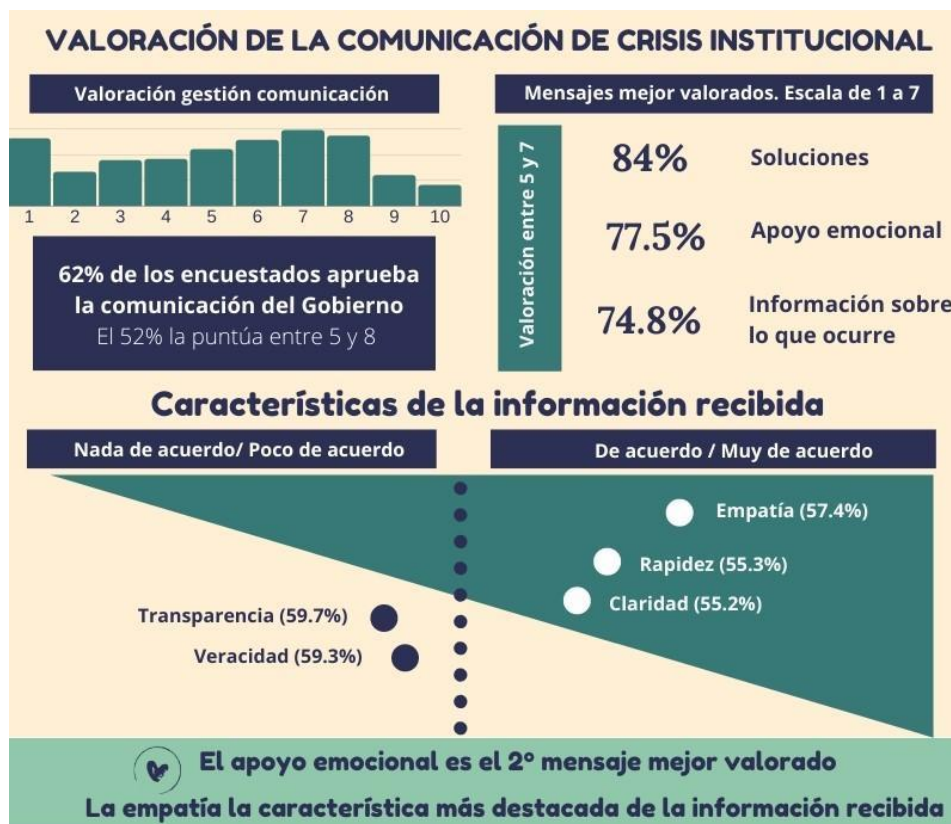
**Image 2:** Summary infographic of the emotions shared by respondents during the crisis.  
**Source:** self-made (Canva).

### 3.3. Assessment of the crisis communication made by the Government

62.31% of those surveyed approve of the crisis communication management carried out by the Government during the first phase of the pandemic, compared to 37.73% who are dissatisfied. Most of those surveyed (52.27%) score the Government's communication during the crisis between 5 and 8 (on a scale of 1 to 10), and the rating is also slightly higher in the range of between 7 and 8 points (28.4%).

Likewise, the messages received were evaluated, observing that there is no great difference between the three options offered in the survey: information about what is happening, solutions, and emotional support. All are equally appreciated and are scored between 5 and 7, with a rating scale of 1 being the least important, and 7 the most important. Thus, information about solutions is perceived as the most important message, since 84% of the respondents evaluated it with a 7. It is followed by messages that offered emotional support that 77.5% of the respondents scored between 5 and 7. Results very similar to the messages about what is happening that 74.8% also valued in the same degree.

Using the Likert scale, the perception of some characteristics of the official information received was deepened. The three most estimated aspects are empathy on the part of the authorities, a characteristic with which 57.4% strongly agree or agree, quickness (55.3%), and clarity of information (55.2%). It stands out that the most appreciated aspect is purely emotional since it is valued that the Government can understand and put itself in the place of the citizenry ahead of other items, identified in crisis communication as essential (quickness and clarity). In contrast, citizens disagree or strongly disagree with the offered transparency (59.7%) and the veracity of the received information (59.3%).



**Image 3:** Summary infographic of the assessment of crisis communication carried out by the Government during the first phase of the pandemic.

**Source:** Self-made (Canva)

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The global dimension and the dramatic consequences caused by the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus throughout the world have made it necessary to put communication mechanisms in place by the authorities of all countries. The objective of all governments has been, not only to keep the population informed at all times but also to direct all their emotions to turn them into behaviors in favor of controlling the pandemic and its devastating effects. The Covid-19 crisis, due to its severity and urgency, has become an unprecedented paradigm in which to analyze the role of communication in its management and in efforts to make its consequences less tragic.

This work focuses on the analysis of the influence of the official communication of the authorities (topics, content, channels) during the first weeks of the crisis in Spain on the perceptions of the population, especially in its emotional dimension. The aim was to find an explanation for how the use of certain information media and content could affect the feelings of the population and, therefore, their behavior. In a complementary way, an attempt has been made to cross these data with the assessment of public opinion on the official information, the topics that aroused the greatest interest, and the most credible sources. It also sought to know the public's knowledge of the consumption of fake news and how they came to contrast this type of information.

To know these data, it was decided to carry out an online survey from a non-probabilistic procedure during the initial period of the State of Alarm decreed in Spain, from March 23<sup>rd</sup> to April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020. A total sample was obtained of 1,823 responses among the population aged 18 to 82, with residence in Spanish territory and internet access.

The work confirms the research of authors such as Coombs (2007), Slovic and Burns (2001), Pang, Jin, and Cameron (2009), Van der Meer *et al.* (2014), Choi and Lin, (2007), Jin, Liu, Anagondahalli, and Austin (2014), when they refer to the decisive relevance of emotions in the set of public perceptions during a crisis. In the case of Covid-19, this fact is confirmed, when it is verified that *Sadness* and *Fear* are the most present emotions in the population during the first phase of the pandemic, although differences are observed depending on the preferred communication channel used by the population, a circumstance that could be related to the credibility of each channel. This would explain that radio, the channel to which the feeling of *Distrust* is least linked, has been identified for several years as the medium with the greatest credibility and that, on the contrary, the emotion of *Distrust* associated with Twitter could be related to typical misinformation of the channel, one of the most frequent in incidental exposure (Serrano Puche *et al.*, 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen *et al.*, 2018) of the public to receive information.

The sources indicated as the most reliable coincide with those most used to contrast information, and it is striking that practically identical percentages were collected in both questions of the survey. Thus, official sources are identified as credible, are valued in the first place as sources to contrast information, and *Tranquility* is associated with institutional web pages. Logically, this dependence on institutional information is explained given the health nature and magnitude of the crisis, but, significantly, there is still confidence in the official discourse and the work of the institutions. Furthermore, when looking at the role of disinformation in this pandemic, which is reflected in the fact that almost all respondents affirm that they have received fake news. At this point, there is room for another reflection on individual responsibility for the information that is shared and contrasted during a crisis, since 70% of those surveyed acknowledged that they did not consult or contrast the information. Raising the reasons for this attitude could open new lines of research, whether it is related to the channels, the nature of the information, or the informational conformity of the citizens themselves.

The study shows that 62.31% of those surveyed would approve the crisis communication management carried out by the Government during the first phase of the pandemic, obtaining an average score of 7.5 out of 10. The emotional component would also be an important variable for this assessment. Specifically, emotional support is the second-highest valued message and Empathy is the most prominent characteristic of the information received. The ability of the Government to "understand" and "put itself in the place of the citizenry" is positively appreciated, ahead of other aspects, traditionally essential in crises, such as the quickness and clarity in the issued messages.

The results of this work confirm the importance of the emotional capital of the public in the management of official information in crises, a decisive variable to understand how the population understands the crisis and copes with it. These emotions, mostly negative, vary depending on the channel used and coexist with huge amounts of misinformation that the public admits to receiving but not contrasting. All these findings encourage the research of emotions in crises and their anchorage within the communication policies that governments and authorities must carry out in this type of context. It should also be noted that this work involves a first exploratory phase that could be complemented in the future with neuro-communicative analyzes that provide more information in this regard, among others.

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