

Sadness, Negativity, and Uncertainty in Education During COVID-19 on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The global COVID-19 pandemic increased social media usage to obtain information and to share concerns, feelings, and emotions, turning it into a prolific field of research through which it is possible to understand how audiences are coping with the multitude of recent challenges. This paper presents results from a social media analysis of 61,532 education-related news headlines posted by the major daily news provider in Portugal, Sic Notícias, on Facebook, from January to December 2020. The authors focus on how the news impacted on audiences' emotional response and discourse, and this research analyzes the key issues of the most commented news content. The results show a prevailing sadness among audiences and a very negative discourse all throughout 2020, with a high degree uncertainty being expressed. The main concerns revolved around parents supporting children in their first remote learning endeavors, financial sustainability, the lack of devices, the disinfection of schools, and the students' mobility, particularly in the non-higher education context.

KEYWORDS

Audience Emotional Response, COVID-19, Education, News Content Analysis, Portugal, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will be indelibly marked by the emergence of a global pandemic outbreak, that literally stopped the world, as there is no recollection in recent human history. Worldwide, all social spheres were heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with repercussions that will be felt in years to come. The education sphere, being highly dependent on family support, economic conditions, and

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government support is at center stage during such a time of crisis. If the household income is cut back or lost and government support fails, children lose their access to education. If parents working remotely are unable to balance work demands with family needs, children's education will suffer, given their lack of autonomy. If the household income is so low that the minimal conditions to access emergency remote learning cannot be provided, children lose their access to formal education.

The multitude of struggles and non-optimal scenarios in the provision and access to education was added on top of the health and safety concerns that arose with the spread of COVID-19. The financial debility, the overload of work and concerns, the uncertainty, and the fear of losing lives has undoubtedly worsened the mental health of parents and children, whose family environment and routines grew strained by the day.

One of the possible lenses to analyze the evolution of the pandemic situation and its impacts on individual and social levels, is by looking into how audiences have responded to the news on social media, as these platforms became a privileged domain for releasing news and, on the part of the audiences, to obtain information, to comment and share feelings and emotions.

Several recent works have built on social media data to analyze, for instance, the efforts of public health authorities and the public response on Facebook during the pandemic (Sesagiri Raamkumar et al., 2020), and audiences' response to the overall set of news posted during confinements (Boon-Itt & Skunkan, 2020; de las Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2020).

Unlike these, our work is aimed at providing an insightful picture of the emotions and concerns of the Portuguese population and its reaction to education-related news and to the restraints imposed on education because of the COVID-19 preventive measures. Little is known about this specific media segment, and there are no national reports or research revealing the effects and response of the key audiences to the contingencies that circulated in the network. The major news about regulations, restrictions, schools closing, remote instruction, governmental support to students and parents, and daily occurrences are broadcasted by the national news provider into social media, generating the response (reactions and comments) of those who feel affected or closer to the subject, for instance, parents, families, students, and teachers.

Our work follows the general approach of quantitative content analysis, and it consists of a descriptive study of the news posted on Facebook by the biggest news provider in Portugal, SIC Notícias, whose page has more than 1,86 million followers, which corresponds to about 18% of the Portuguese population. Despite the growing diversity of social networks, Facebook is still the platform most used by the Portuguese population, particularly among adults, and used as a frequent interface to receive updates from the major national news providers (Marktest, 2020).

This paper is structured as follows: first, we present the background of the research, describing issues related to mental health during the pandemic in the educational sphere, followed by the issues of social media and wellbeing and how emotions can be measured. Then we present the study, its methods, and procedures, as well as the results obtained and its discussion. Finally, we draw the conclusion and refer to limitations.

BACKGROUND

Mental Health During the Pandemic in the Educational Sphere

Worldwide, the closing of schools and other educational facilities has been one of the key steps taken during the lockdown due to COVID-19, leading to changes in behavior, including the expression of grief, depression, isolation (Lee et al., 2021), as well as stress (Huber, 2021), anxiety and a sense of helplessness among children and adolescents in an unprecedented way (Singh et al., 2020). Younger children (3-6 years of age) displayed signs of clinginess and fear of infection among family members, while children between the ages of 6-18 are more likely to report inattention and to persistently ask about COVID-19. Children suffer sleep disturbances, nightmares, poor appetite regardless of age

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