

Self-Perception of Young University Students About Their Leisure Time Before, During and After COVID-19. An Approach to the Spanish Context

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore and analyse the self-perception of a group of young Spanish university students in relation to their leisure activities, in a temporal space defined in three moments: before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the confinement and after the confinement (return to normality). Information was collected with a self-administered questionnaire to 54 young Spaniards. The results show that before the pandemic, leisure was in person with activities shared with friends. During confinement, leisure was non-face-to-face, significantly increasing family and individual activities. After the confinement, the time that young people spent with their family was reduced, and the time with friends in person and outdoors with “post-COVID” concerns increased. It is concluded that young people have changed their guidelines, activities and with whom they spend their leisure time in comparison to their experience before and during confinement. The return to normality has also changed how young people spend their leisure time, and with whom, by adopting preventive behaviors.

Keywords: youth, leisure, COVID-19 pandemic.

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Received: 27 July 2023
Accepted: 13 November 2023
Published: 09 February 2024



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1. Introduction

More and more socio-educational currents consider leisure as a relevant aspect in the self-realization of people, as well as a fundamental value for social, educational, and psychological development, especially among the youngest. Both the leisure and free time activities carried out by youth and the characteristics and particularities that define them, have constituted and constitute an elementary field of investigation for the approach to the behaviors of youth throughout their personal development, in a stage of life of great relevance in the development of all people, in which essential behavioral values and structures are formed during the transition to adult life.

In particular, in recent years research on the subject has focused on how young people use their free time, as well as what type of leisure they develop, with whom it is shared, or the main activities they carry out to cover young people's free time. In this sense, numerous studies analyze the potential of leisure for human development in its psychological, creative, cognitive, and social dimensions.

Leisure is a right in itself and one of the values most appreciated by society, especially in recent times and by young people themselves (Arastegui & Silvestre, 2012; López, 2011), because it is at this stage when they develop leisure and recreation strategies, they begin to organize free time and become attached to certain activities (Mischenko et al., 2020), at a time when which has exponentially increased the free time to occupy, as well as its intrinsic value.

Positive leisure experiences favor the psychological, emotional, creative, and cognitive growth of youth (Sanz et al., 2019), which is why leisure has progressively become a fundamental pillar of development in the 21st century because it is considered an essential requirement for quality of life; when conceived as a necessity; when understood as an integral experience of the person; and for being considered an important human right that promotes the development of people (Cuenca Cabeza, 2004, 2009; Cuenca & Goytia, 2012; López-Noguero, 2017). In this sense, leisure must have a symbolic charge related to the benefits it provides for it to be significant (Díaz-Esterri et al., 2021), since significant leisure is related to well-being in all areas (Zhuo & Zacharias, 2021).

In the Spanish context, the 2009-2010 Time Use Survey already showed that young people enjoyed more time in activities of social life and fun than the rest of the age groups. However, it is important to highlight young people spent only part of their time on leisure activities since they mostly spend their time on activities related to work and academics (National Institute of Statistics, 2011). At European level, the young people who spend the most time on social and associative life and leisure activities according to the above-mentioned

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survey are the Finns with 24.2% of the day, followed by the Germans, the Greeks and the Belgians, who spent more than 23%. In contrast, the countries where young people spent less than 20% per day on these activities were France, Italy, Luxembourg, Greece and Romania (Eurostat, 2021).

In general terms, it can be indicated that young Europeans are satisfied with their amount of free time (7.4 out of 10 points). Specifically, the countries whose young people are most satisfied with the amount of time spent on these activities are Poland and Romania (8.1), while Bulgaria (6.3) and Denmark (7.1) have lower scores. Spanish young people, on the other hand, outperform the European average with 7.6 points out of 10 (Eurostat, 2022a). The research carried out by Caballo et al. (2017) points out in their study that young Spanish people currently carry out leisure practices linked to the playful, creative and festive dimension. The solidarity dimension is, according to this same study, much more neglected although it is fundamental in the construction of youth identity and the development of citizen skills of social participation.

Expanding on the particular in a national key, the data from the INJUVE 2019 Survey (Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, 2021) confirm that the main activities that young people usually carry out in their leisure time are listening to music or radio (97%) and watch movies or series online (92.9%). Going to bars and clubs is the third option most indicated by young people (76.3%), followed by sports activities (64.5%), reading and cultural activities (49.5%), the practice of the bottle (39.1%) and, lastly, volunteer actions (18.5%), a fact that reinforces the conclusions of the previous study.

Recent data at European level show that young people have increased the amount of time they spend on the internet every day, with 96% of young Europeans using the internet every day. Spanish young people also exceed this European average, reaching 97.57% (Eurostat, 2023). Among the activities that young Europeans do most are instant messaging (87.87%), participating in social networks (85.83%) and watching TV or streaming videos (85.75%), while the activities they do least are online learning material (46.84%), searching for health information (42.74%) and managing online banks (41.57%) (Eurostat, 2022b).

From an educational perspective, certain leisure activities such as reading, watching movies, or going to the theater improve cognition and prevent learning difficulties and behavioral problems (Axelsson et al., 2013; Moreno, 2013), among other benefits. Specifically, reading allows for intellectual, linguistic, and comprehension development and enrichment (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Gil, 2011; Piasta et al., 2012), also improving academic performance and school grades (Cromley, 2009) and stimulating neuropsychosocial and social development, thus favoring critical sense and life skills (Sanz et al., 2019).

On the other hand, musical activities facilitate the development of creative attitudes, relational thinking, respect, and openness (Moreno, 2011) and favor personal, intellectual, psychomotor, and socio-affective growth (Conejo, 2012). Likewise, visits to museums or exhibitions in person or online are an opportunity for learning and didactic action (Álvarez & García, 2013). Similarly, other artistic activities such as writing, painting, sculpture, and musical composition promote creativity and a critical spirit (Caride et al., 2012).

Finally, technologies and the expansion of the Internet have transformed people's lives and, especially, entered like a tsunami in the leisure of the population, thus affecting the development of personality and socialization. In this way, digital leisure encompasses all leisure activities carried out on the Internet through electronic devices – such as connecting to social networks – and traditional activities that have been technologized – such as listening to music or watching series on different online platforms – (Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, 2021). In addition, as the INJUVE 2019 Survey shows, 75% of Spanish youth spend between two and three hours a day on the internet.

1.1 The leisure of youth during the pandemic

In March 2020, when the WHO (World Health Organization) declared a state of alarm, a pandemic, due to the increase in cases of Covid-19, all leisure alternatives that required human contact were progressively reduced and in many cases radically eliminated (Díaz-Esterri et al., 2021; Fraudatario & Zaccaria, 2020). Faced with this situation, most governments worldwide took drastic measures to stop the spread of the virus, such as social distancing, closing schools, and other educational centers, etc. (López-Noguero et al., 2021; Di Nicola & Ruspini, 2020).

The confinement measure to reduce contagion produced a peculiarity in the leisure of young people: free time and family time were significantly increased, while outdoor leisure opportunities and the possibility of sharing them with other people were canceled (Ettekal & Agans, 2020; Mischenko et al., 2020; Panarese & Azzarita, 2021; Roberts, 2020; Simblett et al., 2021; Zudhy et al., 2020).

These changes in people's lives altered the time they spent exercising, using social networks, listening to music, watching television, and playing video games (Hidalgo-Andrade et al., 2021; Cheval et al., 2021). In Spain, the national research carried out by Navas-Martín et al. (2021) with a sample of 1,673 respondents showed that those under 35 years of age devoted more time to rest, leisure, television, or reading in this period. In this context, the unstructured

leisure to which young people were exposed could have negatively affected their development paths (Ettekal & Agans, 2020; Segado et al., 2023) and even more so when they felt bored, lonely, impatient, nervous, or stressed by the pandemic (Panarese & Azzarita, 2021).

Regarding family leisure, understood as the collective activity carried out within the family (Mukherjee, 2020), the time dedicated to family dynamics in leisure and leisure activities, compared to the time spent before the pandemic, clearly increased, since families themselves have promoted this type of leisure during confinement (Belmonte et al., 2021a). Among these dynamics, sharing conversations and free time, eating together, greater involvement in education, intra-family solidarity, and sharing household chores, among others, stood out (Behar-Zusman et al., 2020).

Psychological damage aggravated by fear of infection, personal and social uncertainty, as well as economic consequences have been a consequence of Covid-19 and have made family life more difficult during confinement (Brooks et al., 2020; Orgilés et al., 2020). However, the family has been aware of the benefits of leisure in the family environment in promoting trust, the feeling of belonging, the improvement of mutual respect, the climate of coexistence, and family communication. In addition, these families have been an instrument to work on emotional and psychological health, as well as an escape valve (Belmonte et al., 2021b).

Self-isolation due to the pandemic also led young people to have a more sedentary life, significantly reduce their active lifestyle and, consequently, spend more and more time with technologies and become more involved in the infinite network of the Internet (Mischenko et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2023). Consequently, young people had to adapt their lifestyles to the new circumstances, carrying out their daily activities virtually (Lazcano et al., 2022; Panarese & Azzarita, 2021; Silva et al., 2021), being the mobile phone and the laptop are the electronic device most used by them (Tejedor et al., 2020).

Therefore, a change in the habit of physical activity and an increase in sedentary behaviors have been evidenced (Biviá-Roig et al., 2020; Castañeda-Babarro et al., 2020; Santos-Miranda et al., 2022; Sharp et al., 2023), with a notable, and diaphanous change in youth dynamics. Indeed, compared to other age groups, young people were the ones who developed more digital leisure activities, with a large increase in the use of social networks (Meier et al., 2021). Specifically, social networks and virtual meetings made it possible to maintain continuous contact with others (Simblett et al., 2021), especially with friends and family, but not so much to make new friends (Tkáčová et al., 2021).

In another order of things, the duration of calls and video calls to maintain connections and/or social relationships also increased exponentially (Gabbadini et al., 2020), especially in women, so that telephone communication

with others during confinement is it became more concentrated and intense (Reisch et al., 2021).

Likewise, during the quarantine, the frequency with which certain activities that harmed mental health, such as watching television and other activities that can generate addiction, such as gambling, increased (Ellis et al., 2020; King et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2021; Zhuo & Zacharias, 2021).

The study developed by Fitzgerald et al. (2022) highlights that media use did not seem to alleviate feelings of negative affect, boredom, or depression. However, we must also point out that certain virtual reality activities can have a positive impact on mental and physical well-being during periods of confinement by keeping users busy and physically active (Siani & Marley, 2021). Along these lines, augmented reality also promoted physical activity, the maintenance of social connections, and benefits for mental health (Ellis et al., 2020). For their part, Tkáčová et al. (2021) also highlighted that online games allow for fun, relaxation, or community and social connection for like-minded people.

Regarding physical activities, the investigations do not coincide with the results obtained, because while some studies show that they decreased during the pandemic (Park-Hyun et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2021), others show that they increased, especially in the group of young people (Kim & Kang, 2021). Specifically, Sivevska and Popeska (2020) explain that physical activities were an effective way of coping with stress, negative thoughts, and other emotions caused by the crisis. Hu et al. (2020), state that Covid-19 has been able to cause people to reconsider their healthy style habits. In addition, the time spent doing sports and hobbies, and watching series and videos showed higher levels of leisure satisfaction (Hidalgo-Andrade et al., 2021).

Various investigations have also found differences in the practice of leisure among young people during the pandemic. Thus, Hidalgo-Andrade et al. (2021) found that people with higher levels of self-control spent less time in front of a screen, and those with high levels of self-esteem preferred to enjoy activities that did not require screen time.

On the other hand, Asensio-Ramón et al. (2021) showed that young people who were not part of the Scout Movement consumed more video games, television, and board games while young Scouts enjoyed other types of games that required more creativity. Likewise, the social inclusion of at-risk youth through leisure activities has been affected by the pandemic, maintaining and increasing the economic challenges to access these activities (Díaz-Esterri et al., 2021; Ettekal & Agans, 2020). Woodrow and Moore (2021) add that young people excluded from leisure are exposed to criminalization, exclusion, and stigmatization in times of Covid.

Therefore, the significant and active leisure that young people had before COVID-19 became passive, did not respond to their needs, and did not characterize their usual leisure (Mischenko et al., 2020).

1.2 Returning to normality, leisure after confinement

Other research has shown that physical distancing and the restrictions imposed have had a significant impact on young people (Panarese & Azzarita, 2021). Ettekal and Agans (2020) already warned that each young person would experience the pandemic differently and that it would have a different impact on their lives. Lazcano et al. (2022) show that the pandemic has had an impact on the routines of young people, on their relationships with their friends, and on their psychological well-being.

In this line, family, love, and peer relationships were also affected after the pandemic, especially when school routines were recovered due to the reduction of family time and the mismatch of schedules (Branquinho et al., 2021). According to Tang et al. (2022), there were general delays in sleep and wake times during this period. An increase in the time required to fall asleep was also observed, along with a general deterioration in sleep quality. The research by Khan et al. (2022) also confirms changes in people's behavior after the pandemic. Specifically, they concluded that public transport would be used to a lesser extent, that relationships will be established in open environments, that there will be fewer hugs, and, in the case of people with a higher educational level, that they will maintain physical distance.

In regards to leisure activities, Maddock and Suess (2021) have shown that young people were more likely to engage in various risk and leisure behaviors before vaccination. On the contrary, Kim and Kang (2021) argue that crowds can reduce the interest of young people in leisure activities. It has also been identified that individual activities have become more popular, although people who give more importance to relationships and leisure activities have adopted preventive behaviors to maintain them, especially when these activities are carried out with the family (Kim & Cho, 2020).

Regarding travel, Wang et al. (2022) found that leisure is the main motivational factor that influences satisfaction and the intention to travel. On the other hand, the young participants in the research by Rončák et al. (2021) reported that they would not change their travel habits after the pandemic, although they ultimately preferred to travel alone and stay individually. Another study carried out by Caldeira et al. (2022) shows that young people tend to accept the imposition of pandemic restrictions to a lesser extent and feel safer when traveling thanks to their self-regulatory behavior. However, Mackenzie

and Goodnow (2021) underline the importance that micro-adventures will take on, that is, trips to nearby unknown places that will be visited in greater depth instead of trips to greater distances and to see more in less time.

In this context of changes, Lazcano et al. (2022) point out that young people value their leisure more now than before the pandemic, that how they practice it has changed and that they have introduced new activities in it. Likewise, these authors show that young people have felt treated unfairly and that society has not offered them leisure alternatives in a situation such as the one experienced in these months.

Given this panorama, and taking into account the importance of leisure in the lives of young people, it is essential to propose socio-educational interventions that train this group in the enjoyment of leisure activities and social relations in a context such as the current one. Networking and non-formal organizations such as the Scout Movement to contribute to the development of coping strategies for adverse situations such as the ones we find ourselves in can be a start (Asensio-Ramón et al., 2021; Díaz-Esterri et al., 2021).

Finally, the 2030 Youth Strategy establishes comprehensive health and quality of life as a goal and includes alternative, social and healthy leisure policies as a line of action. This means offering various leisure, culture, physical activity, and sports services that reduce eating disorders, as well as the prevention and reduction of the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs and addictions (Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, 2022). This circumstance is especially important in a country like Spain, where climatic conditions favour and encourage outdoor leisure, forming part of the culture of Spaniards in all age groups. In addition, the promotion of tourism has facilitated the expansion of consumption in the country's extensive hotel and catering services as part of this culture.

2. Materials and methods

The aim of this research is to explore and analyse the self-perception of a group of young Spanish university students in relation to their leisure activities, in a temporal space defined in three moments: before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the confinement and after the confinement (return to normality).

The study was carried out from a qualitative methodological perspective, based on the following research question: How has the use and management of leisure time of these young people evolved before, during, and after the confinement caused by the pandemic?

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Before, During and After COVID-19. An Approach to the Spanish Context
Fernando López-Noguero, José Alberto Gallardo-López, Irene García-Lázaro,
Verónica Sevillano-Monje

It is exploratory, descriptive, and inductive research, which starts from the opinions of the young participants (Freebody, 2003). In this sense, methodological elements were used that allow an approximation to the reality of these young people, based on the content analysis (López-Noguero, 2002) of their opinions through the implementation of the open qualitative survey technique.

2.1 Participants

An intentional sampling was carried out, based on accessibility to the population under study, corresponding to young Spanish university students between 18 and 30 years of age. Specifically, the final sample is composed of 54 young people (46 women and 8 men), Social Education students (33 participants enrolled in the second year) and Social Work students (21 participants enrolled in the fourth year) at the Pablo de Olavide University (Seville, Spain).

In order to facilitate the participation process, the involvement of the teaching staff of the different subjects was initially requested, so that they could inform the students of the research objectives and encourage them to collaborate.

Subsequently, the questionnaire was sent to the participants together with the information on the objectives of the study, guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity, and it was applied through Google Forms, allowing the collection of information asynchronously during the month of March 2021. Informed consent was obtained from the young people participating in the study. Confidentiality was respected at all times, following the protocol established by the Declaration of Helsinki (64th WMA, Brazil, October 2013). This procedure methodology was considered pertinent for the development of the research since it starts from an open and flexible proposal that collects information on the objective set out in the study without the direct intervention of the researcher at the time of completing the questionnaire. By not intervening in the discourse of the participant's thoughts, freedom is granted, from a distance, to address those issues that the participant perceives related to the questions asked (Fricker & Schonlau, 2002).

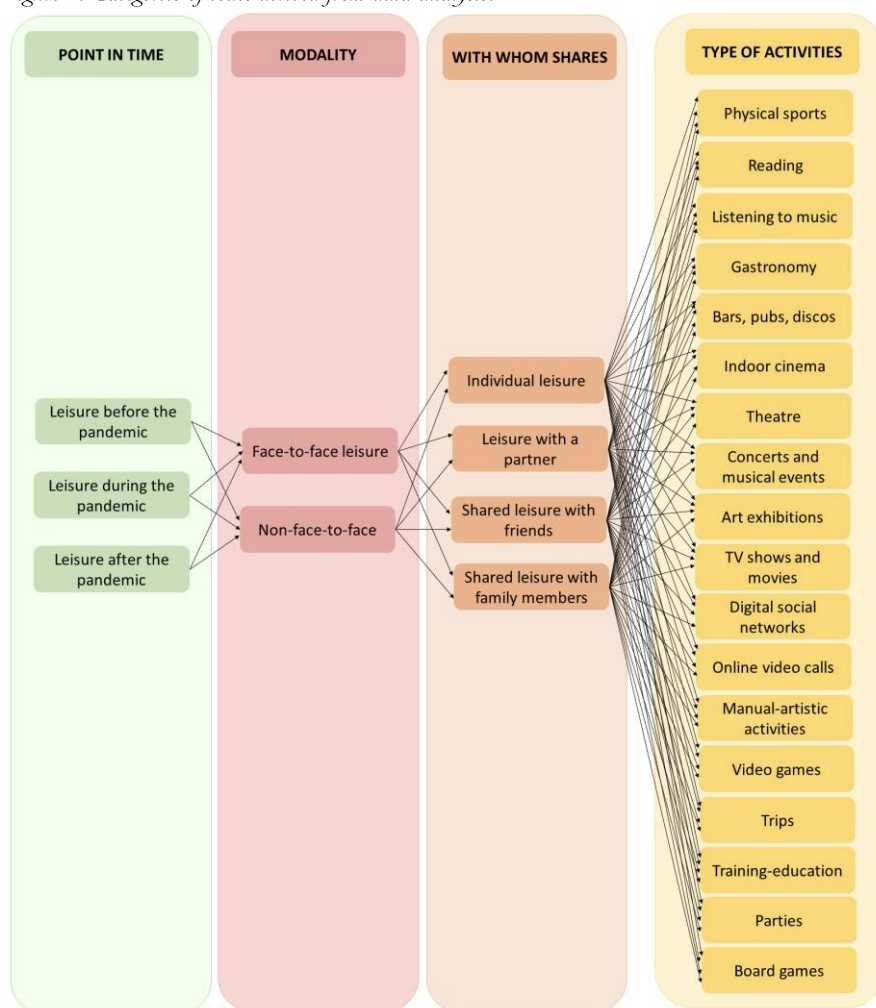
2.2 Information collection instrument and procedure

To collect information, a self-administered questionnaire with three open questions was used:

- 1) How was your leisure before the pandemic?
- 2) How was your leisure in times of confinement?
- 3) How is your leisure in this time of new normality?

The data obtained were processed systematically, following a coding process of descriptive information units (Jansen, 2013), composed of the main category of codes called “temporary moment”, which refers to the information located before, during, or after confinement.

Figure 1. Categories of codes derived from data analysis.



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Fernando López-Noguero, José Alberto Gallardo-López, Irene García-Lázaro, Verónica Sevillano-Monje

Three subcategories were also established to identify and analyze the data obtained based on whether the leisure was carried out in person or not (“leisure modality”), with whom they shared their leisure (“shared with”) or the type of activities they carried out (“type of activity”). Each category and subcategory is made up of a series of codes that were used to analyze the contents of the questionnaires (Figure 1).

2.3 Analysis and treatment of information

Atlas.ti 8 was used for qualitative data analysis. The first codes were obtained from the open coding of the information segments or units inductively. Through successive coding relationships between analysis codes were found and their names were refined. On the other hand, to support the qualitative analysis of the information obtained in the responses of the participants, in the research results graphs are presented that summarize the codes located in the opinions, according to the specific dimension of analysis and attending to the three temporal moments of interest for this study (leisure before the pandemic, leisure during confinement and leisure after confinement).

3. Results

3.1 Leisure modality (face-to-face or non-face-to-face/digital)

Taking into account the opinions of the participants, regarding whether leisure before the pandemic was carried out in person or, on the contrary, leisure was not in person, it is clear that face-to-face leisure prevailed before. In this sense, the opinions analyzed indicate how on many occasions leisure took place on weekends, where parties, discos, social life in bars, etc. prevailed. The importance of the group of friends, interaction outside, and outdoor activities is also pointed out.

“Before the pandemic, I went out every weekend with my friends, with my group of scouts we went on outings, hiking, etc. After summer we would go on occasional trips with friends, etc.” [Woman, 19 years old, Social Education]

“Cool! I went out a lot, I traveled a lot, I went out to parties with my friends and family” [Woman, 23 years old, Social Education]

“My leisure was mainly outside, with friends and family. Routinely, we agree on a time and a place to meet, either during the day to sunbathe with

some pipes or a beer, or at night for a thoughtful talk” [Woman, 21 years old, Social Education]

During confinement (obviously due to the restrictions on leaving) leisure became exclusively non-face-to-face, including digital leisure. In this sense, the evident restrictions in social relationships are clearly indicated, the importance of calls and, especially, video calls in order to maintain social contact with other people located in another address, as well as the high consumption of audiovisual products from all type (series, youtube or TikTok videos, etc.)

“During confinement, my free time was reduced to everything I could do at home (watch series and listen to music)” [Woman, 21 years old, Social Work]

“Zero. I was just staying at home. I can only highlight the video calls with friends, partner and family” [Woman, 19 years old, Social Education]

After confinement, the young people surveyed indicated that they resumed face-to-face leisure activities, abandoning non-face-to-face leisure habits. In this stage of lack of confidence, the fondness of the young people who participated in this study for outdoor activities and partying stands out, although with precautions and in a restricted way.

“I resort to activities outdoors and where there are no people” [Woman, 23 years old, Social Education]

“When I returned to the new normal, my leisure changed, it focused more on traveling and doing outdoor activities, getting to know nearby places and towns in the area, hiking, going on a picnic” [Woman, 23 years old, Social Work]

“In this new normality, we try to go above all to the countryside, to be outdoors and that there are no crowds of people; although it is true that almost every week at least one day we go out to the terraces of the bars” [Woman, 21 years old, Social Work]

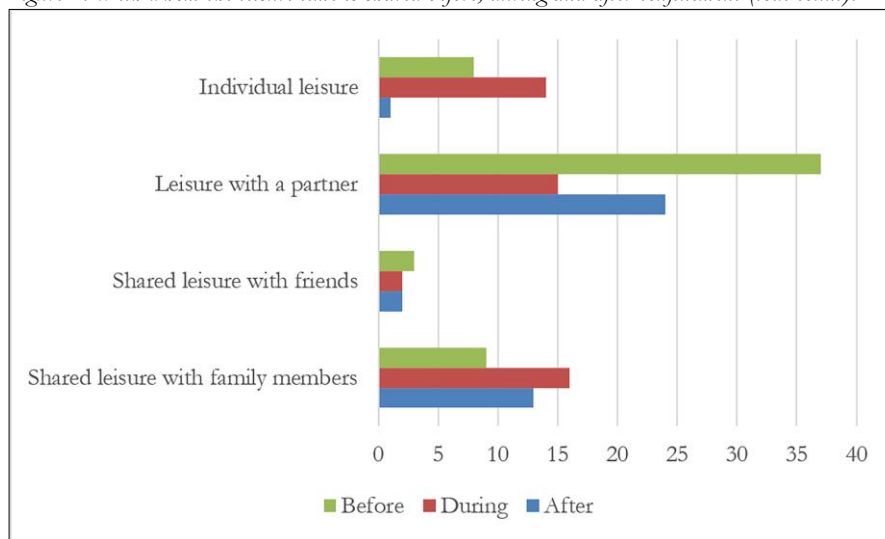
3.2 With whom you share leisure (individual, friends, family, or partner)

According to the opinions obtained, as can be seen in Figure 2, which represents the number of times that the codes relating to who they share their leisure time with at different times appear, we can see that before the pandemic caused by COVID-19, young people shared their leisure time mainly with friends and, to a lesser extent, with their partners and family members. During confinement, individual leisure and that shared with family members increased

Self-Perception of Young University Students About Their Leisure Time Before, During and After COVID-19. An Approach to the Spanish Context
 Fernando López-Noguero, José Alberto Gallardo-López, Irene García-Lázaro, Verónica Sevillano-Monje

exponentially, to lower both situations after confinement, radically in the case of family members. It is also interesting to see how, after the pandemic, the young people who participated in the study had more individual leisure than they did before confinement and less leisure with family and friends. With regard to the sentimental partner, there are practically no variations in any of the stages analyzed. Finally, there is a notable reduction in the circle of friends of the young people interviewed.

Figure 2. *With whom the leisure time is shared before, during and after confinement (code count).*



“I went out to clubs or bars with my friends (both from university and from other fields), my partner, and family. I really liked going to concerts. I planned events like going to a festival, fairs, or trips. The typical leisure of people my age” [Woman, 19 years old, Social Education]

“Before the pandemic, I was a very sociable person, but now I am more repressed and I have greatly reduced my group of friends, for example, if before I went out with my friends for a walk or to a bar terrace, now I feel more repressed, for fear of catching the virus” [Woman, 22 years old, Social Education]

“I used to go out with friends for a drink, shopping, cinema, walking...” [Woman, 23 years old, Social Work]

In this way, as we have previously pointed out, during confinement, leisure time shared with family members increases considerably, although it is also shared at this time of confinement with friends and, to a much lesser extent,

with a romantic partner. It can be seen how family ties were strengthened during confinement, as many of the young people comment that they shared leisure time with their families, carrying out joint activities. However, it is noteworthy that during the confinement the interviewees carried out more individual leisure, focused on activities carried out on many occasions in solitude. Social networks were massively used for leisure and shared with friends.

“It was limited since I couldn’t leave the house or interact with my friends. It was based on board games, watching movies and series, and spending time with the family” [Woman, 26 years old, Social Education]

“I used my leisure in confinement to read and do physical exercise and the truth is that I was a bit lucky since my family and my aunts live in a house that is shared by a staircase and we used to spend a lot of time on the roof where we had lunch together and we shared a lot of time” [Man, 19 years old, Social Education]

“My leisure in confinement was through social networks with friends and at home with my parents, sharing time together, doing sports on the rooftop, watching a movie, etc.” [Woman, 21 years old, Social Work]

Likewise, as we mentioned earlier, after confinement, leisure shared with family members decreased considerably, while leisure shared with friends increased. It is noteworthy that individual leisure, which young people had acquired during confinement, continues to be a leisure habit today. After confinement, leisure activities stand out where activities with a small, trustworthy group and in the open air prevail, with some routines acquired during confinement, such as manual or artistic tasks, continuing.

“Currently, my leisure has decreased because I take many precautions due to the situation we are experiencing. I limit myself to meeting with one or two friends in open places where the safety distance can be maintained or in the house of one of them” [Woman, 23 years old, Social Education]

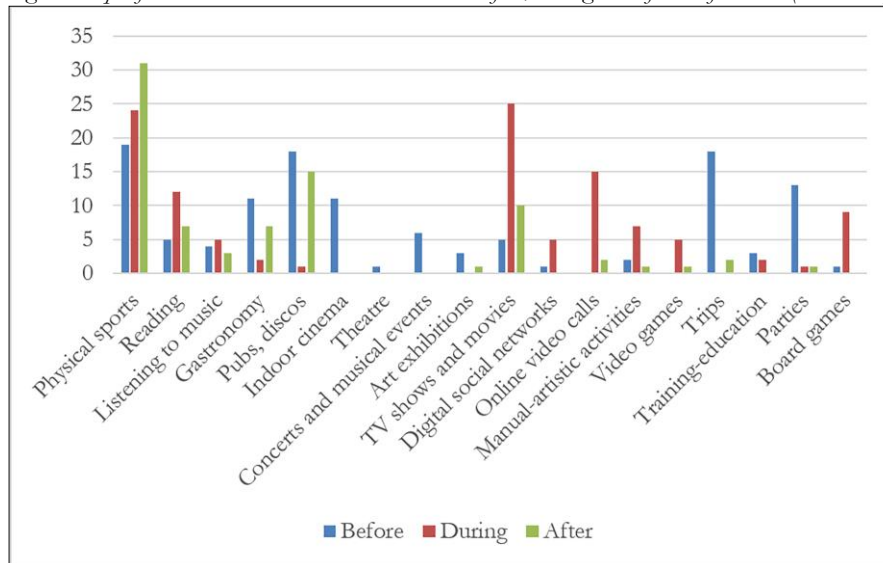
“Very strange, I have changed my routine a lot now I get up earlier to go for a walk and not meet anyone, and even before I used to go to a gym and now I have signed up for riding lessons because it is a more individual sport and there is not as much contact with other people” [Woman, 22 years old, Social Education]

“My leisure has changed, now I really enjoy going out with my friends, but I also really enjoy reading or crocheting” [Woman, 21 years old, Social Work]

3.3 Specific activities carried out in leisure time

Analyzing the speeches provided by the young people surveyed (Figure 3), taking into account the code count, it becomes clear that the type of leisure activities that were carried out before the pandemic was more related to trips, parties, night attendance at bars, pubs, discos, as well as physical-sports activities. These activities were carried out in groups and involved an in-person outing, they shared more with friends, and activities such as: going to the gym, going out to dinner, going to the cinema, traveling, etc.

Figure 3. Specific activities carried out in leisure time: before, during and after confinement (code count).



“Well, my leisure before the pandemic I think was like that of most people my age. I met up with my friends for a drink, went out to eat with my parents and siblings, read, watched series, went to the movies with friends... If it's true that maybe I did more outdoor activities” [Man, 28 years old, Social Education]

“Much more active. I would go out at least one day at the weekend, especially activities such as going out to dinner, going for a drink, outings to other provinces, traveling...” [Woman, 30 years old, Social Education]

“Before the pandemic, my leisure was very different, I used to go with my friends to cocktail bars, and discos, that is, I was more oriented towards nightlife. In addition, he also used to frequently shopping malls. It was more consumerist leisure” [Woman, 23 years old, Social Work]

Analyzing the opinions provided by the young people surveyed, it becomes clear that the type of leisure activities that were carried out during the confinement period was more related to activities that were carried out at home, as it could not be otherwise due to the confinement. In this way, much more was shared with the family (board games, shared family leisure) and individual leisure increased exponentially.

With regard to leisure with the friends of the young people surveyed, as has been mentioned previously, they related and shared their leisure time digitally (online) through social networks, video calls, etc. In this way, social networks became an important leisure option for the young people who participated in the study during these months.

Likewise, individual activities related to physical-individual sports, manual-artistic activities, yoga, reading, etc. also increased. In any case, the main leisure activity was watching TV and series.

“The most we could do was video calls and play online games with people who were not part of the family nucleus... or something at home with those who were part of that nucleus” [Woman, 19 years old, Social Education]

“During confinement, my free time was focused on doing joint activities with my parents, such as playing sports, board games, and watching movies. On the other hand, I also made video calls with my friends to distract us, increasing our creativity and reinventing ourselves, playing bingo through video calls and inventing games to make confinement more enjoyable” [Woman, 23 years old, Social Work]

“Paint, do crafts, play sports at home, listen to music, watch series and movies. All this alone, except for the sport that I sometimes did with my brother or my mother. I also continued to use social networks, perhaps more than before” [Woman, 22 years old, Social Work]

Analyzing the opinions provided by the young people surveyed, it becomes clear that the type of leisure activities that begin to be carried out after confinement is limited, seeking outdoor activities, always with “post-COVID” precautions, notably reducing the circle of friendships.

The issue of social phobias, the fear of contagion, the restriction on outings, etc., also stands out. However, shared leisure increases, while individual leisure, which remains a value, retains its importance.

As far as sports activities are concerned, these were accentuated during confinement and have even increased since then, with activities restricted during confinement such as trips, going to bars, pubs, etc., also experiencing a notable increase.

Self-Perception of Young University Students About Their Leisure Time
Before, During and After COVID-19. An Approach to the Spanish Context
Fernando López-Noguero, José Alberto Gallardo-López, Irene García-Lázaro,
Verónica Sevillano-Monje

Board games, manual-artistic activities, or video calls, so common in confinement, suffer a sharp decline, as do training activities or face-to-face viewing in movie theaters. This last aspect clearly speaks of the objections to carrying out activities in joint spaces that were so common before.

It is therefore observed how leisure has changed due to the passage of confinement, where some practices have been established and others have disappeared.

“Well, very limited, meet up with my closest friends, to chat or have a drink at noon or have coffee” [Woman, 30 years old, Social Education]

“Well, quite strict and poorer than I would like. I go to bars, but with the established measures. I see and stay with much fewer people than before. I don’t go to clubs, fairs or concerts. I have done some mini trips when I could, but with fewer thanks, because very few activities could be done” [Woman, 19 years old, Social Education]

“I only go out on Saturdays with a small group of friends, usually to museums or the park to be able to maintain the necessary distance and measures” [Woman, 21 years old, Social Work]

4. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore and analyse the self-perception of a group of young Spanish university students in relation to their leisure activities, in a time frame defined in three moments: before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the confinement and after the confinement (return to normality).

The development of this research has made it possible to demonstrate that the young people surveyed practiced their leisure before the pandemic, mostly in person with outdoor activities (trips, parties, going to bars, pubs, discos, etc.) and mainly with friends. These findings coincide with other research that highlights that before the pandemic, leisure was more active and significant (Mischenko et al., 2020), with activities linked to the playful and festive dimension (Caballo et al., 2017).

On the contrary, as reflected in the young people’s discourses, during confinement, leisure became non-face-to-face, significantly increasing individual leisure (manual-artistic, physical-sports activities, watching TV or series) and family leisure (activities such as board games and sharing time together). Regarding family leisure, the research by Belmonte et al. (2021a) shows similar results to the present study, indicating that there was an increase in family dynamics during the period of confinement.

However, during the pandemic, young people also enjoyed leisure time with friends, although to a lesser extent and through electronic devices (social networks, video calls, etc.), as previous research also shows (Meier et al., 2021; Simblett et al., 2021; Tkáčová et al., 2021).

On the other hand, according to Hu et al. (2020), Covid-19 has caused people to reconsider their healthy style habits. In this regard, interviewees indicate that individual or group physical-sport activities increased during and after confinement, as reflected in other research (Kim and Kang, 2021; Sivevska and Popeska, 2020). However, activities that hurt mental health also increased (Ellis et al., 2020; King et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2021; Zhuo & Zacharias, 2021) such as watching television and series.

It is concluded, therefore, that there is a great change in the guidelines and activities that young people carry out before the pandemic and during confinement to adapt to the reality that was imposed on them (Segado et al., 2023). According to Mischenko et al. (2020) and Sharp et al. (2023) leisure during confinement was more passive and less similar to the usual leisure that young people develop under normal conditions. Likewise, it also significantly changes the people with whom they developed their leisure.

Once the confinement is over, young people participating in the study indicate that decrease their leisure time with their family while the time they spend with friends increases. This result agrees with the research by Branquinho et al. (2021) in which it is highlighted that family and peer relationships are affected due to the reduction of family time and the mismatch of schedules.

Likewise, the young people surveyed to return to face-to-face leisure outdoors, although in a limited way and with “post-Covid “ precautions due to social phobias and fear of contagion. This finding confirms that after the pandemic there are changes in people’s behavior when interacting in open spaces and maintaining physical distance (Cheval et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022). On the other hand, this study shows that individual leisure activities remain a value in post-confinement, appreciating how the friendships with which young people develop leisure activities are significantly reduced.

Also, the most frequent activities during confinement (board games, manual-artistic activities, or video calls) are again unusual. On the contrary, activities that were previously restricted due to confinement, such as traveling or going to bars, pubs, etc., are now being resumed, as stated by Caldeira et al. (2022). However, participants in this research believe that training activities or going to the cinema are reduced because they take place in small spaces. This result coincides with the research by Kim and Kang (2021) in which they argue that crowds can reduce the interest of young people in leisure activities.

Based on these data, it is concluded that young people have varied how they practice their leisure after confinement (Lazcano et al., 2022) with respect

to who they do it with and how they do it. This means that young people have adopted preventive behaviors to maintain relationships and leisure activities after the pandemic (Kim & Cho, 2020).

It is important that the leisure carried out in the free time of young people in these times of anxiety is valuable and favors their integral development, is useful to achieve their social maturity, and, finally, helps them in the complex task of socialization and integration of the people in the society in which he has lived. For this reason, it is necessary to rethink the fundamental role that the pedagogy of leisure and free time must now play, currently inserted within the processes and experiences of Social Education (Rodríguez et al., 2018).

A certain limitation of this study must be taken into account. We must be cautious when interpreting the results, as they may not be transferable to the entire young population, as this is a contextualised study focused on a specific group of young Spaniards. However, it should be noted that this research involves a descriptive analysis of a specific reality that deepens and analyzes relevant issues about the evolution of the leisure practices of young people. Therefore, thanks to this research, the growing body of literature on youth and leisure are expanded.

It would be advisable to expand the sample in future research. Likewise, the use of other measurement instruments is recommended to access additional useful information such as discussion groups or in-depth interviews. Finally, it would be appropriate to reexamine the new reality of leisure, taking into account the continuous changes that have occurred since the end of confinement. This would mean carrying out longitudinal research that contemplates the changes produced in the successive waves of Covid-19 without restrictions as strict as those imposed during confinement.

Funding

This publication is part of the research project entitled Development of Youth COVID 19 programmes – “Delve into the improvement of the lives of social service workers and their degree of motivation to help improve the quality of life of the most vulnerable families and groups, as well as to know and understand the needs of young people in the CAM for the year 2022”, funded by the Institute Department of Districts, Youth and Citizen Participation of the Autonomous City of Melilla (BOME-BX-2022-60).

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Self-Perception of Young University Students About Their Leisure Time
Before, During and After COVID-19. An Approach to the Spanish Context
Fernando López-Noguero, José Alberto Gallardo-López, Irene García-Lázaro,
Verónica Sevillano-Monje

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Self-Perception of Young University Students About Their Leisure Time Before, During and After COVID-19. An Approach to the Spanish Context
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Self-Perception of Young University Students About Their Leisure Time Before, During and After COVID-19. An Approach to the Spanish Context
 Fernando López-Noguero, José Alberto Gallardo-López, Irene García-Lázaro, Verónica Sevillano-Monje

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Self-Perception of Young University Students About Their Leisure Time Before, During and After COVID-19. An Approach to the Spanish Context
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