

Revista **CENTRA** de Ciencias Sociales

CENTRA Journal of Social Sciences

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Information on CENTRA's scientific publications in social sciences

The **Andalusian Studies Center Public Foundation** -CENTRA-, attached to the Consejería de la Presidencia, Interior, Diálogo Social y Simplificación Administrativa of the Junta de Andalucía, is a scientific and cultural institution that already has a history of more than twenty years, and which has as its foundational objectives the promotion of scientific research and the generation of knowledge about the social, economic and cultural reality of Andalusia.

In accordance with these purposes and its nature, **CENTRA** has created ex novo in 2021 a line of scientific publications in the field of social sciences, in accordance with the universalist canons of scientific communication, made up of three book collections (Actualidad, Biblioteca de Investigación y Enfoques) and the CENTRA Journal of Social Sciences.

The **ACTUALIDAD** collection addresses issues of relevance and interest in the contemporary Andalusian social and political reality linked to the broader context of Spanish society, the European Union and, in short, global dynamics. It is characterized by a determined orientation to present empirical evidence of the phenomena considered, linking the data provided to its theoretical and explanatory analysis.

Even though it is a collection linked to the scientific community and research in the social sciences, it is also conceived under the broadest idea of dissemination for an audience that is not an expert in the topics covered. The collection, which has been published without interruption since 2005, is now structured according to a selection process for original manuscripts in accordance with universalist criteria of scientific quality and anonymous evaluation by academic peers external to CENTRA. It is available in digital format and is accessible by free download from the website of the Center for Andalusian Studies.

The newly created **BIBLIOTECA DE INVESTIGACIÓN** collection is made up of monographic research papers from different areas of knowledge in the social sciences. It therefore has the objective of publishing the results of exhaustive investigations in accordance with the standardized criteria of communication. In this way, this collection also allows those doctoral theses in the field of social sciences that meet these criteria to be published in it and that they are presented in a format compatible with editorial standards and the established length.

The **ENFOQUES** collection, also created ex novo, is aimed at bringing together under the same volume the academic results of seminars, scientific conferences, etc., that are the consequence of some academic initiative for research or debate whose result implies a collective work directed by an editor. or editors. This group nature does not imply any reduction in the commitment to the quality and scientific nature of the collection, since the generation and validation of scientific knowledge is a joint and community process that, as the frontiers of the social sciences have advanced, is becoming more and more necessary. However, this collective nature of the works published here does require scrupulous work by the editor or editors who coordinate the initiative, supervise the work of the different contributions, evaluate their substantive results, and integrate them into the unitary whole that the publication implies. final published manuscript.

The **CLÁSICOS DE LAS CIENCIAS SOCIALES** collection presents in Spanish works of undisputed reference previously published in a foreign language. It includes both modern and contemporary classic works and authors. Given its unique nature, this collection is not subject to anonymous peer review processes of a universalist nature. Notwithstanding this distinctive feature, the decision regarding the titles to be published must be approved by the CENTRA Editorial Board of Social Sciences after considering the relevance of the work to this collection. The Editorial Board may also receive proposals for publication in this collection from scholars outside the board.

Finally, and likewise newly created, the **CENTRA Journal of Social Sciences** is a semi-annual scientific publication for all areas of this field of scientific knowledge that is published in Spanish and English in electronic format, freely accessible and downloadable, and in Spanish in paper support. The journal has a miscellaneous nature for the social sciences as a whole that does not exclude the possibility of publishing debate sections and specific numbers of a monographic nature that, in any case, will be governed by the same canons of universalism and anonymous evaluation of scientific communication. than the rest of the texts presented. The journal is open to unpublished texts, written with the utmost scientific rigor, coming from the broad scientific community, both nationally and internationally.

In order to provide content to all this new initiative of scientific publications, and scrupulously guarantee the principles of scientific communication, there is an interdisciplinary Editorial Board made up of prestigious professors from universities and national and international research organizations.

ARTICLES

ARTÍCULOS

ARTICLE/ARTÍCULO

Naming Harm: Mapping Narcissistic Abuse and Its Relational Grammar on Social Media

Nombrar el daño: cartografía del abuso narcisista y su gramática relacional en redes sociales

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ABSTRACT

This article examines narcissistic abuse as a form of symbolic violence within intimate relationships. Drawing on digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis, it analyses publicly available content on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, where survivor communities and therapeutic practitioners have developed and stabilised a vocabulary for naming and interpreting relational harm. The study reconstructs the cycle of abuse through four phases: idealisation (love bombing), devaluation, discard and re-engagement (hoovering). It identifies recurring tactics such as love bombing, gaslighting, the silent treatment, intermittent reinforcement, breadcrumbing, ghosting and flying monkeys. The findings indicate that these categories constitute a relational grammar that renders visible an architecture of affective subordination grounded in the asymmetrical administration of recognition. The limitations of the research design are acknowledged, and avenues for future empirical inquiry are proposed.

KEYWORDS: narcissistic abuse; symbolic violence; intimate relationships; digital ethnography; discourse analysis; recognition.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el abuso narcisista como forma de violencia simbólica en relaciones íntimas. Mediante etnografía digital (Hine, 2015; Pink *et al.*, 2016) y análisis crítico del discurso, examina contenidos públicos en Instagram, TikTok y YouTube donde comunidades de supervivientes y terapeutas han estabilizado un vocabulario para nombrar el daño relacional. El estudio reconstruye el ciclo del abuso en cuatro fases: idealización (*love bombing*), devaluación, descarte y reenganche (*hoovering*). Identifica tácticas recurrentes como *love bombing*, *gaslighting*, tratamiento del silencio (*silent treatment*), refuerzo intermitente (*intermittent reinforcement*), *breadcrumbing*, *ghosting* y «monos voladores». Los resultados muestran que estas categorías configuran una gramática relacional que hace visible una arquitectura de subordinación afectiva basada en la administración asimétrica del reconocimiento. Se señalan las limitaciones del diseño y posibles vías de contraste empírico futuro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: abuso narcisista; violencia simbólica; relaciones íntimas; etnografía digital; análisis del discurso; reconocimiento.

1. Introduction

Narcissistic abuse is understood here as a form of relational affective domination. It does not refer to a clinical diagnosis or an individual psychological trait, but rather to a logic of power that unfolds within relationships characterised by intimacy, trust and the expectation of mutual recognition. It operates through repeated acts of intensified recognition, progressive devaluation and symbolic control over the construction of meaning. Its cumulative effect is the erosion of emotional autonomy and of the capacity to interpret one's own experience, together with a weakening of identity and a persistent sense of disorientation regarding 'what is happening' within the relationship. Empirically, this dynamic unfolds in a recurrent relational sequence organised around four functional phases: idealisation (love bombing), devaluation, discard and re-engagement (hoovering). These phases should not be understood as discrete episodes or isolated emotional fluctuations, but as interdependent moments within a single relational apparatus. Their repetition generates emotional dependency, guilt, cognitive confusion and emotional subordination. The cyclical character of this sequence constitutes a structural feature of the phenomenon and analytically distinguishes it from circumscribed relational conflicts or isolated communicative dysfunctions (Ainz-Galende and Rodríguez-Puertas, 2024).

This article adopts a sociological approach centred on the social form of the relationship. From this perspective, the pattern described may be interpreted as a mode of non-coercive power grounded in asymmetries of recognition and the differential management of affective resources (Ainz-Galende, 2026). In line with classical theories of symbolic domination, control is exercised not through direct imposition but

through relational mechanisms that operate upon expectations, subjective investments and the conditions that confer legitimacy upon the relationship itself (Weber, 1922; Bourdieu, 1998). Its distinctive feature lies in its operation within the realm of intimacy, where emotional proximity intensifies the effects of disavowal and the withdrawal of recognition (Campbell and Miller, 2011). To describe this relational architecture, one central idea is particularly useful: dependency arises not only through coercion but through the managed instability of recognition. According to Simmel, the relationship may be understood as a form of interaction marked by oscillations between closeness and distance, symbolic inclusion and exclusion through the withdrawal of recognition. Within this logic, it is not individual psychological content that defines the relationship, but rather the form taken by the interaction and the relative positions occupied by the actors within it (Simmel, 2002). Narcissistic abuse may therefore be interpreted as a relational form in which the intermittent provision of recognition intensifies attachment and renders exit increasingly costly.

The analysis is situated within the field of intimate relationships, understood not exclusively as formal partnerships but as relational configurations defined by trust, emotional investment and the anticipation of reciprocity (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1999). This perspective encompasses heterosexual and homosexual relationships, non-conventional sexual-affective bonds and non-institutionalised forms of intimacy. It is also consistent with a sociology of personal life that has challenged the distinction between the public and the private as a stable analytical boundary (Smart, 2007). In contrast to this relational framework, dominant clinical approaches have tended to conceptualise narcissism as a diagnostic category or a relatively stable trait, as reflected in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and in personality psychology more broadly. However, a number of studies have shown that narcissism functions as a socially mediated mechanism of self-regulation that is activated and reproduced through interaction with others, particularly in contexts where recognition occupies a central position (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001; Campbell *et al.*, 2002a). This analytical shift from the individual to the relationship makes it possible to examine the structural and affective consequences of these dynamics without reducing them to subjective dispositions.

A significant feature of the phenomenon is that much of its contemporary identification has emerged alongside, and partly independently of, the academic field. Therapeutic communities and digital spaces have developed a vocabulary for describing recurring relational experiences. Terms such as love bombing, gaslighting, hoovering, stonewalling and flying monkeys are not employed here as theoretical categories in the strict sense, but as relatively stabilised semantic repertoires that make it possible to recognise narrative regularities and recurrent sequences of interaction. Their sociological relevance lies not in their epistemological status but in their value as empirical indicators of contemporary forms of relational suffering (Illouz, 2007a, 2012). The transnational circulation of these repertoires, visible across both Anglophone and Spanish-speaking digital spaces, points to a degree of convergence in the grammars through which affective harm is articulated. This suggests that narcissistic abuse is not merely an individual experience or one confined to a particular

cultural context. Rather, it may be understood as a contemporary form of affective violence linked to broader transformations in emotional economies, expectations of recognition and the precarisation of intimate relationships under late-stage capitalism (Berardi, 2009). Analysing these discourses does not imply endorsing them normatively; rather, it entails treating them as empirical material through which socially recurrent relational patterns can be identified.

Accordingly, this article proposes a conceptual mapping of narcissistic abuse as a form of relational affective domination structured around a recognisable cycle. To this end, it brings sociological theories of power and emotion into dialogue with the analysis of semantic repertoires emerging within digital environments. By shifting the focus from individual diagnosis to the architecture of the relationship, this study contributes to expanding the analysis of violence within intimate life and offers an analytical framework for addressing forms of relational harm that frequently remain socially invisible.

2. Theoretical Framework

As noted above, narcissistic abuse is not conceptualised in this article as a psychological anomaly or a stable individual trait. Rather, it is defined as a social form of relationship: an asymmetrical relational regime in which recognition, attention and withdrawal are strategically wielded as resources of power. The aim of the analysis is not to identify a clinical profile but to describe the interactive structure that takes shape when seduction, validation and affective intensity function as techniques for regulating the other. The analytical focus adopted is that of relational form. Following Simmel's formal sociology (2002), relationships are not explained through individual psychological content but through the structure of interaction that governs proximity and distance, inclusion and exclusion, engagement and withdrawal. Within this framework, narcissistic abuse may be understood as a stabilised form of ambivalence: intense proximity followed by punitive distancing; recognition followed by strategic withdrawal. Intermittence does not necessarily weaken the bond; it may strengthen it. When affirmation is irregular, the other becomes anchored in the expectation of its return.

This reading gives rise to a central proposition: the intermittence of recognition is not a by-product of conflict, but the structural mechanism through which affective dependency is produced. Dependency arises not from direct coercion, but from the unequal administration of access to recognition. This shift from the individual to the relationship situates the phenomenon within a sociological tradition that conceives of domination as a social relation rather than a form of explicit imposition. Within intimate relationships, power does not necessarily depend on physical violence. Its effectiveness lies in its invisibility. Control may present itself as love, sensitivity or poorly managed conflict, making it difficult to identify as a form of domination. The concept of symbolic violence helps to clarify this dynamic. In Bourdieusian terms, power operates through the imposition of schemes of perception that naturalise asymmetry and displace conflict onto the self-interpretation of the subordinated party (Bourdieu, 1999). What counts as affection, what counts as exaggeration and what counts as a personal failing are all redefined. The result

is not merely emotional suffering, but a destabilisation of agency understood as the capacity to interpret one's own experience autonomously.

While Bourdieu enables us to understand the structural internalisation of asymmetry, Norbert Elias' concept of figuration introduces a dynamic dimension that is equally crucial. A figuration is a network of interdependencies in which actors occupy relative positions that vary according to their control over resources and the degree of mutual dependency (Elias, 1982). Power does not reside in an individual as a stable attribute, but in the relational configuration that binds the parties together. In narcissistic abuse, asymmetry is not explained by any subjective essence, but by a progressive imbalance in the structure of dependencies: the party who controls the rhythm of recognition alters the very figuration of the relationship. This perspective makes it possible to understand the cycle not as a psychological trait but as a relational process in motion.

The dimension of legitimacy adds a further explanatory layer. Weber (1922) argued that all forms of domination require some principle of justification. In contemporary intimate relationships, this legitimacy is often constructed through a rhetoric of authenticity and affective exceptionalism. The idealisation phase, including what is referred to in vernacular vocabularies as love bombing, generates this initial legitimacy: it establishes the belief in the uniqueness of the relationship and accumulates symbolic capital that cushions it against subsequent episodes of devaluation. Goffman's theory of the presentation of self (1959) is particularly useful for understanding how this legitimacy is managed in specific situations. Unlike Bourdieu, who emphasises the structural internalisation of domination, Goffman demonstrates how impressions are produced and sustained through the distinction between front-stage and backstage areas. Initial idealisation may be interpreted as an intensification of the front stage, where consistency, availability and exceptionalism are displayed both to the partner and to third parties, while the backstage of the relationship harbours ambivalence and disavowal. This dissociation between public appearance and private dynamics protects the credibility of the abuser and makes it more difficult for the subordinated party to find an audience willing to validate their experience. These dynamics are embedded within broader cultural transformations of intimacy. Giddens (1992) describes the transition towards confluent love, characterised by reflexive and negotiable relationships, while Bauman (2003) emphasises the fragility and reversibility of ties in liquid love. Such transformations do not automatically produce narcissistic abuse, but they enhance its cultural plausibility by normalising ambiguity and shifting responsibility for relational failure onto the individual management of the relationship. Illouz (2007a, 2012) has shown how therapeutic and media culture transforms emotional life into a site of continuous self-evaluation and an object of symbolic consumption. Within this context, affective domination may be mistaken for intensity or complexity, while harm is privatised.

The psychological literature remains relevant insofar as it demonstrates that narcissism functions as a relational system of self-regulation sustained by external recognition (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001; Campbell *et al.*, 2002a). From a sociological perspective, however, the key issue is not clinical diagnosis but interactive function: the other as an infrastructure of self-esteem. In this sense, the 'narcissistic' becomes

observable as a relational pattern: recognition as reward, withdrawal as sanction, proximity as capture and silence as control. A distinctive feature of the phenomenon is that part of its vocabulary has become stabilised within digital communities. Categories such as gaslighting, love bombing and hoovering are employed here not as clinical labels but as empirical indicators of recurrent relational sequences. These communities generate collective intelligibility and contest recognition in contexts where intimate suffering has historically been delegitimised (Fraser, 2009).

Digital environments do not constitute a mere setting; rather, they function as an infrastructure that amplifies these dynamics. Their logics of visibility, persistence and circulation favour intense narratives, condensed categories and the public exposure of private dynamics. The alternation between presence and absence acquires greater impact when inscribed within spaces where the audience is potentially vast and enduring.

Finally, the possibility of exit is not distributed evenly. Gender, social class, age, cultural capital and support networks condition both material and symbolic autonomy. Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control makes it possible to understand these dynamics as a regime sustained by structural inequalities. In this regard, an analytical proposition may be advanced: the lower the degree of structural autonomy, the greater the cost of exit; the greater the cost of exit, the more effective the relational apparatus becomes. Taken together, narcissistic abuse may thus be conceptualised as a contemporary form of affective domination organised around intermittence, ambivalence and the monopoly of meaning. It constitutes a relational architecture that articulates forms of interaction, dynamic configurations of dependency and affective legitimacy. Understanding it requires shifting the analytical focus away from individual diagnosis and towards the social structure of the relationship, as well as towards specific transformations in contemporary intimacy: the normalisation of ambiguity, the individualisation of relational failure and the digital amplification of affective exposure.

3. Methodology

3.1. Objective and Design Rationale

This study examines how a public grammar of so-called 'narcissistic abuse' is constructed and stabilised within digital environments. This grammar is understood as a relatively coherent repertoire of concepts, metaphors and narrative sequences through which experiences of relational harm are described, interpreted and communicated. The aim is not to estimate prevalence, establish causal relationships or assess individual clinical profiles. Rather, the objective is to map the vocabulary currently in circulation, identify recurring popular definitions and examine how these are articulated within a widely shared narrative sequence that organises the phenomenon into four functional stages: idealisation, devaluation, discard and re-engagement.

The analysis is situated strictly at the discursive level. The focus is on identifying which categories are employed, how they are defined, how they are embedded within relational sequences and under what forms of authority they are presented as intelligible and recognisable within the digital public sphere. The unit of analysis is neither the individual case nor the singular biographical experience, but rather the relational pattern as narrated and stabilised through recurring semantic repertoires.

3.2. Methodological Approach

The study adopts a digital ethnographic design, defined here as the systematic observation of discursive practices produced on digital platforms, with particular regard to their situated, public and everyday character. Platforms are not treated merely as channels of dissemination but as sites of semantic production in which meanings are negotiated, definitions are consolidated and interpretive frameworks for relational harm are articulated.

The study also adopts a situated knowledge perspective, which requires the explicit acknowledgement of the conditions under which the corpus was produced, the selection criteria employed and the analytical decisions involved. This position does not replace methodological rigour; rather, it relocates it to the transparency of the research process and the explicit delimitation of the object of study. The analytical strategy takes the form of a discursive mapping exercise aimed at examining how a phenomenon becomes intelligible through language, which categories define its boundaries, which sequences structure it and which positions are assigned to the actors involved. The guiding question of the study is which concepts are used on social media to describe narcissistic abuse and how these concepts are organised into a recurrent relational cycle.

3.3. Corpus Construction and Digital Fieldwork

The corpus was constructed from publicly available material drawn from Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, platforms that play a central role in contemporary emotional and therapeutic discourse. Content published between January and April 2025 was analysed. Fieldwork consisted of the systematic and repeated monitoring of the selected profiles throughout the observation period, including the regular review of new posts, videos, descriptions and associated hashtags, as well as comments where these contributed definitional content or relevant conceptual reformulations. This process made it possible to document the recurrence of specific terms, their relative definitional stability, their contextual variations and their typical location within the narrative cycle outlined above. The sample comprised fourteen Spanish- and English-language educational profiles that systematically address dynamics of relational abuse. During the period under consideration, several hundred publicly available items produced by these profiles were recorded. From this broader corpus, an in-depth analysis was conducted of a subset of conceptually autonomous items, that is, units that explicitly and independently presented a definition, mechanism or stage of the cycle, until conceptual saturation was reached. Comments were incorporated only when they introduced explicit definitions or terminological clarifications relevant to the stabilisation of the repertoire. It should nevertheless be noted that a substantially larger number of comments were reviewed during the course of the analysis.

3.4. Selection Criteria

Sampling was purposive and theoretically driven. Its aim is not to provide a statistically representative account of individual experiences, but rather to identify relatively stabilised conceptual repertoires that circulate widely within the digital spaces under analysis. Profiles were selected on the basis of their sustained presence throughout the observation period, their recurrent production of explanatory content concerning dynamics of relational abuse beyond isolated personal accounts, and the recognisable circulation of categories replicated across accounts and communities. The decision to delimit the corpus to a defined set of profiles reflects the need to maintain internal coherence and analytical consistency.

Table 1
Profiles included in the analysed corpus

Profile	Main platform	Predominant language	Approximate volume reviewed (period)
@carolgonzalez_psicologa	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@psico.maxi	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@psicopsiquis	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@pinuelinaki	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@psicopatascotidianos	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@instintocriminal.science	YouTube	Spanish	30+
@orudiz	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@giapelleterapeuta	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@drramani	YouTube	English	60+
@therapyjeff	TikTok	English	60+
@shannonthomas	Instagram	English	60+
@narcissist_survivor	Instagram	English	60+
@selftalk	TikTok	English	60+
@apartados8km	Instagram	Spanish	30+

Source: own research.

The volume is presented as a descriptive estimate corresponding to the observation period. The figures do not constitute an exhaustive count, as content availability may vary according to format, including temporary stories, profile modifications and archiving practices.

3.5. Representativeness and Scope

Representativeness is not conceived in population terms but rather in discursive or semantic terms. The corpus is considered representative insofar as it captures an identifiable discursive current characterised by the recurrence of categories, the relative stability of popular definitions and narrative convergence across platforms and formats. The validity of the analysis rests upon conceptual recurrence and the internal coherence of the repertoire, rather than upon the exhaustive quantification of content or its statistical distribution.

3.6. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted using critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2006) with a thematic-interpretative orientation. In an initial phase, open coding was undertaken to identify recurrent terms, metaphors, typical scenarios and narrative sequences associated with the relational cycle. In a second phase, the codes were grouped according to their relational function and their position within the four stages described above. Finally, a systematic comparison across platforms was conducted until a coherent interpretative framework had been established. Saturation was assessed in conceptual terms. It was considered to have been reached when the incorporation of additional items yielded no substantively new categories and did not alter existing definitions or functions within the cycle, but merely reproduced descriptive variations of the same repertoire. In the analysis section, concepts are accompanied by textual examples identified by platform and content type in order to ensure the traceability of discursive usage.

3.7. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

All material analysed was drawn from publicly accessible sources available without subscription or membership of closed communities. No private messages or restricted spaces were accessed. Where comment excerpts are cited, any information that could permit the direct identification of individual users has been omitted and sensitive information has not been reproduced. The design does not permit inferences regarding prevalence, nor does it ensure sociocultural diversity in a statistical sense. Nor does it incorporate triangulation through in-depth interviews or observation within closed settings, which limits the possibility of comparing public discourse with situated experiences beyond the digital environment. These limitations define the scope of the study, which is oriented towards conceptual mapping and the analysis of a specific discursive current rather than the quantitative measurement of the phenomenon or the clinical verification of individual cases. In this regard, concepts such as coercive control are employed as interpretative frameworks for understanding the relational regime and the conditions governing exit from it, rather than as instruments for classifying cases or deriving legal typologies.

4. Analysis: Mapping the Cycle of Narcissistic Abuse in Intimate Relationships

The analysis reconstructs the cycle of so-called narcissistic abuse as a relational architecture organised around four phases: idealisation (love bombing), devaluation, discard and re-engagement (hoovering). These phases are described by combining their most widely used designation with their function within the cycle: capture, disorientation and control of meaning, relational erasure and the reappropriation of access. They do not constitute discrete episodes or a rigidly linear sequence, but rather positions within a dynamic apparatus whose repetition produces affective dependency, interpretative erosion and asymmetries of power.

The terms circulating on social media are treated here as vernacular categories. They are not employed as clinical labels or psychological typologies but as relatively stabilised semantic repertoires that condense typical scenarios, popular definitions and narrative regularities. Their analytical value lies in the fact that they make it possible to observe how a specific form of relational harm becomes publicly intelligible and how the experience of the relationship is organised through a sequential narrative framework. To avoid a merely paraphrastic account, each mechanism is illustrated through textual excerpts drawn from the corpus analysed. These excerpts are identified by platform, content type (for example, carousel post, short-form video or livestream) and publication date. Where relevant to understanding the discursive context, a general characterisation of the profile is also provided (educational or therapeutic; Spanish-speaking or Anglophone). This form of identification ensures the traceability of the empirical material without shifting the analytical focus towards the individual attribution of specific accounts.

4.1. Idealisation and Love Bombing: Capture through the Intensification of Recognition

Across all fourteen profiles analysed, the initial phase of the cycle is referred to with remarkable consistency as love bombing. This convergence is not merely terminological: popular definitions reproduce highly similar formulations in both Spanish and English, describing it as ‘extreme intensity at the beginning’, ‘rapid promises about the future’ or ‘a connection that feels too perfect to be real’. In a carousel post published by a Spanish-language educational profile on Instagram (March 2025), love bombing was defined as ‘making you feel like the most special person in the world within a matter of days’. Similarly, a video published by an Anglophone therapeutic profile on YouTube (February 2025) described it as ‘an avalanche of attention and promises that leaves you no time to think’. This definitional consistency across platforms makes it possible to treat the term not as a stylistic label but as a relatively consolidated narrative category within the digital grammar of relational abuse.

In vernacular accounts, love bombing is presented not as simple emotional enthusiasm but as an early saturation of recognition, attention and promises. The expressions most frequently encountered in the corpus – ‘everything happened so quickly’, ‘they made me

feel unique', 'no one had ever understood me like that', 'they seemed perfect' – share a recognisable structure: exceptionalism, acceleration and exclusivity. The relationship does not emerge gradually; it is declared extraordinary from the outset. The decisive structural feature is not intensity in itself but its concentrated and premature administration. The relationship begins already invested with a narrative of uniqueness and destiny. Sociologically, this phase may be interpreted as a form of capture through an excess of meaning: the promise precedes verification. Before the relationship has accumulated sufficient shared experience, it has already been morally legitimised as special and irreplaceable (Herman, 1992).

From the perspective of Simmel's formal sociology (2002), this intensification may be understood as a particular organisation of proximity and distance. Proximity is not constructed progressively but rather through a sudden fusion that eliminates the reflective distance necessary to evaluate the relationship. When the corpus describes prematurely anticipated milestones ('we were talking about living together after a week', 'they told me I was the love of their life within days'), what is observed is not simply emotional speed but a compression of the social time required for mutual acquaintance. This acceleration reduces opportunities for external comparison and limits the capacity of third parties to intervene as moderating influences.

Such temporal compression is systematically referred to as fast-forwarding or 'relationship acceleration'. In a short-form video published by an Anglophone TikTok profile (January 2025), it was stated that 'if they promise marriage in the first week, it's not romance, it's strategic speed'. The definitions collected consistently emphasise that the issue is not merely 'moving too fast', but rather the premature advancement of symbolic stages – commitment, shared life projects and total intimacy – before a sufficient relational foundation exists to sustain them. Another recurrent mechanism is mirroring, defined throughout the corpus as 'being exactly like you' or 'having the same wounds as you'. In a post published by a Spanish-language therapeutic profile on Instagram (April 2025), followers were warned that 'when someone agrees with you about everything from the very first moment, it's not magical compatibility, it's calculated reflection'. From a relational perspective, this technique produces performative similarity: if the other appears as a reflection of oneself, trust becomes automatic and doubt comes to be perceived as unnecessary.

The phenomenon commonly referred to as future faking – intensive promises about the future – serves a similar function. In the materials analysed, it is defined as 'making long-term plans with no genuine intention of fulfilling them' or 'using the future to secure the present'. The future functions as a moral guarantee for present investment. The expectation of future stability mitigates early signs of ambivalence. The relationship becomes anchored to a promise that has not yet been tested. A particularly revealing statement on this issue, found in the comments accompanying one of the posts analysed, reads as follows: 'We'd only been together for a month and we already knew the names of our children, the dog we were going to adopt and where we were going to get married. I believed every word of it, and it seemed as though he did too.'

Another frequently recurring mechanism is what is referred to as trauma dumping: the early disclosure of painful experiences as a means of accelerating intimacy. During a livestream hosted by an educational profile on YouTube (March 2025), it was noted that ‘sharing deep trauma on a first date can create artificial intimacy’. Analytically, the issue is not to question the authenticity of the suffering being disclosed but to examine its relational function: activating care, accelerating trust and generating an implicit moral obligation. These mechanisms – acceleration, mirroring, future projection and strategic vulnerability – converge in producing the same effect: the establishment of an initial certainty. The person involved does not merely feel desired, but recognised in an exceptional way. In Bourdieusian terms (Bourdieu, 1999), this can be seen as a form of symbolic power that operates through privilege rather than coercion. Domination begins as distinction. Goffman’s theory of the presentation of self (1959) helps to refine this point further. In the materials analysed, idealisation is accompanied by performative consistency: constant attention, immediate availability and visible demonstrations of care, including within public digital spaces. This coherence creates a robust façade that establishes a favourable definition of the situation. The initial impression functions as an interpretative framework through which subsequent phases are understood. When contradictions emerge, they tend to be interpreted as temporary deviations from an originally perfect essence rather than as indications of an underlying structural pattern. The most consequential effect of this phase is not the experience of falling in love but the establishment of a narrative of inevitability. The relationship ceases to be a contingent interaction and becomes a moral entity that demands coherence and loyalty. In Simmelian terms, a symbolic third party emerges that requires fidelity to the story that has already been told.

In summary, the convergence of these categories across platforms reveals not only a shared vocabulary but also a recurrent structural sequence: accelerated intensity, the promise of uniqueness and the moral reinforcement of the relationship. This early sacralisation constitutes the condition of possibility for the next phase. Capture does not consist merely in initiating the relationship, but in consolidating its legitimacy before experience has had the opportunity to test it. Once that legitimacy has been established, the subsequent withdrawal of recognition does not immediately dissolve the relationship; rather, it places it under strain. It is this structured tension that marks the threshold of devaluation.

4.2. Devaluation: Disorientation and the Monopoly of Meaning

If idealisation establishes an initial certainty, devaluation introduces a progressive instability that reconfigures the relationship without formally declaring its transformation. In the corpus analysed, this transition rarely appears as an explicit rupture. Rather, it is described as a shift that is difficult to date: ‘I don’t know when things started to change’, ‘suddenly they weren’t the same person anymore’, ‘something broke, but I didn’t know what it was’ (Spanish-language educational profile, Instagram, carousel post, February 2025). The recurrence of this inability to identify a precise turning point is significant: devaluation does not erupt; it infiltrates.

The semantic core of this phase is organised around the distortion of reality and the unilateral redistribution of interpretative authority. The most frequently recurring term is

gaslighting. In an English-language educational video (YouTube, February 2025), it is defined as ‘systematically making someone question their memory, perception or sanity until they rely on you to define reality’. Similarly, a Spanish-language post (Instagram, March 2025) states: ‘It’s not arguing; it’s making you believe you’re crazy for feeling what you feel.’ In both cases, the vernacular definition extends beyond deception itself and emphasises its cumulative effect on judgement and self-trust.

From the perspective of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1999), this mechanism operates not only through the denial of facts but through the imposition of legitimate frameworks of interpretation. Conflict ceases to be located in the behaviour of the abuser and is instead displaced onto the supposed hypersensitivity, instability or exaggeration of the victim. Doubt becomes internalised. Interpretative agency is progressively eroded.

This process is frequently accompanied by what is referred to as the silent treatment or stonewalling. In a short TikTok video (Anglophone profile, January 2025), it is described as ‘punishing you with silence when you ask for accountability’. A Spanish-language Instagram carousel (April 2025) formulates the same idea in similar terms: ‘You tell them that something has hurt you, and they disappear. And in the end, you’re the one apologising.’ The narrative structure is remarkably stable: expression of a boundary → communicative withdrawal → confusion → self-attribution of blame. Silence functions as a relational sanction and reorganises the temporal rhythm of the relationship. The party who controls the reopening of communication controls the affective tempo of the bond. Another recurrent theme is intermittent reinforcement. During a YouTube livestream (March 2025), an English-language therapeutic profile described it as ‘the emotional slot machine effect: just when you’re ready to leave, they become who they were at the beginning’. The slot machine metaphor, repeated across several profiles, is not incidental. Irregular rewards do not extinguish investment; they intensify it. The alternation between emotional coldness and the selective return of affection generates a constant state of anticipation and makes disengagement more difficult. This phase also features categories such as breadcrumbing and triangulation. In an Instagram post (Spanish-language profile, March 2025), breadcrumbing is defined as ‘giving you just enough crumbs to keep you from leaving, but never enough to build anything stable’. Triangulation, meanwhile, is described in a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, April 2025) as ‘introducing real or imagined rivals to keep you competing for validation’. Both practices serve a common function: to reintroduce symbolic competition and transform recognition into a scarce resource.

What is analytically significant is not the diversity of terminology but the convergence of function. Distortion, withdrawal, alternation and comparison do not appear as isolated behaviours but as elements within a structured sequence. Idealisation generated certainty; devaluation introduces managed uncertainty. Drawing on Elias’ concept of figuration (1982), it may be argued that the configuration of interdependencies gradually shifts, with one party increasingly concentrating control over meaning and affective access. Across the accounts analysed, the subjective effects are described with notable consistency: ‘I no longer trusted my own memory’, ‘I felt small’, ‘everything was my fault’ (Spanish-language educational profile, Instagram, April 2025). What is at stake is not simply sadness or interpersonal conflict but the erosion of the capacity

for self-affirmation. The relationship ceases to function as a space of mutual recognition and becomes a regime of conditional validation. At this stage, the difficulty of leaving cannot be understood solely in psychological terms. Various testimonies refer to economic dependency, isolation or fear of losing shared social networks as factors that increase the costs of confrontation and separation (YouTube, Spanish-language educational video, March 2025). The concept of coercive control (Stark, 2007) helps to explain how the accumulation of relational tactics, even in the absence of explicit physical violence, can progressively restrict autonomy.

The structural function of devaluation within the cycle is clear: to weaken the victim's interpretative capacity and displace authority over the meaning of the relationship. Once that axis has been eroded, discard no longer appears as an arbitrary rupture. It becomes plausible. And that plausibility is itself the outcome of a prior reorganisation of meaning.

4.3. Discard: Relational Erasure and Control of the Narrative

Across the profiles analysed, the discard phase is not described as a simple breakup but as an experience of erasure. The formulations are remarkably consistent: 'They disappeared without saying anything', 'they erased me from their life', 'they acted as if nothing had ever happened', 'I felt as though I had ceased to exist' (Spanish-language educational profile, Instagram, carousel post, March 2025). The recurrence of these expressions points not merely to emotional intensity but to a specific mode of relational termination characterised by the retrospective denial of the relationship's existence.

Unlike a reciprocal separation, in which a shared history is acknowledged and some form of closure established, discard is narrated as a form of symbolic dispossession. In an English-language educational video (YouTube, February 2025), discard is defined as 'cutting someone off in a way that erases the shared history and denies their emotional reality'. The definition emphasises not only the ending itself, but the erasure of the past. What is lost is not merely continuity but the legitimacy of the relationship as a shared experience.

From a sociological perspective, this may be conceptualised as relational erasure. It entails not only the withdrawal of affective access but also the denial of the other as a legitimate interlocutor in the shared history. The relationship ceases to be a common memory and becomes unilaterally rewritten. In Simmelian terms, the social form of rupture no longer produces mutual individuation, but pure asymmetry: one party redefines the meaning of the relationship, while the other is denied any equivalent capacity to determine its significance. Among the most recurrent vernacular categories is ghosting. In a short TikTok video (Anglophone profile, January 2025), it is defined as 'ending a relationship by disappearing and blocking all access without explanation'. A Spanish-language Instagram post (April 2025) expresses the same idea in similar terms: 'Blocked, silence, and no final conversation. That isn't closure; it's evaporation.' The constant element is the absence of an explanatory framework. The victim is left suspended in a state of narrative uncertainty, lacking a coherent account through which the ending can be understood and processed. What is termed quiet discard appears as a more gradual variant. In a YouTube livestream

(Spanish-language profile, March 2025), it is described as ‘slowly withdrawing until the relationship is empty, without ever naming what is happening’. The scenarios evoked – ‘fewer and fewer messages’, ‘less presence’, ‘more distance without any conversation’ – make it difficult to identify the precise moment of ending. Closure becomes blurred and, with it, the possibility of processing it symbolically.

Another recurrent modality is replacement, understood as the rapid and visible introduction of a new partner. In an English-language educational video (YouTube, April 2025), it is stated that: ‘They move on in days as if you were interchangeable.’ On Instagram (Spanish-language profile, March 2025), the same idea is expressed as: ‘A week later they were already in another public relationship.’ Here, the harm derives not solely from the breakup itself but from the public display of replaceability. The initial promise of uniqueness is contradicted by the speed of replacement. The wound is not merely one of loss but of discovering one’s fungibility. This public dimension of discard is amplified through strategies of narrative control referred to as character assassination. In an Instagram carousel (Spanish-language profile, February 2025), followers are warned: ‘Before you can tell your side of the story, they’ve already told everyone that you’re the unstable one.’ Similarly, a TikTok video (Anglophone profile, March 2025) defines the practice as ‘preemptively framing you as the problem to protect their image’. Through the lens of Goffman’s theory of the presentation of self (1959), this may be understood as the anticipatory management of the social façade: the situation is publicly defined before the other party has the opportunity to intervene. The asymmetry lies not only in the breakup itself but in the audience before whom it is narrated.

In some cases, the corpus also refers to what is termed discard rage: an outburst of contempt or aggression triggered when the victim seeks explanations. In a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, March 2025), it is described as ‘anger triggered by losing control over the narrative’. Such reactions do not contradict the logic of erasure; they reinforce it. The implicit message is that the other party loses not only the relationship but also the right to question its ending. The sequence observed throughout the corpus is far from random. Abrupt or gradual withdrawal, retrospective denial, the public display of replacement and the pre-emptive control of the narrative together constitute a coherent pattern. Discard is not simply the end of the relationship; it is the unilateral reconfiguration of its meaning.

A qualification is nevertheless necessary, as it introduces a degree of analytical tension. Not every abrupt ending constitutes discard in this sense. The distinction, as suggested by the materials analysed, lies in the combination of denying the past and monopolising the narrative. When a breakup is accompanied by acknowledgement of the shared history and the possibility of closure, the pattern described in digital discourse does not categorise it as discard. The category becomes applicable when the ending entails both erasure and delegitimation (Fricker, 2007). The subjective effect most consistently reported in the testimonies is narrative rupture: ‘I don’t know whether it was real’, ‘it was all a lie’, ‘I feel as though I imagined the relationship’ (Spanish-language profile, Instagram, April 2025). What is at stake is not merely affective grief but the destabilisation of the past as a legitimate source of meaning. The victim loses not only another person but also the interpretative coherence of their lived experience.

This narrative void is crucial for the next phase. Hoovering does not reappear on neutral ground but upon a subjectivity weakened by erasure and by the inability to bring the relationship to a close on its own terms. The cycle advances not through the accumulation of episodes but through the progressive reorganisation of meaning.

4.4. Hoovering: Reappropriation of Access and Reactivation of the Cycle

If discard produces erasure and symbolic dispossession, hoovering introduces an inverse yet complementary operation: the reappropriation of relational access without the restoration of reciprocity. Across the profiles analysed, this phase is consistently described as an unexpected reappearance following a period of silence. The formulations are strikingly similar: ‘Just when I was starting to get over it, they came back’, ‘they messaged me as if nothing had happened’, ‘they reappeared with a simple “How are you?”’ (Spanish-language educational profile, Instagram, March 2025). The scenario is not narrated as an exception but as a recognisable pattern within the cycle.

The term hoovering, derived from the verb ‘to Hoover’, is defined in the educational materials as an attempt to ‘suck’ the victim back into the relational dynamic. In a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, February 2025), it is explained as follows: ‘Hoovering is about pulling you back in without addressing the harm.’ The definition highlights a constant feature: the reopening of the channel of communication without any acknowledgement of the preceding harm. A short TikTok video (Anglophone profile, March 2025) expresses the same idea in similar terms: ‘It’s not reconciliation. It’s checking if you’re still available.’ The emphasis here is not on emotion, but on availability. The gesture functions as a test of continued access.

The discursive mapping reveals that, although the term is widely shared, its manifestations diversify into relatively stable subcategories. An Instagram carousel (Spanish-language profile, April 2025) explicitly distinguishes several forms: a friendly reappearance (‘I just wanted to see how you’re doing’), a vague apology lacking any specific acknowledgement of harm, an appeal to personal crisis (‘I’m going through a difficult time’), the activation of shared memories or the use of sexual suggestion as a route to re-engagement. An English-language educational video (YouTube, March 2025) summarises this diversity as ‘different doors to re-entry, same dynamic of control’. Despite their formal differences, all these modalities share a common structural function: reopening the relationship without assuming responsibility for the previous phase. Reopening does not imply repair; it implies reactivation.

A specific form of hoovering that appears recurrently throughout the corpus, although under less uniform terminology, involves the reactivation of the cycle through third parties, referred to within the vernacular grammar as flying monkeys. Across the profiles analysed, this figure is described as the use of friends, relatives, mutual contacts or even new partners to re-establish relational access without direct exposure on the part of the abuser. A Spanish-language educational carousel (Instagram, March 2025) illustrates the practice through typical scenarios: ‘A friend of theirs messaged me to say they were in a terrible state’, ‘their mother called and asked me to respond to them’, ‘a mu-

tual friend told me they wanted to talk'. In a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, April 2025), the tactic is defined as 'outsourcing contact and pressure: sending someone else to test your boundaries and pull you back in'. In every case, the operation is more than merely communicative. It constitutes a form of soft coercive mediation that seeks to shift the conflict from the relationship itself to the surrounding network, transforming the decision to maintain no contact into a question of image, empathy or group loyalty.

From a relational perspective, flying monkeys fulfil a structural function: they reinstate asymmetry through the colonisation of the social environment as an infrastructure of re-engagement. Hoovering thus ceases to operate solely through the reappearance of the abuser and becomes a distributed reappropriation of access. Availability is tested, information is gathered through informal surveillance, pressure is exerted through moral appeals ('they're suffering', 'don't be cruel') and the narrative is reordered ('they say you misunderstood them'). Several sources associate this mediation with two complementary effects. On the one hand, it generates a form of social proof that normalises return ('everyone thinks you should talk to them'). On the other, it establishes a defensive reputational framework that recasts the victim's resistance as a failing (Instagram, April 2025). From the perspective of Elias' concept of figuration, the structure of inter-dependence ceases to be dyadic and instead becomes configured as a network of dependencies and alliances. Power is exercised not only through alternating presence and absence but also through the mobilisation of intermediaries who sustain the reopening of the channel without acknowledging the harm or restoring reciprocity.

What matters most is not the literal content of the message but its position within the cycle. Hoovering operates upon the narrative void left by discard. Following the abrupt interruption of the relationship and the retrospective denial of its significance, the victim is left with an unfinished story. In that context, reappearance may be interpreted as an opportunity for explanation or closure. In a testimony collected on Instagram (Spanish-language profile, March 2025), one individual states: 'I thought they were finally going to explain what had happened. I just wanted to understand.' The desire for meaning precedes the reopening of the relationship. From a sociological perspective, this phase illustrates particularly clearly that power resides not exclusively in presence or absence but in the capacity to alternate between them. The party who controls when they disappear and when they return also controls the temporality of the relationship. Alternation itself becomes a structural resource. Goffman's theory of the presentation of self (1959) further illuminates this dynamic. In several of the materials analysed, reappearance occurs through a tacit redefinition of the situation: contact is resumed as though no rupture had taken place, as though the intervening period carried no moral weight. A TikTok video (Anglophone profile, April 2025) illustrates this with the message 'Hey stranger :)', sent after months of silence. The banality of the gesture redirects attention to the immediate present and suspends the past without processing it. The situation is redefined without any acknowledgement of the preceding conflict. A further analytical qualification is necessary. Not every reappearance following a breakup constitutes hoovering. Within the corpus, the category becomes applicable when the reopening reproduces the pre-existing asymmetry: absence of accountability, minimisation of harm and an implicit expectation of continued availability. When

reappearance includes explicit acknowledgement of what occurred and a symmetrical negotiation of a possible return, the profiles themselves do not classify it as hoovering. The distinction lies not in returning, but in how one returns.

In numerous accounts, hoovering does not necessarily seek lasting stability. Its function may simply be to reaffirm power. In a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, March 2025), it is stated that: ‘Sometimes it’s just about proving they still can.’ Reappearance functions as a reminder that access remains controllable and available for reactivation. In this sense, re-engagement does not contradict discard; it completes it. When hoovering succeeds, it may generate a brief and selective re-idealisation. An Instagram carousel (Spanish-language profile, April 2025) describes the process as follows: ‘They became attentive, affectionate, the person they used to be ... but only for a few days.’ This mini-idealisation does not reproduce the intensity of the initial phase, but it reactivates its underlying logic in condensed form. When it fails, it may give way to renewed punitive silences or an intensification of hostility.

Once again, the convergence of these descriptions across platforms confirms that hoovering is not an isolated category but the mechanism that ensures the cyclical reproduction of the process. Capture, disorientation, erasure and reappropriation are not independent episodes but functional moments within the same relational architecture. The cycle thus emerges as a structured relational pattern. The alternation between presence and absence, recognition and withdrawal, certainty and doubt produces a form of affective domination that operates without explicit coercion, yet exerts cumulative effects on interpretative autonomy and the capacity to leave. Power is exercised not only through direct control but through the strategic management of access to the relationship and to meaning itself.

5. Discussion

The set of concepts analysed does not constitute a scattered inventory of digital labels, but rather an integrated relational framework. Idealisation, devaluation, discard and re-engagement do not appear in the corpus as arbitrary moments but as a functional sequence that provides a coherent account of relational harm. The contribution of this article does not lie in validating a vernacular taxonomy but in demonstrating how this repertoire is produced, circulated and stabilised within digital environments such that it functions as a public architecture for interpreting intimate relationships.

The central analytical shift has been to move away from the search for the individual ‘narcissistic trait’ and towards an examination of the social form of the relationship. This shift is not merely terminological. It entails questioning a dominant tendency within the clinical literature to locate the problem in the deviant personality of the abuser. The corpus analysed suggests something different: what becomes stabilised is not so much a psychological profile as a relational sequence. The focus shifts from who the individual is to how the relationship is organised. This analytical reorientation does not deny the relevance of individual variables, but relocates explanation to the level of relational structure.

From the perspective of Simmel's formal sociology, love is not a private emotion but a form of interaction shaped by structural tensions between proximity and distance, recognition and autonomy. The cycle mapped in this study may be understood as an abusive reorganisation of those tensions. Idealisation intensifies proximity to the point of producing fusion and premature certainty; devaluation introduces ambivalence and the conditionality of recognition; discard unilaterally redefines the boundaries of the relationship; and re-engagement reactivates oscillation and consolidates dependency. What is altered is not affective intensity itself, but relational symmetry.

In this sense, the core of the phenomenon lies not in a deviant personality but in a sustained asymmetry in the administration of recognition. Domination operates not through overt prohibition but through the unequal distribution of meaning. Here, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence proves particularly illuminating: gaslighting inflicts harm not merely through the denial of facts but through the imposition of frameworks that transfer interpretative authority to one of the actors. The victim comes to doubt not only the relationship, but their own capacity for judgement. The violence proves effective precisely because it presents itself as correction, rationality or superior sensitivity.

Read through a Goffmanian lens, the initial phase of the cycle reveals the performative dimension of the process. Idealisation functions as an intensive production of façade: consistency, availability and exceptionalism are displayed as moral credentials that generate trust and accelerate commitment. The symbolic capital accumulated during this phase subsequently cushions the impact of devaluation. Domination begins in the guise of privilege: being chosen, understood or rescued. This initial investment makes it more costly to question the relationship once ambivalence begins to emerge.

At the same time, the analysis allows for a qualification that complicates this interpretation. Not all elements of the cycle appear with the same intensity or in the same sequence across all the materials analysed. In some cases, the discard phase takes the form of gradual erosion rather than abrupt erasure; in others, hovering does not fully reactivate the cycle. This suggests that the sequence should not be understood as a rigid script, but rather as an ideal-typical pattern. Its analytical value lies in its capacity to organise recurring regularities, not in providing an exhaustive description of every empirical case. Recognising this variability prevents the category from becoming a closed or dogmatic framework.

Nor can the sequence be understood independently of contemporary transformations in intimacy. The transition towards more contingent, reflexive and individualised relationships has expanded the cultural legitimacy of ambiguity and the reversibility of commitment. Without positing simple causal relationships, one may suggest that these conditions facilitate the circulation and normalisation of practices such as withdrawal without closure, rapid replacement and affective intermittence. Far from serving merely as a backdrop, digital technologies amplify these dynamics. They intensify visibility, accelerate alternation and multiply micro-signals of inclusion and exclusion. Silence leaves traces; replacement becomes publicly visible; the reappropriation of access can be enacted through a minimal message. The technical infrastructure facilitates the intermittent administration of recognition.

One of the study's most significant findings is that the intelligibility of the phenomenon has not been produced exclusively within the academic field. Digital communities have stabilised a vocabulary that, irrespective of its clinical status, describes a recurrent relational sequence with remarkable consistency. These categories function as semantic technologies: they enable the identification of patterns, the stabilisation of narratives and the contestation of the trivialisation of affective harm when it leaves no physical trace. This gives rise to an important epistemic reversal: collective experience precedes academic formalisation. Knowledge does not flow exclusively from experts to the public; it also moves in the opposite direction. However, this digital production of intelligibility is not without risks. The rapid circulation of categories can encourage oversimplified interpretations and overgeneralisations. The corpus itself reveals expansive uses of the term 'narcissist' to describe relational conflicts that do not necessarily reproduce the full cycle. This internal tension forms part of the phenomenon itself: the same vocabulary that enables experiences to be named may also rigidify interpretation. The sociological task is not simply to adopt these categories but to analyse them critically as social forms of classification. The analysis also demonstrates that vulnerability to the cycle is not distributed evenly. The capacity to confront or leave the relationship is conditioned by structural resources, including economic dependency, social isolation, cultural capital and support networks. At this point, the concept of coercive control helps to explain how the accumulation of relational tactics can progressively restrict autonomy even in the absence of physical violence. The phenomenon is neither universal nor identical across all contexts; rather, it is mediated by specific social positions.

It is worth emphasising with conceptual precision that this study has neither estimated prevalence nor inferred psychological causality. Its contribution is descriptive and analytical in nature. It has demonstrated how a particular grammar is constituted and how that grammar organises a coherent relational architecture. When reference is made to the difficulty of naming these experiences, this does not denote an abstract epistemological problem, but rather a historically rooted semantic deficit surrounding forms of non-physical affective violence. The emergence of a stable repertoire suggests that this deficit is being partially addressed within the digital public sphere. The value of the analysis therefore lies in a dual translation: transforming an experiential vocabulary into a theoretical object while simultaneously situating it within a broader framework of social theory concerning power and recognition. In short, the article neither uncritically legitimises the digital repertoire nor dismisses it as a passing trend. Instead, it treats it as a sociological phenomenon: a set of categories that emerges, circulates, becomes consolidated and reshapes the collective understanding of intimate harm. If the cycle described is difficult to interrupt, this is not solely because of its emotional intensity, but because it reorganises recognition, temporality and meaning. And when recognition is administered asymmetrically, identity itself becomes vulnerable. So-called 'narcissistic abuse' may therefore be understood as the contemporary designation for a specific form of intimate domination grounded in the strategic alternation of proximity and withdrawal, whose power resides not in visible force but in the asymmetrical management of the meaning of the relationship.

6. Conclusions

This article has shown that what is referred to within digital spaces as ‘narcissistic abuse’ can be understood as the public stabilisation of a specific relational form. The sequence of idealisation, devaluation, discard and re-engagement does not appear in the corpus as a dispersed collection of behaviours but as a recognisable and recurrent relational architecture. Its coherence derives not from diagnostic manuals but from the narrative convergence observed across different platforms and discursive contexts. The principal contribution of the study has been to reformulate the object of analysis. Rather than locating the problem in an individual trait, the study has shifted analytical attention towards the social form of the relationship. What is organised within the cycle is not simply an intense emotional dynamic but an asymmetrical administration of recognition, access and interpretative authority. Domination is exercised through the strategic regulation of proximity and withdrawal, producing cumulative effects on the agency and narrative stability of the person occupying the subordinate position.

This analytical shift broadens the sociological study of violence within intimate relationships to encompass forms that leave no physical trace and do not fit neatly within conventional legal typologies, yet nevertheless produce a sustained erosion of autonomy. The study makes it possible to understand intermittence as a structural mechanism of dependency, gaslighting as a reorganisation of legitimate interpretative frameworks, discard as the symbolic dispossession of a shared past and re-engagement as the reappropriation of relational access. Read sociologically, these categories describe transformations in the structure of the relationship rather than isolated psychological traits. Methodologically, the study adopts a conception of semantic rather than statistical representativeness. It neither estimates prevalence nor infers clinical causality. Instead, it maps an identifiable discursive current characterised by the stability of its categories and the recurrence of its explanatory sequence. This delimitation defines the scope of the study with precision: to describe how the public intelligibility of relational harm is produced and how this reshapes contemporary understandings of love, conflict and relationship dissolution.

The analysis also points to a significant epistemic transformation. Part of the knowledge surrounding forms of non-physical affective violence is being generated within hybrid spaces where lived experience, therapeutic discourse and media circulation intersect. Digital categories do not replace expert knowledge, but neither can they be dismissed as a passing trend. They function as technologies of naming that stabilise previously fragmented experiences and situate them within shared interpretative frameworks. Finally, the effectiveness of the cycle described cannot be separated from broader structural conditions: the precarisation of recognition, the increasing contingency of intimate relationships and the digital amplification of alternations between presence and absence. The form of affective domination analysed here finds in the contemporary cultural and technological infrastructure an environment that facilitates its visibility, narratability and, in certain cases, its reproduction.

In sum, the contribution of this study lies in transforming an experience frequently lived as private confusion into an analysable social form. By shifting the analytical focus from the individual to the relational architecture itself, the article invites us to consider intimacy as a domain in which power assumes subtle yet structured forms. Making that structure visible does not exhaust the phenomenon, but it opens a conceptual space from which it can be discussed, problematised and, potentially, transformed.

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ARTICLE/ARTÍCULO

Existential Loneliness in Residential Care Homes for Older Adults: A Qualitative Exploration of Lived Experiences

Soledad existencial en residencias de personas mayores: una mirada cualitativa a las experiencias vitales

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand existential loneliness among people living in residential care homes for older adults through an exploration of their lived experiences. Using a deductive approach – based on a topic guide developed a priori – and a reflexive thematic analysis, 34 semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents of publicly managed care homes in Seville to explore their biographical narratives in depth. Existential loneliness emerged as a recurring feature of everyday life and was linked to factors such as awareness of the proximity of death, the normalisation of the end of life, the absence of a sense of future purpose, the experience of vicarious happiness through family relationships and the existential void left by the loss of significant others. Enhancing the emotional and existential well-being of people living in residential care settings requires fostering meaningful relationships and experiences both within and beyond the care home.

KEYWORDS: existential loneliness; emotional well-being; residential care homes; older adults; life trajectories; end of life; interviews.

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo busca comprender la soledad existencial de personas que viven en residencias de personas mayores por medio de sus experiencias vitales. A través de un planteamiento deductivo –con un guion con temas a priori– y mediante una aproximación temática reflexiva, se analizaron 34 entrevistas semiestructuradas a personas que vivían en residencias públicas de Sevilla para así explorar en profundidad sus narrativas biográficas. La soledad existencial emergió como parte de su cotidianidad, y se enlazó con aspectos como la consciencia ante la cercanía de la muerte, la normalización del final de la vida, la falta de proyecto vital, la vivencia de una felicidad vicaria a través de la familia y el vacío existencial que dejan las pérdidas de personas del círculo cercano. Para mejorar el bienestar emocional y existencial de las personas que viven en residencias de mayores es necesario facilitar relaciones y experiencias significativas dentro y fuera de la residencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: soledad existencial; salud emocional; residencias; personas mayores; trayectorias vitales; final de la vida; entrevistas.

1. Introduction

Against a backdrop of population ageing and increasing longevity, residential care homes play a vital role in supporting the health and well-being of older adults, particularly those requiring specialised care (Miralles and Rey, 2015). At the same time, these settings face a range of challenges related to adaptation, isolation, loneliness and depression among residents (Zhao *et al.*, 2018). Such issues have become increasingly pronounced and visible in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ho *et al.*, 2021; Simard and Volicer, 2020) and are also associated with the very nature of residential care homes as total institutions (Goffman, 1961/2001). Living in a care home is often associated with a high prevalence of poor physical and mental health, frailty (Rico-Urbe *et al.*, 2016), dementia, cognitive impairment and sensory disabilities (Lara *et al.*, 2019), alongside the considerable emotional demands that such circumstances may entail (Kitzmüller *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, evidence indicates that, compared with older adults living in their own homes, care home residents are more likely to experience loneliness – particularly severe loneliness – and social isolation (Simard and Volicer, 2020; Smith *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, feelings of loneliness are highly prevalent in residential care settings for older people in Spain, with reported rates approaching 70% (Molas-Tuneu *et al.*, 2023).

The literature offers an extensive body of theoretical and methodological work on the conceptualisation of loneliness and its multifaceted nature (de Jong Gierveld, 1998). Within this diverse landscape of perspectives and experiences, it is important to clarify both the definition of loneliness and its various dimensions. Loneliness is defined as a subjective feeling of dissatisfaction arising from a discrepancy between an individual's actual and desired levels of social connectedness (Lapane *et al.*, 2022; Peplau and Perlman, 1982). It is generally understood as a multidimensional

experience comprising two principal dimensions: social loneliness, which relates to the quantity of social relationships and is associated with social exclusion and isolation; and emotional loneliness, which concerns the quality and closeness of meaningful relationships and is associated with feelings of abandonment and emptiness (de Jong Gierveld *et al.*, 2018). In later life, a third dimension emerges: existential loneliness. This ontological form of loneliness is linked to the end of life and prompts reflection on life's meaning and one's personal life course (Bolmsjö *et al.*, 2019).

2. Existential Loneliness in Residential Care Homes for Older Adults

Although there is a wide range of operationalisations and definitions of existential loneliness (Gil Álvarez *et al.*, 2023), the conceptualisation most commonly used in the context of older adults and residential care refers to a sense of separation from the world, from other people, from one's former self and, ultimately, from human life itself, regardless of the size or quality of one's social network (Bolmsjö *et al.*, 2019; Yalom, 1980). This creates a gulf between the individual and others that may come to be perceived as insurmountable and incomprehensible to those around them (Larsson *et al.*, 2024).

The transition from one's home to a residential care setting – most often prompted by health problems, vulnerability or widowhood, which frequently intersect (Hajek *et al.*, 2015) – can give rise to existential questions for which residents find no answers, either on their own or through those closest to them, whether family members, caregivers or their newly formed social networks within the care home. Later life is often accompanied by existential reflections on the past, present and future (Sjöberg *et al.*, 2018). These reflections are shaped by circumstances of dependency and care needs, as well as by the experience of living in a standardised environment specifically designed for the provision of professional care. Consequently, residents contend with existential challenges such as emptiness, loneliness, loss of identity and awareness of approaching death (Sjöberg *et al.*, 2018; Sundström *et al.*, 2018), which may become deeply embedded in everyday life and affect other dimensions of health and well-being.

Existential loneliness is associated with the human experience itself, encompassing the search for meaning in life, a sense of purpose, the sharing of everyday experiences, the maintenance of hopes and aspirations, the ability to confide one's worries and joys, as well as experiences of isolation, disconnection from reality and alienation, among other circumstances (e.g. Bolmsjö *et al.*, 2019; Ettema *et al.*, 2010; Larsson *et al.*, 2017). It may manifest as an awareness of being separated from others, expressed through an experience in which social, emotional and existential dimensions are closely intertwined. Moreover, this occurs within an environment where daily life is necessarily shared with other residents and staff members, where external social support and occasional visits from family and friends may be available, and where the institution itself operates according to the characteristics of a total institution (Goffman, 1961/2001). Existential loneliness therefore refers to a condition inherent to the human experience, yet one that is shaped to a considerable extent by both

structural factors – demographic, social and political, among others – and individual factors such as age, gender, health status and family circumstances.

To understand the different layers of loneliness experienced by older adults living in residential care, it is essential to listen to their own accounts within the environment in which they reside. The literature reviewed suggests that themes emerging from experiences of existential loneliness often reveal a tension between negative and positive feelings. Individuals may, for example, maintain hope for the future while simultaneously accepting the proximity of death (Carr and Fang, 2023; Larsson *et al.*, 2024). They may experience profound feelings of abandonment and isolation while continuing to derive meaning from relationships with family and others (Larsson *et al.*, 2023, 2024). They may also experience an ongoing process of grief following the loss of loved ones, while accepting such losses as an inevitable part of life (Paque *et al.*, 2018). More broadly, their experiences often encompass both resignation to living apart from the wider world and a sense of peace regarding the future and a life perceived as having been well lived and now approaching its end (Barbosa-Neves *et al.*, 2019; Larsson *et al.*, 2024).

Given that most studies have focused on estimating the prevalence of loneliness and analysing associated factors, research into the lived experiences of loneliness among people residing in care homes remains relatively recent (e.g. Barbosa-Neves *et al.*, 2019; Jansson *et al.*, 2021; Paque *et al.*, 2018; Prieto-Flores *et al.*, 2011; Victor, 2012). Qualitative studies examining existential loneliness are particularly scarce (e.g. Carr and Fang, 2023; Jansson *et al.*, 2023; Larsson *et al.*, 2023, 2024; Misiak *et al.*, 2024). The principal contribution of the present study lies in the fact that no previous research in Spain has explored existential loneliness in residential care homes for older people. In addition, it introduces an innovative methodological protocol based on a qualitative research design grounded in the social sciences.

3. Objective and Methodology

3.1. Objective

The aim of this study is to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of existential loneliness among people living in residential care homes for older adults.

3.2. Research Design and Ethics

A cross-sectional qualitative design was employed using semi-structured interviews. The research protocol received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidad Pablo de Olavide (reference code 23/8-1). All participants provided written informed consent prior to taking part in the study. Institutional support and authorisation to conduct visits to the care homes were granted by the Directorate-General for Older People, Active Participation and Loneliness of the Regional Government of Andalusia.

3.3. Sampling and Participants

Sampling was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the three publicly owned and managed residential care homes for older people operated by the Regional Government of Andalusia in the province of Seville were selected through convenience sampling (Saumure and Given, 2008). These centres formed part of the fieldwork undertaken for the broader research project within which this article is situated. In the second phase, residents from each care home were selected to form the final sample through purposive sampling (Schreier, 2018), following a three-stage contact and sampling protocol. First, the management of each care home was contacted by email and telephone to provide information about the project and request an in-person meeting. Second, centre staff assisted in compiling a list of potential participants who might meet the inclusion criteria. Third, a preliminary interview was conducted with each potential participant to verify strict compliance with the inclusion criteria. This involved administering a brief questionnaire and consulting once again with professionals at each centre.

The inclusion criteria were willingness to participate in the study, being aged 60 years or older, having lived in the care home for at least three months, and obtaining both a positive subjective assessment of sensory abilities and a positive objective assessment of cognitive functioning (Mini-Mental State Examination score $\geq 24/30$ for participants with primary or higher education, and $\geq 21/30$ for participants without formal education [Folstein *et al.*, 1975; Escribano-Aparicio *et al.*, 1999]). In addition, once the research team had completed its assessment, each resident who met these criteria was individually reviewed in consultation with specialised staff at the respective care home (psychologist and/or social worker) in order to minimise screening errors. The sole exclusion criterion was failure to meet any of the above conditions.

All residents who met the inclusion criteria were selected, resulting in a potential sample of 44 individuals, of whom 34 were ultimately interviewed. At Heliópolis, located in the municipality of Seville, 17 residents were interviewed. The care home had a capacity of 168 places and accommodated a population in which 90% of residents were considered at risk of vulnerability or social exclusion, primarily due to homelessness or housing insecurity. At Huerta Palacios, located in the municipality of Dos Hermanas and with a capacity of 134 places, 10 residents were interviewed. At Marchena, which had a capacity of 56 places and primarily accommodated individuals with care dependency needs, seven residents were interviewed. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics.

Table 1
Sample profile

Variable	Category	n	% / Mean
Care home	Heliópolis	17	50
	Huerta Palacios	10	29
	Marchena	7	21
Age	Mean (years)	34	77.4
	60–69	7	20
	70–79	15	44
	80–89	8	24
	90+	4	12
Gender	Male	14	41
	Female	20	59
Marital status	Single	12	35
	Divorced	8	24
	Widowed	14	41
Time since widowhood or divorce	Mean (years)	24	18.8
Education	No formal education	12	36
	Primary education	11	32
	Secondary or higher education	11	32
Mini-Mental State Examination	Mean (score out of 30)	34	24.6
Previous residence in a care home	Yes	21	62
	No	13	38
Length of stay in current care home	Mean (years)	34	6.1
Total time spent in care homes	Mean (years)	34	7.9
Main reason for admission	Health	16	47
	Loneliness	5	15
	Vulnerability	9	26
	Other	4	12

Source: own research.

3.4. Data Collection

Participant recruitment and fieldwork were conducted between December 2023 and June 2024 by a research team with extensive experience in qualitative research involving older adults.

Drawing on previous experience of interviewing older people (García-González and del Rey, 2021), the interviews followed a philosophy of ‘kind science’ or ‘caring science’, characterised by two key features. First, given the emotional intensity of encounters with residents, fieldwork was scheduled so that each member of the research team conducted no more than one interview per week. Second, a dual-interviewer system was employed, consisting of a primary interviewer and a secondary interviewer. The

primary interviewer led the conversation, while the secondary interviewer took notes, monitored the emergence of topics from the interview guide and contributed to the discussion when necessary. This approach enabled the primary interviewer to focus exclusively on the conversation, while the secondary interviewer captured nuances in both the verbal interaction and participants' non-verbal communication, as well as observations relating to the surrounding environment. This organisation also facilitated a more balanced distribution of the emotional demands associated with conducting in-depth conversations on emotionally sensitive topics.

The interviews were conducted face to face in private areas of the care homes, ensuring both the confidentiality of the process and the participants' ability to speak openly about their experiences. Interviews lasted approximately 60–70 minutes and were structured around a semi-structured thematic guide comprising seven topics related to loneliness and emotional well-being: life trajectories prior to admission to the care home; reasons for admission and the adaptation process; family relationships and bonds; social networks within and beyond the care home; identity and existential reflections; health and autonomy; and the residential care home as a total institution. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by members of the research team with experience in transcribing interviews with older adults. To ensure data quality and fidelity to the audio recordings, the transcripts were reviewed by the same researchers who had conducted the interviews.

3.5. Interview Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022). Given the limited body of research on existential loneliness, the complexity of the concept, the difficulty of accessing the study population, and the highly subjective, stigmatised and socially sensitive nature of the topic – which meant that loneliness was rarely discussed explicitly during interviews but instead emerged in multiple ways, primarily as a latent category – a deductive approach to data analysis was adopted (Green and Thorogood, 2018). This approach allows researchers to draw on theoretical frameworks previously developed in the literature, thereby facilitating the interpretation of complex and sensitive phenomena such as existential loneliness. From this perspective, the analytical categories were identified on the basis of the themes included in the interview guide, theoretical and conceptual frameworks relating to loneliness, and prior research experience.

The interview process and thematic analysis were closely intertwined, focusing on the existential, emotional and family-related experiences reported by residents that might be associated with their emotional well-being and everyday life within the care home. Although the main themes had been identified *a priori*, an open-coding approach was also adopted to enable the identification of emerging themes relating to existential experiences (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). Following the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021), a flexible approach was employed, allowing adaptation to different theoretical frameworks and particularly well suited to the study of subjective experiences. Accordingly, Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytical process was adapted from six to four stages: (1) reading and familiarisation; (2) initial manual

coding of the transcripts; (3) developing and refining the content and meaning of themes and categories; and (4) writing up and interpreting the findings. Although the sample included residents with diverse profiles (Table 1), all 34 interviews were analysed as a single dataset. The authors initially conducted independent analyses, which were subsequently compared and discussed in order to develop, refine and interpret the analytical categories and select the verbatim quotations presented. Following the analysis, saturation was achieved both theoretically and at the sample level.

4. Findings

This study focused on understanding existential loneliness among people living in residential care homes for older adults. In residents' narratives, existential loneliness emerges as a pervasive and multifaceted experience linked to the sense of self, identity, one's relationship with time, awareness of the proximity of death and a symbolic disconnection from the surrounding environment and the people within it. Rather than simply reflecting a lack of companionship in either quantity or quality, it constitutes a form of subjective dislocation in which the world no longer holds the same meaning or interest for the individual, and the narrative continuity of life appears to have been disrupted. Existential loneliness is rarely expressed directly. Instead, it surfaces through silences, learned resignation, memories that are mentioned but not elaborated upon and everyday routines. Four themes were identified as shaping this phenomenon: awareness of mortality and the finitude of life, the absence of a sense of future purpose, the role of family and the creation of vicarious sources of meaning and hope, and unresolved significant losses.

4.1. Awareness of Death and the Finitude of Life

Awareness of death emerges as a constant, normalised and accepted presence, experienced as an ongoing process: dying is not viewed as a discrete future event, but rather as something already unfolding. Death itself is not generally feared, although it prompts reflection, often expressed through humour, resignation, spirituality or silence.

The following excerpts illustrate how residents develop an indirect awareness of their own mortality through the deaths of their mothers and project their own relationship with death through a perspective marked by humour and resignation. This familiarity lends an almost domestic quality to death, normalising what is ultimately inevitable. At the same time, a powerful combination of resistance to death and humorous acceptance emerges, which may itself constitute an existential coping strategy: defusing the gravity of death in order to live more peacefully with oneself.

Resident [R]: I used to say to my mother: 'Mum, you're getting so old. You'll be dying soon, won't you? Aren't you afraid?' And she'd say, 'Bloody hell, how should I know? How could I possibly know whether I'm afraid of death or not? It doesn't bother me.'

Interviewer [I]: Would you say you're afraid of death?

R: Well, I don't know where I'm going. [...]

I: You don't want to die.

R: No, I don't want to die, but then again, I won't feel anything, just like everyone else. I don't know, who wants death? I always say: 'Once I'm dead, do whatever you like.' They ask me whether I want to be cremated or buried, and I say: 'With how burnt out I already am, am I really going to get any more burnt?' [Woman, 78 years old].

R: The future? Dying [laughs]. [I: No...] [Continues laughing] Dying with my boots on. The future I see is dark, very dark.

I: Do you have negative thoughts about what lies ahead?

R: No, not negative. Positive. [Man, 83 years old].

Furthermore, death is not dramatised because it has become integrated into everyday life and experience. Certain underlying certainties run through these narratives: companionship alone is not enough, and as life draws to a close, death is envisaged as a peaceful and welcome transition. The existential significance of death extends beyond how one wishes to die. Residents also speak about how they wish to live until the end and how they hope that end will unfold: without suffering, without violence, with meaning, dignity and companionship.

I: Are you worried about death?

R: Death? It doesn't frighten me. No, it doesn't worry me at all. If I become very ill, they already have written instructions about what to do with me: not to prolong my life, not to try to make me better. Like my mother, my mother died very peacefully. [...] That's what I ask God for – that I die the same way my mother did. Happy. [Woman, 95 years old].

I: How do you see your future?

R: I think I'm going to die very soon. [...] That's what I think, that I'll die very soon. And that's that. My family always gets upset when I say things like that. [Woman, 91 years old].

These testimonies reveal a way of relating to life that incorporates death without turning it into a tragedy, normalising it and making it part of the everyday fabric of existence. Death, as an inevitable end, gives rise to a profound form of loneliness, but it also fosters an ethic of living in the present. Knowing that everything comes to an end – and expressing a wish to die without truly desiring death itself – can lead either to hopelessness or to a form of emotional lucidity in which humour, irony and faith function as mechanisms of resilience. It is within this ambiguity that the strength of these narratives resides, as affirmations of life in which existential loneliness remains latently embedded.

4.2. Absence of a Sense of Future Purpose

The routines and rhythms of residential life often lead residents' personal life projects to fade into the background, with meaning and fulfilment increasingly experienced vicariously, primarily through family members. The absence of a sense of future purpose is reflected in the perception that each day is much the same as the one before: there are few significant events, changes or personal decisions through which time is structured. This way of inhabiting the present, without direction or desire, results in a diminishing of life's forward momentum: rather than building towards something, one simply exists. Accordingly, the absence of a sense of future purpose is often expressed through everyday statements marked by resignation.

I: Do you do anything in those moments [when you feel sad] to feel better or lift your spirits?

R: I'm always the same. I don't have... better days or worse days. Just the same. [Woman, 76 years old].

I: Is there anything that makes you want to keep living?

R: No. At my age, you think about how old you are and what you're doing... and you understand that something has to happen.

I: What do you expect from the future?

R: What am I supposed to expect? Death, that's all. What can I expect here in the care home? You lose your enthusiasm for everything. [Man, 79 years old].

For many residents, the future contains neither hope, nor personal projects, nor the prospect of meaningful change. There is often no visible trauma, only a sense of disconnection associated with a loss of motivation to engage in activities and, ultimately, a diminished desire to continue living.

I: What do you expect from life?

R: To die.

I: Do you want to die?

R: Very much. Very much. If there were something to sign, I'd sign it right now. I really want to go... and the thing is, I'm comfortable here! But I still really want to go.

I: Have you thought about why?

R: Well, I don't know why. I just don't feel at peace inside myself [...] And when you reach my age, if you remember me – and you will remember me – you'll see and say, 'How right [name] was.' You lose the desire to go out, to come in, to laugh, to do anything. [Woman, 82 years old].

In many cases, existential loneliness manifests itself through the disappearance of long-term hopes and aspirations. As a result, moments of happiness become concentrated in the short term, emerging from the simplest and most everyday aspects of life within the care home. Small sources of satisfaction, such as watching television or receiving occasional visits from family members, assume a central role in residents' daily lives. To cope with this loneliness, individuals often adapt, almost by necessity, to a reality in which expectations have gradually diminished.

I: Are there things that still bring you a sense of anticipation or excitement?

R: The telly. I like watching it, yes.

I: And what brings you joy?

R: When my nephew comes to visit. That's what brings me joy. [Woman, 94 years old].

R: Excitement? The television. If there's something good on, I enjoy it.

I: But... in life, is there anything that excites you, anything you look forward to?

R: No, that's what I'm telling you. [Man, 83 years old].

4.3. Family and the Generation of Vicarious Sources of Hope

Residents often experience happiness and hope vicariously through their families, closely linked to the visits they receive, which are imbued with both positive meaning (when visits occur) and negative meaning (when they do not occur or are perceived as insufficient). Thus, in the absence of a clear sense of future purpose or meaningful prospects, residents tend to hold on to what has provided continuity and meaning throughout their lives and continues to do so in the present: family. In many cases, residents describe the presence of their children and grandchildren as one of their principal sources of hope and encouragement. This may be understood as an attempt to anchor their sense of self in their closest interpersonal relationships. Interaction with family members, even when infrequent or brief, remains one of the few sources of genuine happiness in daily life, a reality that becomes particularly significant within the context of residential care.

I: What kinds of things do you look forward to?

R: Being with my daughters and my grandchildren. When you're here, that's what you want. [Woman, 76 years old].

R: What do I look forward to? Oh, life. Life, life! May God give me the strength to carry on as I am and to see my children and my grandchildren [...] They're young people, sometimes they come and sometimes they don't, but you have to forgive them and leave it at that. [Woman, 83 years old].

When residents say that being with their daughters and grandchildren is ‘what I want’, they underscore the importance of these emotional bonds in maintaining a sense of belonging and personal worth within a residential context that might otherwise be experienced as alienating. This form of hope, grounded in affection and family relationships, becomes a source of emotional support in the face of a growing sense of existential loneliness. There is, therefore, a reaffirmation of identity through family ties.

Family thus plays a dual role. On the one hand, these relationships may be instrumental and, at times, fragile. On the other, they remain a profoundly positive presence despite their increasingly limited place in the resident’s day-to-day life. Residents’ narratives frequently combine resignation – regarding physical distance, infrequent visits and relatives who seemingly ‘disappear’ once a person enters residential care – with acceptance: not wanting to be a burden, recognising that family members have ‘their’ own lives, acknowledging that ‘my’ life is now here in the care home, and deciding that ‘I’m not going to cry any more’.

I: When you first came to live here, did you expect people to visit you more often?

R: I expected my eldest daughter to come. That would have been the greatest joy in the world. [...] I cried a lot, but in the end I said to myself, ‘I’m not going to cry any more’. That’s just how it is, and this is what I have to accept, because it is what it is. [Woman, 68 years old].

Accepting what one has rather than what one hopes for reflects a form of emotional resignation in response to the realities of ageing and residential life. This reinforces the idea that family, although often absent in terms of regular physical presence, remains a crucial source of emotional support and continuity, particularly when interactions are characterised by trust and a sense of emotional affirmation. These accounts illustrate how family, as a central source of identity and belonging, continues to provide meaning and comfort despite the constraints imposed by the care home as a total institution and the growing awareness of approaching death.

R: What do I look forward to? To be honest, right now... for my children to come and visit, to have a little chat. You become somewhat resigned to the fact that life is coming to an end [laughs]. [Man, 64 years old].

I: How often does he [your nephew] come to visit you?

R: Every week. We go and have a coffee together and he spends a long time talking with me. I talk to him.

I: You prefer talking to people you trust.

R: Of course. Apart from him, I hardly talk to anyone. [Woman, 94 years old].

These narratives reveal a need to preserve emotional bonds even when they have weakened. They also unfold within a framework of separation created by the care home itself – through its physical boundaries, institutional rules and, in some cases,

the lack of direct means of contacting family members. Residents often adopt resigned yet understanding perspectives towards life ‘outside’ – almost as though referring to what they perceive as ‘real life’. In doing so, they justify both geographical and emotional distance, even as something appears to fracture within relationships that were once deeply meaningful when they still lived at home.

I: Do your children and grandchildren come and visit you here?

R: Yes, they do. Every couple of weeks. Or once a month. Well, whenever they can come. Because they can’t always. ‘Grandma, we’re...’ And it’s true, they’re working. [Woman, 87 years old].

R: [My son doesn’t come] because he has to work and be with his family. Be at home and all that.

I: How do those moments make you feel, [when they come to see you]?

R: Wonderful. And they can tell. They know. They know I’m happy when I’m with them. [Woman, 88 years old].

Feelings of being a burden intertwine with a sense of no longer having a place, yet at the same time there is a degree of resentment arising from the lack of time available for visits or even telephone calls. A sense of guilt emerges from the inability to maintain the emotional bonds that once existed, leading to a form of existential disconnection from a family within which the resident had previously occupied a central and organising role.

R: [...] And my daughter has her own life. And she can’t come. So that... makes me very sad.

I: You miss...

R: You do miss your family. Even a phone call, because my daughter doesn’t even call me. She’s not the kind of person who says, ‘I’ll call my mum and see how she’s doing’. But a phone call... people don’t realise what it means when someone calls you. A phone call opens something up inside you. I don’t know, it makes that day feel different. But in the end, you adapt. What else can you do? They’re young. They have their lives, and I have to have mine here. [Woman, 76 years old].

I: Do you have a mobile phone?

R: No, I don’t. [...] I had one before I moved into the care home. But when I arrived here, my daughter asked me what I needed it for... [Woman, 76 years old].

4.4. Unresolved Significant Losses

The participants described the loss of children and other loved ones as a permanent biographical rupture. What is expressed explicitly – the fact of death itself – is accompanied by what remains unspoken yet clearly implied: the difficulty of accepting the loss, the impossibility of forgetting and its enduring impact in the form of an existential void.

I: And are you happy with your life?

R: Well... sometimes family deaths come back to me... Thinking about them, the people who are gone, the way they left... That's how it is, this thing about family deaths.

I: And when you feel like that, when you feel down remembering family deaths... do you talk to anyone about it?

R: No, no, no. Then it passes... it comes and then it goes. [Sighs]

I: You keep those feelings to yourself, don't you?

R: [Silence] [Man, 73 years old].

In the voices of the participants, one hears a grief process that has never been fully resolved. These losses are past events, yet they also remain emotional experiences that continue to resonate in the present. The deaths have not been fully integrated into their life narratives and continue to shape the way they experience and make sense of the present.

I: I had four children, but two of them died. My daughter died ten years ago, when she was forty. She left behind two children, a boy and a girl. [...] And I brought them up myself. [...] Five years after my daughter died, my husband passed away. [...] And then my son, nearly three years ago. [...] When my son died, I suffered terribly. I cried so much. [Woman, 87 years old].

Beyond the pain itself, what underlies these narratives is a profound disruption to personal biography. The people who have died formed an integral part of the residents' identity, and their absence deepens the loss of self that life in a residential care home may already have weakened. This experience is particularly acute when the loss is perceived as contrary to the natural course of life, as in the case of younger family members, and especially the death of a son or daughter. The love that was given and the companionship once shared remain present even though the other person is no longer there. It is here that existential loneliness intensifies: in grief, when the other person continues to occupy a place in one's heart but no longer occupies a place in the world, a profound sense of emptiness may emerge.

R: My daughter died two years ago... And since then, for me... my life has been over. When you lose a child... Because a mother dies, a father dies, a sister dies, a husband dies. That's normal. But the death of a child is not normal. A mother is not prepared for that. And since my daughter died, I haven't been the same. And what can I do? If God sent this to me. [...] It's something immense. You have to go through it yourself to understand. What can you do? If He wanted to send me that, He must have had His reasons. I've come to accept it. I've come to accept it. [Woman, 82 years old].

Emotional losses associated with degenerative illnesses such as dementia and Alzheimer's disease also leave a trail of existential loneliness. Although death itself may be accepted, far more complex is the experience of watching someone become invisible or unrecognisable while still alive – of having their mind erased and no longer being able to remember them as they once were.

I: Is there anyone you miss in your day-to-day life?

R: Of course, I miss my children and my grandchildren. And my great-grandchildren. And I miss my sisters-in-law as well. I have a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law who both have Alzheimer's. I went to see them the other day, but I won't go again. My children say to me: 'Mum, I'll take you to see Auntie.' But I don't want to see her like that. I want to remember her as she was.

I: How does it make you feel when you miss these people?

R: I feel... overwhelmed. A little emotional, as I say. Because I miss them. And my mother, and my children. [Voice breaks] Every day I pray for them. That's all I have left. [Woman, 87 years old].

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how existential loneliness is connected to the life course, everyday experiences and the 'institutionalised' lives of people living in residential care homes for older adults. The existential loneliness emerging from residents' experiences is associated with four key dimensions: (1) awareness of death and the finitude of life; (2) the absence of a sense of future purpose; (3) the role of family and the generation of vicarious sources of hope; and (4) unresolved significant losses.

The findings are consistent with those of other recent studies (particularly those conducted following the COVID-19 pandemic) that have explored existential loneliness in residential care settings using qualitative designs (e.g. Carr and Fang, 2023, in the United Kingdom and Australia; Jansson *et al.*, 2023, in Finland; Larsson *et al.*, 2017, 2023, 2024, and Sjöberg *et al.*, 2018, 2019, in Sweden). Overall, older adults spoke about being aware of, or even wishing for, the proximity of severe ill health and death; fearing abandonment by their families; worrying that they might be forgotten by loved ones or even by themselves; resigning themselves to the loss of the life they had before entering residential care; and accepting their new life circumstances (Barbosa-Neves *et al.*, 2019). Taken together, these experiences help us understand the processes through which existential loneliness, understood as a sense of disconnection from the world, emerges within residential care settings.

The transition from living in one's own home to a residential care home entails, first and foremost, a cognitive shift and a narrowing of the sources of meaning upon which individuals have relied throughout their adult lives, particularly their role as

central figures within their families (Larsson *et al.*, 2024). Second, admission to a care home often results in a significant transformation in individuals' self-perception and personal identity (Goffman, 1961/2001, within the framework of the theory of total institutions). As a result, many of the activities and decisions that once fostered a sense of agency are lost, and within this institutional framework residents have few, if any, opportunities to exercise control over the decisions that shape their current lives.

This residential and life transition is also accompanied by a transformation in both the quantity and quality of family relationships. In general, these relationships become weaker, more instrumental and more routinised, particularly from the perspective of older people living in residential care and receiving visits or contact from family members (Larsson *et al.*, 2023). While some residents maintained close relationships with their children and relatives, others experienced feelings of abandonment or detachment due to a lack of visits or an inability to sustain regular contact. This phenomenon is widely documented in the literature on older adult care, which suggests that residents' expectations regarding family involvement can have a significant influence on their emotional well-being (Sörensen *et al.*, 2002; Larsson *et al.*, 2023). Families play a fundamental role in providing emotional support that can mitigate the impact of existential loneliness among residents (Saarelainen *et al.*, 2020; Sjöberg *et al.*, 2019).

The experience of feeling ignored, rejected or perceived as a burden because residents believe that their families visit out of obligation rather than genuine desire can be deeply painful and may contribute to profound existential loneliness (Sjöberg *et al.*, 2018). Conversely, feeling seen, valued and appreciated contributes to the creation of meaningful existential experiences. Indeed, any experience in which individuals feel cared for, empowered and supported by those around them – whether family members, friends, fellow residents or care home staff – can act as a buffer against existential loneliness and foster hope in everyday life. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) is particularly relevant in this regard. It suggests that the continued presence of our closest relationships, most commonly family members, serves as a central protective mechanism against feelings of emptiness and existential loneliness, whereas their loss or weakening deepens a sense of existential disconnection. Residents' narratives indicate that any form of contact can help alleviate the monotony of routines and institutional regulations. However, it is regular in-person visits, particularly those that allow residents to spend time outside the care home, that appear to have the most beneficial effects (Saarelainen *et al.*, 2020). This observation is consistent with theories of comfort contact (Playfair, 2010), which suggest that face-to-face encounters and opportunities to spend time outside with others can help restore a sense of belonging to the world and thereby prevent social death (Borgstrom, 2016). This concept is closely linked to perceptions of no longer belonging to reality and of life having already run its course and therefore no longer being worth living (van Wijngaarden *et al.*, 2015). These short-term future-oriented relationships in later life within residential settings are associated with having a sense of purpose, experiencing life as meaningful and preserving a sense of self and identity (Mansfield *et al.*, 2021). In this way, they help prevent individuals from becoming, in existential terms, *nobody* (Yalom, 1980). The participants' accounts

reveal a form of biographical pain (Carr and Fang, 2023; Johnson, 2013), reflected in a final stage of life in which there is ample time to reflect on past traumas and failures, painful memories, experiences of grief, unfulfilled promises and other aspects of life that can no longer be changed, all of which may deepen existential loneliness.

Over the course of life in residential care, and likely as a consequence of previous bereavements and losses within their close social circles, as well as transitions towards ill health, the end of life and death increasingly move to the forefront of everyday experience (Paque *et al.*, 2018). The emotions associated with these losses – sadness, loneliness, denial and grief – particularly in cases involving younger family members, are likely to be linked to residents' wishes to die. In some cases, emotional exhaustion, a sense of having no further reason to continue living and persistent boredom also appear to be important factors in perceiving death as something both imminent and, to some extent, desirable (Wijesiri *et al.*, 2019). This gives rise to a sense of waiting in loneliness (Jansson *et al.*, 2021, 2023), or even of sitting alone in a waiting room for death (or heaven) to arrive (Forbes, 2001; Kitzmüller *et al.*, 2017). There is, therefore, a more or less explicit sense of vulnerability, understood as an awareness of one's own mortality and fragility, associated with the perception of having limited social support from one's closest social network (Sanchini *et al.*, 2022).

6. Methodological Limitations

This study has four main limitations. First, it adopts an ecological design conducted in three publicly managed residential care homes within a single province of Andalusia. These centres represent only a small proportion of the residential care sector in Andalusia and Spain as a whole, and one of them accommodated a particularly high proportion of residents experiencing social exclusion. Second, the stringent inclusion criteria resulted in a relatively small sample and may have introduced a degree of selection bias. Third, owing to the complexity of the topic, the interview guide did not explicitly address existential loneliness, although this dimension was implicitly embedded throughout the interviews and emerged naturally during the conversations. Fourth, although existential loneliness is often expressed differently by men and women, the study did not specifically adopt a gender perspective. A more detailed analysis of these differences, as well as of other individual characteristics such as age, educational level, social class or reason for admission to residential care, would require further research.

7. Conclusion

The principal contribution of this study is that it helps address one of the gaps in the Spanish literature on loneliness in residential care homes for older adults through the application of a qualitative methodology. Through the analysis of 34 in-depth interviews, our findings provide evidence that existential loneliness, although expressed implicitly, may coexist with the everyday lives of older people living in residential care settings. This form of loneliness is rarely articulated directly. Rather, through the biographical interview

approach, we infer that it is rooted both in residents' previous life experiences and in their day-to-day lives within the care home. Moreover, it is evident across a wide age range, reinforcing the processual nature of the development of existential loneliness. Existential loneliness is shaped, first, by individuals' life trajectories; second, by the changes in habits, relationships and family dynamics associated with the transition from living at home to living in residential care; and third, by the everyday routines and constraints inherent to life within a total institution such as a care home. Taken together, these three dimensions illustrate how individuals, throughout the transition into and experience of residential care, become increasingly vulnerable, with vulnerability understood as a condition of human exposure in which existential loneliness may emerge.

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ARTICLE/ARTÍCULO

Perceptions of Class Inequality among Undergraduate Students: The Case of the University of Granada

Percepciones sobre la desigualdad de clase en el estudiantado de grado: el caso de la Universidad de Granada

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ABSTRACT

This study examines perceptions of social self-placement – that is, the position students believe they occupy within the stratification system – and views on wealth distribution in Spain among undergraduate students at the University of Granada. Drawing on a survey based on validated questionnaires (Funcas, UCM), the sample comprises 1,437 students drawn from across the university's faculties and degree programmes. The findings reveal a marked overidentification with the middle class, limited awareness of existing levels of inequality and an idealised vision of a more egalitarian distribution that nonetheless concentrates wealth in the upper classes. The data further demonstrate the reproduction of familial educational capital and the underrepresentation of working-class students in higher education. The study concludes that there is a significant gap between students' objective socioeconomic positions and their subjective self-perceptions, alongside a clear tendency for resources to remain concentrated among more privileged social sectors. These findings underscore the need for universities to strengthen their critical and educational role in fostering socially aware, informed and equity-oriented citizens.

KEYWORDS: social class; perceptions of inequality; university students; social stratification; wealth distribution.

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RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza mediante encuesta, basada en cuestionarios validados (FUNCAS, UCM), a 1.437 estudiantes de grado de diversas facultades y titulaciones de la Universidad de Granada, la percepción que tienen sobre su autoubicación social (posición que ocupan en la estratificación social) y sobre cómo está distribuida la riqueza en España. Los resultados revelan una sobreidentificación con la clase media, conocimiento limitado de la desigualdad real y una visión ideal más igualitaria que, no obstante, concentra riqueza en clases altas. Se constata reproducción del capital educativo familiar y una presencia menor de clases populares en la universidad. Se concluye un desajuste significativo entre la posición socioeconómica objetiva y la autopercepción estudiantil, junto con una tendencia a concentrar recursos en sectores privilegiados. Estos hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de que la universidad refuerce su función crítica y pedagógica para formar ciudadanos conscientes, informados y comprometidos con la equidad social.

PALABRAS CLAVE: clase social; percepción desigualdad; estudiantado universitario; estratificación social; distribución de la riqueza.

1. Introduction

Class inequality is one of the central themes of sociology, as it directly shapes life opportunities and conditions access to economic, educational and symbolic resources in contemporary societies. However, research has shown that subjective perceptions of inequality are not always consistent with objective reality, particularly among younger sectors of the population.

Examining how university students perceive class inequality is therefore essential from a sociological perspective for several reasons. First, perceptions of inequality are not merely individual opinions but social representations that reflect and reproduce structures of power, legitimacy and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1982; Jost, 2019). Analysing how future professionals interpret inequality allows us to understand the symbolic mechanisms by which social hierarchies are naturalised or questioned. Second, university students constitute a key social group in processes of cultural and political change. Their conceptions of social justice, meritocracy and mobility shape their behaviour and future professional and institutional decisions. Understanding how they perceive economic inequality and social class thus offers valuable insight into the kind of citizens universities are producing (García *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, examining how students interpret their own class position allows us to assess the extent to which they may be developing a critical awareness of social structures.

Third, although the university has historically been conceived as a space for social mobility, it continues to reproduce inequalities rooted in the economic, cultural and social capital of families (Bourdieu, 2022; Gairín and Suárez, 2017).

This raises the question of whether higher education fulfils its democratising function or, on the contrary, reinforces existing social distances.

In sum, studying how university students perceive class inequality not only reveals the extent to which they are aware of their position within the stratification system but also invites critical reflection on the role of higher education in building a more equitable and socially conscious society.

This article examines perceptions of class inequality among undergraduate students at the University of Granada (UGR), with the aim of investigating how they place themselves within the social structure and how they conceptualise wealth distribution in Spain. Drawing on a quantitative, survey-based methodology, it seeks to provide empirical evidence on the mechanisms of legitimisation, ignorance and critical engagement with social inequalities among university students. As noted above, analysing these perceptions is central to understanding the extent to which higher education contributes to reproducing or questioning the established social order.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Perception of inequality and class self-placement

Research has consistently shown that social perceptions, particularly regarding structural phenomena such as inequality, tend to diverge from objective reality. This perceptual dissonance is shaped, in the first instance, by individuals' daily social practices and their position within the social structure: people from lower classes tend to perceive lower levels of inequality than those in higher strata, a pattern associated with more limited access to information about the actual distribution of wealth (Castillo, Miranda and Carrasco, 2012; García *et al.*, 2022).

Beliefs, personal experiences and ideological positions all shape how inequality is perceived (Irwin, 2018). Unequal access to essential resources can also alter individuals' understanding of what constitutes wealth or well-being, while the immediate social environment serves as a frame of reference. Dawtry, Sutton and Sibley (2015) found that people who interact primarily with individuals of high economic status tend to overestimate the average wealth of society as a whole and, consequently, to be less supportive of redistributive policies.

Subjective socioeconomic status (SSES) is a key variable for understanding attitudes towards redistribution. This concept – capturing an individual's self-placement within the social hierarchy – predicts political attitudes and behaviours more accurately than traditional objective measures, as it incorporates comparative assessments and subjective perceptions (Kraus *et al.*, 2013). SSES helps explain why individuals with modest incomes identify as middle class and display moderate redistributive preferences (Operario *et al.*, 2004).

Several approaches from social psychology explain why individuals tend to minimise inequality. The motivational perspective holds that people tend to justify the status quo, reducing their sensitivity to inequality when it is perceived as consistent with dominant ideologies (Jost *et al.*, 2009). The intergroup perspective proposes that inequality fosters social segmentation and the consolidation of hierarchies that reinforce the symbolic and material distance between groups (Jetten *et al.*, 2017). The cognitive approach argues that individuals rely on mental shortcuts to simplify complex economic phenomena, producing biased interpretations of inequality (Eidelman and Crandall, 2012).

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) introduces a further dimension to the analysis of perceived legitimacy. From this perspective, individual responses to inequality depend on whether one's position is perceived as just or unjust. When people regard their position as legitimate and deserved, they tend to accept inequality and show less willingness to challenge it; when they perceive it as unfair, attitudes favouring social transformation emerge.

Political ideology also plays a decisive role in the interpretation of inequality. Those who identify with progressive or left-wing positions tend to view inequality as a structural problem requiring redistributive policies, while conservative or right-wing ideologies tend to legitimise it as the outcome of individual merit or personal decisions (Guzmán, Barozet and Méndez, 2017). Neoliberal ideology has contributed to normalising inequality by presenting it as a natural consequence of meritocracy.

System justification theory (Jost, 2019) holds that people tend to legitimise the existing social order to reduce dissonance and uncertainty, even when that order is unfavourable to them. This mechanism of self-justification and hierarchy normalisation explains why a cognitive recognition of inequality can co-exist with limited support for redistributive policies (Jost and Hunyady, 2005). Consequently, system justification acts as a buffer that prevents perceptions of inequality from translating into political demands.

Sensitivity to inequality thus appears to depend on class position and institutional context. Haddon and Wu (2021) showed that people in different social positions can respond heterogeneously to changes in inequality, while Kenworthy and McCall (2008) demonstrated that the relationship between market inequality and support for redistributive policies is mediated by ideology and political structures. Taken together, these studies underscore that the perception of inequality serves as a crucial link between objective inequality and redistributive attitudes. Research shows that providing accurate information about income concentration increases support for redistribution (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018; Iacono and Ranaldi, 2021). Ignorance or underestimation of inequality therefore reduces citizen pressure for change, particularly among those who perceive themselves as middle class or who justify the existing system (Haddon and Wu, 2021; Jost, 2019; Kenworthy and McCall, 2008).

International comparative programmes – including the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the European Values Study (EVS) and the World Values Survey (WVS) – show that beliefs about inequality and distributive justice vary substantially across countries according to institutional, cultural and objective inequality factors (Hadler, 2005; Niehues, 2014). These programmes, which aim to conduct comparative social analysis and examine the transformation of values across different cultural contexts, allow researchers to examine the correspondence between objective and subjective inequality, revealing how the informational and political context shapes social perceptions.

2.2. Perceptions of inequality among university students

Higher education is a key space for the analysis and transformation of perceptions of inequality. Hipólito and Castro (2021, p. 89) argue that ‘education is not limited to the transmission of knowledge but also produces subjects, identities and aspirations, and its purpose is not to mould individuals but to inspire, lead and empower them to imagine a better world.’ The university is thus simultaneously a site of technical and instrumental learning and a space for critical formation aimed at identifying and transforming social inequalities. From this perspective, its essential function should be to foster citizens who are capable of actively participating in social, cultural and political life, and contributing to a more equitable society.

Gairín and Suárez (2017) likewise argue that universities are not neutral institutions but can function both as reproducers of inequality and as agents of democratic advancement. Brito and Moya (2017) further contend that the university must preserve its historical mission while adapting to contemporary social transformations, working towards greater equity and social cohesion. Higher education institutions must therefore promote the formation of an active citizenship that links educational processes with social change.

Regarding the social position of students, the analyses of Alonso *et al.* (2017) examine young people qualitatively as one of the groups most affected by economic crisis, social spending cuts and growing inequality in recent years. Facing a landscape marked by high unemployment and profound uncertainty, young people constitute a vulnerable group of considerable sociological interest for exploring how social, political and economic changes are perceived and experienced.

It is worth noting that the study distinguishes between precariously situated young people and young adults with different social backgrounds, personal and educational trajectories and varying family obligations, identifying several groups across social class lines, with job insecurity, the middle classes and new policies emerging as key themes. Notably, all groups – with the exception of the most affluent private university students – have developed work survival strategies in response to the adverse conditions they encounter. Students across the

social spectrum report difficulties accessing employment for which they have been trained and describe the need to take whatever work is available.

When discussing rising inequality and the decline of public services, the study concludes that ‘an impoverished old middle class feels compelled to maintain a sense of privilege – despite having lost well-being – because the crisis has brought extreme poverty into view’ (Alonso *et al.*, 2017, p. 162). As one moves down the social profile of student groups, the perception of impoverishment and social polarisation – regarded as indisputable – becomes increasingly stark (Alonso *et al.*, 2016). This impoverishment is reflected in near-unanimous agreement around the widespread reduction of wages and the radical deterioration of working conditions, with those from upper social classes least concerned. Nevertheless, the prevailing perception among the young people in this study is that inequality will continue to be entrenched and driven by low wages and the radical deterioration of working conditions.

Data from the Funcas think tank survey on perceptions of inequality in Spain confirm this trend: the majority of respondents acknowledge the existence of wide income differences but show limited awareness of the real magnitude of poverty. While 45.6% of respondents express willingness to pay higher taxes to reduce inequality, 54.4% reject this option, suggesting a disconnect between recognising inequality and the willingness to act on it.

3. Objectives and methodology

Despite the relevance of social class perception as an axis of inequality, its subjective dimension has received limited attention specifically in the university context (Reay, 2005). The literature tends to focus on objective indicators of social stratification, neglecting those aspects that make social class a lived reality that shapes the expectations and academic habitus of the student body (Bourdieu, 1987). Given this situation, this article, which is markedly exploratory in nature, aims to map the perceptions and beliefs of undergraduate students regarding their position in the social structure.

3.1. Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine how students at the University of Granada (UGR) perceive their position within the social structure – and more specifically, their sense of class belonging – as well as their understanding of how wealth is distributed in Spain.

The study is organised around the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the socioeconomic conditions – income, educational level and occupation – of the parents of UGR students.
2. To analyse students' perceptions of class belonging according to family income.
3. To explore how students perceive the distribution of wealth in Spain and what they consider a fair or desirable distribution in an ideal scenario.

3.2. Data collection and sampling techniques

The study adopts a quantitative methodology with a descriptive and comparative approach. Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire, applied predominantly in person under classroom supervision to undergraduate students at the UGR. Fieldwork was conducted between March and May 2024 across 21 faculties and 67 degree programmes spanning the following branches of knowledge: arts and humanities, sciences, educational sciences, health sciences, legal sciences, social sciences, economics and business, and engineering and architecture. The reference population comprises 46,599 students enrolled during the 2023/24 academic year (2023/24 academic year report).

The sample was designed using a multi-stage cluster approach: in the first stage, degree programmes were selected by branch of knowledge; in the second stage, groups and classes within each programme were selected for questionnaire administration. The final sample comprises $n = 1,437$ valid cases, of which 498 (34.5%) identify as male, 911 (63.2%) as female and 28 (1.9%) as another gender identity. Assuming max-

imum population variance ($p = q = 0.5$), a 95% confidence level and a design effect (DEFF) of 1.5, the theoretical sampling error was 3.1%. This estimate should, however, be interpreted with caution. Participant recruitment combined face-to-face classroom administration with distribution of the questionnaire via class WhatsApp groups (link/QR code), meaning that effective participation was conditioned by class attendance and voluntary response. Although the research design achieved broad coverage across degree programmes and branches of knowledge, the results should be regarded as a solid empirical approximation of the student population of the UGR rather than a strictly probabilistic representation free of selection bias and non-response effects. It should also be noted that the absence of an explicit ‘working class’ category in the questionnaire may have encouraged overidentification with the middle class, a limitation that should be borne in mind when comparing findings with other studies.

The questionnaire comprises 15 questions organised into three thematic blocks: 1. Sociodemographic data. 2. Perceptions of class belonging. 3. Perceptions of wealth distribution.

In developing the questionnaire, we drew on the following reference sources:

1. the Funcas Survey on Perceptions of Economic Inequality in Spain (2019),
2. and the questionnaire developed for Teaching Innovation Project no. 40 (Call 2021/2022): ‘Inequality in front of the mirror: a tool for learning social stratification through sociological self-analysis’, directed by Professor Celia Díaz Catalán from the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology, Department of Sociology, Methodology and Theory.

3.3. Statistical analysis

Data analysis was exclusively descriptive; all percentages, statistics and tables were produced using SPSS version 28.

The analysis incorporates a comparative dimension, setting the UGR data alongside those of the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) (Teaching Innovation Project no. 40, Call 2021/2022, cited above) and the broader Spanish population, drawn from CIS Survey 3427, November 2023 Barometer, Centre for Sociological Research (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, CIS).

Results are presented partly in comparative tables showing data from the UGR, the UCM and the general Spanish population simultaneously, as well as ‘real’ figures alongside ‘subjective’ perceptions, with the aim of visualising mismatches between objective and perceived inequality.

Following a widely used methodological scheme (Debbeler, Schupp and Renner, 2021; Bublitz, 2016; Faggian, Michelangeli and Tkach, 2023), respondents were first asked to estimate the actual distribution of wealth (perceived distribution) and then to indicate what they considered a desirable distribution (ideal distribution). This design allows for analysis of: 1. The degree of perceptual error. 2. The direction of bias (underestimation or overestimation of inequality). 3. The gap between perceived and ideal distributions. 4. The implications for redistributive policy preferences.

4. Results and discussion

We begin by presenting a socioeconomic profile of the University of Granada (UGR) student body, drawing on data on household income, parental education level and parental occupation.

4.1. Family socioeconomic conditions

4.1.1. *Annual household income*

Table 1 shows the annual household income of respondents: approximately 38% report income below €21,000, 40% between €21,000 and €47,000, and 20% above €47,000. Comparison with national income data reveals broadly similar distributions: 38%, 40% and 17%, respectively.

The proportion of households with income below €13,000 is notably lower among UGR students (9.4%) than in the general Spanish population (14.4%), suggesting that the student body tends to occupy a somewhat more favourable socioeconomic position in the lower strata. By contrast, the share of households with income above €60,000 is smaller at the UGR (5.2%) than the national average (7.0%), indicating that, while low-income households are underrepresented, very high-income households are also less present. This may be because families at that level are more likely to be able to afford to send their children to private universities or even to study outside Spain.

Table 1
Annual household income UGR (%)

Income brackets	UGR	Spain
€13,000 or less	9.4	14.4
€13,001 to €21,000	29.5	24.3
€21,001 to €32,000	23.2	21.7
€32,001 to €47,000	17.5	18.2
€47,001 to €60,000	15.2	10.3
Above €60,000	5.2	7.0

Source: own research. CIS Survey 3427. November 2023 Barometer.

4.1.2. *Parental education level*

Table 2 shows the educational level of the parents of UGR students. Higher education and secondary education together account for the majority, which stands at 58.9% among mothers and 53.9% among fathers. In addition, these figures are compared with national parental education data and with those from the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). The results show that doctoral (7.7% and 7.4%, respectively) and higher education (35.4% and 28.4%, respectively) qualifications are substantially more prevalent among the parents of students at both universities than among the average Spanish parent, a pattern that points to the intergenerational transmission of educational capital: families with higher education credentials have considerably greater access to university. Conversely, university access remains limited for children of parents with low educational levels – particularly those with no formal education or only primary schooling, who are markedly underrepresented. At the UGR, 14.4% of mothers and 17.3% of fathers fall into this category, while it is even more pronounced at the UCM (11.1% of mothers and 12.8% of fathers).

The proportion of parents with vocational training qualifications (18%) may be a significant factor in young people’s tendency to choose non-university training pathways, reinforcing the preference for technical and professional options that offer faster entry into the labour market.

Having only secondary education is markedly less common among the parents of university students than in the general population of the same generation: while almost half of Spaniards aged 48–62 did not progress beyond this level, this figure is nearly halved among the parents of students at both the UCM and the UGR. This pattern suggests a combination of upward social mobility, expanding educational aspirations and the partial democratisation of access to higher education. Secondary education thus functions as an intermediate social space where strategies of upward

mobility and mechanisms of reproduction coexist: some families manage to surpass the educational level of the previous generation, while others remain constrained by cultural and economic resources.

It is also worth noting that the gender gap in educational attainment is smaller than in the general Spanish population, with mothers of university students tending to hold relatively high qualifications – a pattern that may reflect a generational shift in women’s education in urban and middle-class contexts.

This confirms that the current student body at both the UCM and the UGR comes disproportionately from families with above-average educational levels, reinforcing the role of cultural capital as a key determinant of access to higher education. While there has been some progress in the inclusion of middle-class sectors, the presence of working-class students – particularly those from families that did not progress beyond primary education – remains limited. Universities continue to be predominantly the preserve of the children of graduates, which poses a significant challenge to equal opportunities and genuine social mobility.

Table 2
Parental education level (%)

Education level	Spanish population - women (48-62 years)	Spanish population - men (48-62 years)	Mothers UCM	Fathers UCM	Mothers UGR	Fathers UGR
Doctorate	1.0	1.0	6.8	6.0	7.7	7.4
Higher education	28.0	18.0	48.8	32.6	35.4	28.4
Vocational training	15.0	14.0	19.8	22.6	18.2	18.0
Secondary	46.0	46.0	21.5	26.1	23.5	25.5
Primary	14.0	19.0	9.2	9.8	10.9	12.2
No formal education	3.0	3.0	1.9	3.0	3.5	5.1

Source: own research. Teaching Innovation Project 40, UCM.

4.1.3. Parental occupation

Across Spain as a whole, the most common occupational category is professional support technicians (25.5%), followed by scientific and intellectual professionals (19.8%) and service workers (catering, personal, protective and sales workers) (11.8%). Directors and managers account for 11.2%, reflecting a moderately high share of senior occupational profiles in the general population.

At the UCM, a more polarised profile emerges. While professional support technicians remain the most represented group (20.4%), there is a notably higher share both of directors and managers (14.1%) and service workers (21.7%), suggesting greater social diversity in the student body and a stronger presence of families whose primary income derives from the service sector.

The UGR presents a distinct profile. The largest occupational category is accounting, administrative and clerical employees (16.8%), followed closely by service workers (16%) and scientific and intellectual professionals (11.9%). Particularly striking is the relatively high presence of workers in agriculture, livestock and fishing (9.7%) and in elementary occupations (9.2%), pointing to greater representation of students from rural backgrounds or households with lower professional qualifications.

Directors and managers barely reach 9.6%, reinforcing the picture of a less elite social composition compared to the UCM.

Compared with the national picture, the two universities display distinct occupational profiles that bear the marks of their respective territories, regional labour markets and student body characteristics.

Table 3

Occupation of the highest earner in your household (%)

Occupation	Spain	UCM	UGR
1. Directors and managers	11.2	14.1	9.6
2. Scientific and intellectual professionals	19.8	10.9	11.9
3. Professional support technicians	25.5	20.4	7.8
4. Accounting, administrative and clerical employees	9.7	10.6	16.8
5. Service workers (catering, personal, protective and sales workers)	11.8	21.7	16.0
6. Skilled agricultural, livestock and fishing workers	2.2	2.2	9.7
7. Skilled craft and trade workers in manufacturing and construction	5.8	7.3	9.2
8. Plant and machinery operators and assemblers	2.1	3.0	5.5
9. Elementary occupations	4.6	4.3	9.2
10. Military and police occupations	1.7	5.4	4.0

Source: own research. Teaching Innovation Project 40, UCM. CIS Survey 3427. November 2023 Barometer.

4.2. Perceptions of inequality

The following sections analyse how UGR students perceive inequality, how they self-place in terms of social class and how they understand the distribution of wealth in Spain.

4.2.1. *Perceptions of social class position*

This section examines the self-perception of relative social position according to family income, interpreted through a social class lens. Two classification frameworks are used: the income brackets established by the OECD to define social classes and the classification used by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) (Table 4). The aim is to identify which class individuals would fall into according to their income. For this purpose, the CIS classification was adopted for the analysis of university students' household income, since this classification more appropriately locates the upper class at incomes above €60,000.

Table 4
Classification of social classes by income

Social class	OECD annual income brackets (€)	CIS income classification (€)
Upper class	Above 41,840	Above 60,000
Upper-middle class	31,380 to 41,840	47,001 to 60,000
Middle-middle class	20,920 to 31,380	32,001 to 47,000
Lower-middle class	15,690 to 20,920	21,001 to 32,000
Working class	Not included	13,001 to 21,000
Lower class	15,690 or less	13,000 or less

Source: own elaboration based on OECD (2023), Income Distribution Database and CIS Survey 3427. November 2023 Barometer.

Table 5 compares class self-perception across students at the two universities and the general Spanish population, and includes a column of objective data on social structure to allow subjective perceptions to be set against real class positions. The aim is to identify mismatches between actual and perceived class, and to examine how university students understand their place in the social hierarchy. It should be noted that the 'working class' category was not included in the self-perception questionnaire administered to UGR students. Placing it alongside upper, middle and lower class categories within the same classification scheme risks confusing respondents, since a theoretically consistent classification would also require including the capitalist or bourgeois class and a middle class defined by the mechanisms of exclusion governing access to educational credentials and technical skills (Wright,

2018). Accordingly, the 29.5% of UGR students whose household income falls between €13,000 and €21,000 are distributed across the middle-middle, lower-middle and lower class categories. This accounts for the notably higher combined percentage of middle-middle and lower-middle class self-identification among UGR students (57.1% and 25.1%, respectively) compared to both the UCM (47.8% and 17.9%, respectively) and the general Spanish population (44.6% and 13%, respectively).

Table 5

What social class would you say you belong to?

Social class	Spain		UCM		UGR	
	Perceived	Actual	Perceived	Actual	Perceived	Actual
Upper	0.2	7.0	1.3	8.1	0.3	5.2
Upper-middle	3.6	10.3	14.9	7.6	14.6	15.2
Middle-middle	44.6	18.2	47.8	52.3	57.1	17.5
Lower-middle	13.0	21.7	17.9	15.8	25.1	23.2
Working	11.8	24.3	17.1	8.5	*	29.5
Lower	16.2	14.4	1.0	7.7	2.6	9.4

Source: own research. Teaching Innovation Project 40, UCM. CIS Survey 3427. November 2023 Barometer.

Table 5 reveals that class self-perception does not necessarily correspond to objective class position, particularly among university students. Self-identification as ‘middle class’ dominates the collective imagination, driven by meritocratic narratives and a desire to distance oneself from stigmatised categories such as ‘working class’ or ‘lower class’. Access to university itself varies based on social origin, as the preceding data confirm, reflecting the persistence of structural inequalities within the educational system.

This tendency is evident across all three contexts – Spain, the UCM and the UGR – with particularly strong concentration in the ‘middle-middle’ category among the general Spanish population and UGR students. Three factors help account for this pattern: (a) The desire for normalisation and social stability. Many people avoid identifying with ‘lower’ or ‘working’ class categories because of the stigma and precariousness associated with them. This is what the literature terms the ‘middle-class illusion’ (Castillo, Miranda and Cabib, 2013), which blurs class boundaries, neutralises the perception of structural conflict and weakens awareness of inequality. (b) The cultural construction of the middle class as synonymous with success and progress. Haddon and Wu (2021) argue that the subjective experience of class is shaped not only by material conditions but by cultural and symbolic narratives that diminish

the perception of social distance. In this context, self-identification as ‘middle class’ functions as a form of aspirational identity that offers symbolic stability in the face of precariousness, particularly among young people transitioning to the labour market. (c) The buffering effect of higher education. University attendance can generate an optimistic perception of upward mobility even when objective class position has not changed. Drawing on system justification theory (Jost, 2019), individuals – including those from subordinate groups – tend to legitimise the status quo and perceive the existing social order as just or inevitable.

Symbolic identification with the middle class thus sustains a sense of normality and distributive justice, reducing the dissonance between mobility aspirations and real conditions of inequality.

These findings are consistent with the concept of subjective socioeconomic status (SSES), which – as discussed in the theoretical framework – captures how individuals perceive their relative position in the social hierarchy beyond objective income indicators. The data suggest that class self-perception is not determined solely by household income brackets but is mediated by social, cultural and symbolic discourses that ‘normalise’ middle-class identification, as can be seen in Table 6. The MacArthur Scale (Adler *et al.*, 2000) similarly shows that middle-class identification can be decoupled from objective socioeconomic indicators.

4.2.2. *Wealth distribution by quintiles*

It is important to distinguish conceptually between two related but distinct dimensions: income and wealth, with wealth referring to accumulated assets rather than earnings. The literature consistently shows that wealth inequality is considerably greater than income inequality in most countries (Piketty, 2015). The OECD report *Income and Wealth Inequalities: Society at a Glance 2024* notes that, across OECD countries, the wealthiest 10% own on average more than 50% of total household wealth, compared to a considerably lower share of total income. When asked to estimate the distribution of wealth in Spain (Table 6), students display a widespread underestimation of real inequality. Wealth in Spain is highly concentrated: the richest quintile (5) owns 67.3% of total wealth (with Conde and García [2025] assigning 21% of total wealth to 1% of Spanish households); yet UCM students estimate this share at only 45.5%, and UGR students at 39.9%. This reflects a significant distortion of economic reality in both universities.

At the other end of the distribution, the poorest quintile (1) – which actually holds just 0.5% of total wealth – is assigned 6.1% by UCM students and 9.8% by those at the UGR, further illustrating the tendency to perceive a more equal society than the data support.

This discrepancy between the actual distribution of wealth and students’ perceived or ideal distribution reflects a pattern widely documented in the international literature on misperceptions of inequality and redistributive preferences (Gimpelson and

Treisman, 2018). As Hauser and Norton (2017) argue, what matters is not only how unequal society actually is, but how unequal people believe it to be.

The data show that students underestimate the real concentration of wealth and overestimate the share held by the lowest quintiles, constructing a more egalitarian representation of the economy than objective evidence warrants. This perceptual gap carries significant implications: research has consistently shown that ignorance or underestimation of inequality reduces support for redistributive policies and strengthens individualistic narratives, to the detriment of a more critically aware citizenry.

Nevertheless, students propose an ideal distribution of wealth considerably more equitable than the actual one. At the UCM, students assign the richest quintile an ideal share of 26.9% and the poorest 13.4%. At the UGR, an even more egalitarian model is proposed, with the richest quintile at 21.3% and the poorest at 16.2%. This suggests that inequality is experienced less as a structural reality than as a moral or ethical problem – though it is notable that even in students’ ideal scenarios, the richest quintile retains a substantially larger share than the poorest.

Table 6
Perceived and ideal wealth distribution (%)

Wealth distribution	Actual	UCM Perceived	UCM Ideal	UGR Perceived	UGR Ideal
Quintile 1	0.5	6.1	13.4	9.8	16.2
Quintile 2	5.4	10.5	16.8	12.6	17.7
Quintile 3	10.0	15.6	20.0	17.4	23.5
Quintile 4	16.8	22.4	22.9	20.2	21.3
Quintile 5	67.3	45.5	26.9	39.9	21.3

Source: own research. Teaching Innovation Project 40, UCM.

4.2.3. *Income relative to mine*

Table 7 examines the perception of relative socioeconomic status, specifically, how students compare their household income to that of others. The analysis of household income in relation to the perception of relative economic status allows us to delve deeper into one of the central concerns of this study: the mismatch between objective socioeconomic position and the way students interpret their place in the social structure. As established above, perceptions of inequality are not shaped solely by material conditions but are mediated by social, cultural and symbolic processes that influence class self-placement.

Among students in the lowest income bracket ($\leq$ €13,000), almost half consider that the majority of families are better off economically: 40.7% estimate that 75% of families have higher incomes than their own, compared to only 8.9% who believe that three quarters of households are worse off. This reflects a clear awareness of economic disadvantage but limited downward comparison, suggesting that inequality is understood as a structural trait rather than as a relative situation open to change.

In the middle income brackets (€13,001–€32,000), although the proportion of students who acknowledge the existence of lower-income households increases, upward comparison remains dominant. In the €21,001–€32,000 segment, for instance, 46.6% consider that at least half of all families have higher incomes than their own, compared to 43.8% who place half or more of households below them. This near-symmetry does not reflect balance but class ambivalence, characteristic of the contemporary middle classes.

Following Bourdieu (1982), this ambivalence can be interpreted as the product of an intermediate position marked by the accumulation of cultural capital – in this case, access to university – that does not necessarily translate into equivalent economic security. Constant comparison with those ‘above’ reflects both aspirations for upward mobility and fear of social descent, producing a sense of vulnerability that fuels symbolic identification with the middle class even when material conditions are precarious.

Among students from medium-high and high-income households ($\geq$ €47,001), Table 7 reveals a greater awareness of economic privilege, though upward comparison does not disappear entirely. Among those in the over-€60,000 bracket, 56% consider that 75% of families have lower incomes than their own – a perception broadly consistent with their objective position. Yet 24% still estimate that at least half of households are better off, suggesting that even the most privileged sectors define their status in relation to groups that are still more advantaged. This constant displacement of the reference group upwards obscures the perception of privilege and reinforces the idea that inequality is always external and other.

These empirical patterns take on their full meaning when analysed through the lens of system justification theory. As Jost and Hunyady (2005) and Jost (2019) argue, individuals tend to accept and legitimise the existing social order as a means of reducing cognitive dissonance. The data in Table 7 suggest that generalised upward comparison – even among those in relatively advantaged positions – functions as a symbolic mechanism that places inequality at ‘other’ social levels, weakening identification with disadvantaged groups and diminishing awareness of structural conflict.

Taken together, the data show that objective household income does not translate directly into a clear perception of class position. The interaction between SSES, Bourdieu’s logics of capital and the legitimating mechanisms of the system produces a class self-placement characterised by insecurity, upward comparison and

persistent identification with a generic ‘middle class’. This explanatory framework helps to account for why, even against a backdrop of structural inequality, university students tend to acknowledge inequality without translating that recognition into a critical reading of social hierarchies or any greater disposition to challenge the existing order.

Table 7
What percentage of families do you think have higher/lower income than yours? (UGR, %)

Household income	Higher than mine			Lower than mine		
	25	50	75	25	50	75
€13,000 or less	23.0	36.3	40.7	65.9	25.2	8.9
€13,001 to €21,000	22.4	57.2	20.5	48.9	41.2	9.9
€21,001 to €32,000	31.3	56.3	12.3	20.8	61.4	17.8
€32,001 to €47,000	41.4	51.5	7.1	11.1	57.6	31.3
€47,001 to €60,000	62.5	31.9	5.6	5.6	50.0	44.4
Above €60,000	69.3	24.0	6.7	6.7	37.3	56.0
Overall total	34.2	50.5	15.3	29.2	49.1	21.7

Source: own research.

It should be noted that, according to data from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2025), the AROPE rate (At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion) stood at approximately 26.5% of the population in Spain in 2023, meaning that almost one in four households faces poverty or social exclusion risk; by 2024 this figure had fallen to 25.8%.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study yield a number of substantive conclusions in relation to the stated objectives.

First, the data on parental income, education and occupation show that UGR students come predominantly from households with somewhat more favourable socioeconomic positions than the Spanish average, particularly in the lower strata, though very high-income households are also underrepresented. A high proportion of parents hold higher education qualifications, while families with low educational levels – especially those who did not progress beyond primary school – are markedly underrepresented. Although some families with secondary and vocational qualifications have managed to partly overcome the educational barriers of the previous generation, university access remains socially selective. The data thus confirm the persistence of structural barriers to access to higher education and the continuing reproduction of intergenerational patterns of educational and cultural capital transmission, which limits the scope of the university's democratising potential.

Second, there is a clear mismatch between the objective socioeconomic position of students at the University of Granada (UGR) and their class self-perception. Despite a significant proportion coming from low or lower-middle income households, the majority self-place in a generic 'middle class', pointing to a 'middle-class illusion' sustained by aspirations of upward mobility and the stigmatisation of lower social categories. This leads individuals to place themselves in the middle class even when their material conditions do not warrant it, contributing to the naturalisation of inequality and undermining the capacity to recognise and address real differences in power and resources.

This pattern of middle-class self-placement and underestimation of wealth concentration is consistent with two theoretical frameworks. On one hand, research on subjective socioeconomic status (SSES) shows that relative self-placement – rather than objective income – structures political attitudes and assessments of distributive justice, helping to explain the middle-class self-identification observed among UGR students. On the other hand, system justification theory identifies the motivational mechanisms by which individuals, including those from lower social classes, rationalise and normalise inequalities, thereby reducing citizen pressure for redistributive policies.

Comparative evidence (ISSP, EVS, WVS) and recent studies of class sensitivity (Haddon and Wu, 2021) further confirm that the relationship between objective inequality, perception and redistributive preferences is heterogeneous and contingent on class position and informational context.

Third, students display limited knowledge of the actual distribution of wealth: they substantially underestimate the concentration of wealth in the highest quintiles and overestimate the resources held by the most disadvantaged groups, constructing a

far more egalitarian image of society than the objective data support. This perceptual distortion coexists, however, with a markedly more egalitarian ideal distribution, pointing to normative values oriented towards social justice even in the absence of accurate knowledge of real inequality.

In sum, the university continues to operate according to a logic that favours students from families with established educational trajectories. A phenomenon of ‘subjective centrism’ is also apparent, whereby class self-perception obscures the real boundaries of social stratification. A notable paradox emerges: despite limited knowledge of the actual magnitude of economic inequality, university students express a clear normative inclination towards more egalitarian models of wealth distribution.

These findings underscore the need to strengthen the university’s role as an active agent in the formation of a critical and engaged citizenship, to mainstream the analysis of structural inequalities across curricula, to foster reflective thinking and to promote spaces for dialogue and transformative action within the university community. These are key conditions for building more inclusive, aware and equitable institutions that actively engage with the symbolic barriers that shape students’ university experience according to their social origin.

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ARTICLE/ARTÍCULO

Those Things That Care for Us: Objects, Assemblages and Everyday Arrangements that Sustain Life

Esas cosas que nos cuidan. Objetos, entramados y arreglos cotidianos que mantienen la vida

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ABSTRACT

The presence of technologies in care invites a rethinking of the relationships established between caregivers and people who receive care. Through our project *Technological Arrangements and Assemblages in Family Networks for Home Care* (PRY115/22), funded by the Andalusian Studies Centre Foundation, we analyse the role that technologies play in care, particularly within the domestic sphere, and their integration into the human–technological nexus. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals with intensive daily care needs and their family members in order to investigate access to and everyday use of these tools from a qualitative perspective. The results reveal habitual use of a range of devices, marked by emotional ambivalences and the formation of singular bonds. The findings suggest that care is articulated through objects and technologies that facilitate ageing in place, configuring ‘more-than-human’ care networks.

KEYWORDS: Gender; care; technologies; home.

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RESUMEN

La presencia de las tecnologías en los cuidados invita a repensar las relaciones que se establecen entre las personas cuidadoras y quienes reciben cuidados. A través de nuestro proyecto Arreglos y ensamblajes de tecnologías en las redes familiares para el cuidado de las personas en sus hogares (PRY115/22), financiado por la Fundación Centro de Estudios Andaluces, analizamos el papel que las tecnologías desempeñan en los cuidados, particularmente en el ámbito doméstico, y su inserción en los entramados sociotécnicos. Para indagar en el acceso y uso cotidiano de estas herramientas, desde un abordaje cualitativo, se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a personas con necesidades intensas de cuidados en su día a día y a sus familiares. Los resultados revelan un uso habitual de diversos dispositivos, atravesado por ambigüedades emocionales y por la construcción de vínculos singulares. Se concluye que los cuidados se articulan mediante objetos y tecnologías que facilitan la permanencia de las personas en el hogar, configurando entramados de cuidados «más que humanos».

PALABRAS CLAVE: género; cuidados; tecnologías; hogares.

1. Those things that care for us

As technologies become increasingly central to care, a reconceptualisation of the links between the human and the non-human is called for, along with a redefinition of the very concept of care in its interrelation with technological development. This approach gives rise to a number of questions: Can technology empower or foster the agency of those who need care in their daily lives? In what ways do technologies contribute to attentiveness or, on the contrary, lead to neglect? Is it meaningful to speak of ‘what takes care of us’ or to affirm that objects themselves possess the capacity to care? To provide some answers to these questions, this article presents the results of the research project *Technological Arrangements and Assemblages in Family Networks for Home Care* (PRY115/22), funded by the Andalusian Studies Centre Foundation.

The field of study of technologies in care is rapidly expanding. The academic literature has charted an extensive course on this topic, ranging from first-generation adaptations in machines and devices to more sophisticated inquiries into robotics (Vallès-Peris *et al.*, 2026), the ethical challenges of artificial intelligence (AI) and the impact of nanotechnologies on bodies (Murphy *et al.*, 2021). A substantial body of work addresses this issue from a range of perspectives. Without intending to be exhaustive, we focus here on four major analytical strands selected for their contemporary relevance and explanatory power.

The first strand focuses on technologies for health and well-being, examining the direct interaction between people and devices from a predominantly biomedical

perspective. Within this framework, AI is applied to health, learning and communication. This includes telemedicine, encompassing applications for fall prevention, home remote monitoring systems and medication management tools. Assistance robots also play an important role in care processes (Nagusi Intelligence Center, 2023).

The second strand concerns the development of so-called smart homes and the incorporation of technological resources into domestic environments. Feminist perspectives have problematised this proposal, examining how the sexual division of labour within the home is transformed – yet ultimately maintained – as ways of living change, and questioning whether smart homes can genuinely be said to fulfil a caring role (Gruhlich *et al.*, 2025). This strand thus explores the relationship between care and technology through the lens of social gender structures.

The third strand examines the potential of technology in care, with particular emphasis on the training and education of caregivers in order to counter misinformation and alleviate the concerns that technological developments may raise (Torres-Gelo, 2025). It seeks to cultivate more positive dispositions towards technological advances, understanding them as tools that facilitate care.

The fourth strand approaches technologies from the intersection of science and technology studies (STS) and the ethics of care. From this perspective, technologies are understood to reconfigure the relationships between those who receive care and those who provide it (Moyà-Köhler and Domènech, 2021; Sánchez Criado and Domènech, 2015; Vallès-Peris and Domènech). One of the central concerns of this strand is the notion of networks of interdependence, in which the human is intertwined with objects, environments and technical devices. Drawing on the ethics of care, authors such as Paperman (2019) and Tronto (2024) have emphasised an embodied and relational subjectivity sustained by networks of interdependence. Although this approach has been somewhat resistant to technification, viewing it as a risk to ‘good care’ (Nurock, 2020, 2024), authors such as Winance (2024) bridge the gap between STS and the ethics of care. They suggest that technological objects and arrangements can be facilitators of agency, allowing the body not only to be ‘acted upon’ by others but also to act through technological mediations.

These contributions reflect the multiplicity of approaches from which the relationship between technologies and care can be analysed. This last strand provides the analytical foundation for our research, since sociotechnical frameworks and the ethics they materialise are best placed to reveal how care is being reconfigured. We argue that technologies and everyday objects are not mere instruments but constituents of more-than-human assemblages that redefine the very meaning of care. The objective of this article is to explore and describe the technologies present in home care practices, drawing on the accounts of those directly involved – people who require care in their daily lives and their family members.

2. Defining technocare

Vulnerability is inherent to the human condition (Paperman, 2005), which makes caregiving a universal need. Additionally, the integration of technologies into care practices directly affects social relationships and ways of perceiving and experiencing reality. If vulnerability is the norm rather than the exception, technological devices are not mere technical aids but fundamental means through which care is made possible.

Maintaining and repairing bodies, as well as sustaining the emotional and subjective dimensions of life, depends on interactions involving both humans and non-humans. In this framework, technologies are active participants in care (Mol, Moser and Pols, 2010; Winance, 2024). Telecare illustrates this well, as do various devices that acquired greater visibility during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, such as respirators used in intensive care units. While technology cannot replace the care provided between human beings, many devices have contributed to saving, maintaining and repairing lives. Some take the form of techno-assistive devices that become incorporated into bodies, binding with and integrating into them – as is the case with wheelchairs, prostheses and hearing aids (García Selgas and Martín Palomo, 2021). The assemblage of care technologies involves continuous readjustments and rebalancing that facilitate and improve daily life, or simply render it bearable, allowing people to maintain their autonomy even in situations of great fragility (Callén et al., 2009). The degree to which technologies and care align depends largely on the uses attributed to them in specific contexts (Mol, 2008).

The specialist literature on technologies and care reveals a vast field, ranging from studies of first-generation applications – such as the adjustment of wheelchairs, respirators and remote care devices (Mol, Moser and Pols, 2010) – to examinations of the relationship between care and robotics (Vallès-Peris *et al.*, 2026), artificial intelligence (Murphy *et al.*, 2021; De Togni *et al.*, 2024), and nanotechnologies and their impact on bodies (Maestrutti, 2011), as well as the ethical challenges these developments entail (Nurock, 2020, 2024). In short, this is a broad field that demonstrates how technologies already participate in care in multiple ways (Buse, Martin and Nettleton, 2018; Browsel and Bradley, 2003). Such participation is not merely instrumental – it redefines the lives of those who need care and all those involved in their care network.

Technologies are part of what it means to be human and have been present since the earliest hominids first created basic tools. Yet, like caregiving itself, they tend to become taken for granted once incorporated into everyday life. As Núria Vallès-Peris (2021) underlines, technologies are not neutral but active mediators in moral, social and political action – hence the importance of examining both concrete care practices and the ethics embedded in artefacts.

3. Methodology

The study of technologies involved in care presents both theoretical and methodological challenges, given that these practices are deeply embedded in everyday life and, as such, rarely made explicit in social discourse. To meet the objectives of this article – to explore and describe the technologies present in home care practices – a qualitative methodological design was adopted, with semi-structured interviews as the main technique for generating data. This technique allows us to examine how participants interpret care as mediated by technological objects and devices, drawing on the accounts of both those who provide care and those who receive care in their everyday life.

The study population comprised people who require care and their family caregivers living with them in Andalusia. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling, via associations, sector companies and the personal networks of the research team. To minimise the biases inherent in these methods, the channels of contact were diversified, and the anonymity and confidentiality of all information was guaranteed throughout. The inclusion criteria were as follows: adults residing in their own homes or in the homes of relatives in Andalusia, who need and receive care in their daily life or who provide it to family members, and who are able to communicate orally with or without support. The exclusion criteria were: non-residents of Andalusia, people living in residential care facilities, minors and those unable to communicate orally.

Fieldwork took place in 2023 and 2024, in a post-pandemic context marked by the persistence of distress and fear, as well as a heightened awareness of vulnerability. This context shaped the ways in which technologies were incorporated into care and the meanings they acquired in everyday life. A total of 22 interviews were conducted: six with people with daily care needs and 16 with family caregivers of people in situations of dependency. Twenty participants were women and two were men, ranging in age from 31 to 83 years. Most caregivers care for their parents – mothers more frequently than fathers – while the remainder care for their spouses. Contacting older people proved particularly difficult due to the post-pandemic climate and the reluctance of family members to allow unknown individuals into their homes, which resulted in a smaller final sample of people receiving care. The criterion of thematic saturation was nonetheless maintained to determine the closure of fieldwork.

Interviews were conducted using an open thematic script covering dimensions such as family history, care activities both provided and received, reflections on care and current needs, and the specific use of objects, machines and technologies. This script was conceived as a flexible tool, open to unforeseen elements that might arise in the course of the interviews.

Analysis was carried out manually, combining semantic analysis – identifying attractors and semantic fields, categories, oppositions and rhetorical figures – with structural analysis aimed at understanding the social positions from which

discursive differences emerge. Interview transcripts were reviewed and an analysis plan was designed around the central concepts identified in relation to technologies, assemblages and objects present in care. A cross-analysis was subsequently carried out, relating discourses according to the topics addressed and the contexts in which they emerged. We sought to identify not only the technologies explicitly mentioned but also those objects that, through their routine integration, had become ‘invisible’ in participants’ accounts. Discourses were interpreted in relation to the concrete conditions of life from which participants construct their perceptions of care and technology, considering the subject of enunciation in relation to the social position they occupy (Alonso, 1998).

4. There are things that take care of us, but it’s hard to talk about them

The findings of the fieldwork reveal that the relationship between care and technology does not emerge spontaneously in participants’ narrative discourse. The topic had to be explicitly introduced before participants began to reflect on these aspects of their routines. This suggests that technocare is either still an incipient reality in the social imagination or, more likely, so deeply embedded in everyday life that it is not perceived as a distinct phenomenon. For it to appear in discourse, it had to be ‘provoked’ – consistent with the idea that technology becomes transparent when it works as intended. The results presented here focus on the technological devices that were most significant for our participants, which means that more familiar technologies feature more prominently than more innovative ones.

4.1. The banal, the small, the everyday

4.1.1. *Objects for medical care at home*

The interviews reveal the presence of various objects related to self-care and home medical monitoring. Devices such as glucose meters, insulin pumps, pulse oximeters and blood pressure monitors actively participate in care, fostering a degree of autonomy. While some devices can be managed independently, others – such as syringes – require the involvement of another person, activating social interactions and bodily contact.

I check my sugar, because I have diabetes. I prick myself and check my sugar. And then when they come, they take my blood pressure. [I8, woman receiving care, 43 years old].

In this case, the glucometer acts as a mediator of personal agency, while the blood pressure monitor articulates the bond with caregivers.

The incorporation of medical technical aids in the home allows family members to assume clinical competencies through their use:

When he catches a cold, the oxygen in his head drops a little, and I have the device. I put it on him one day and he got better. [...] I've got one of those blood pressure monitors, and I also bought one of those finger things to keep track of his blood oxygen. [I3, female, cares for father, 57 years old].

Here, the pulse oximeter – ‘the finger thing’ – not only measures a physiological parameter but provides the caregiver with a sense of security that reduces uncertainty and fear.

The relationship with the object can also be a means of asserting identity and preserving privacy, even in situations of high dependency:

She manages well [*with the probe*]. She doesn't want anyone to touch her, that says it all. She goes, empties her bag, puts it on and takes it off herself. She doesn't want anyone to touch her. [I18, cares for mother, 55 years old].

In appropriating the probe, the person receiving care marks a bodily boundary, thereby preserving her privacy. These findings show that medical technical objects in the home give rise to tensions between autonomy and dependence on others, shaping specific forms of articulation between bodies, technologies and care.

4.1.2. *Mobility inside and outside the home*

Walking sticks, walkers and wheelchairs emerge in participants' accounts as essential aids for mobility, though each carries a different symbolic weight. The walking stick is perceived as a basic and traditional aid, strongly rooted in the cultural imaginary of old age. The walker, by contrast, is valued for the safer movement it affords both inside and outside the home. In everyday use, it transcends its original function as a support, becoming a transport platform and acquiring new meaning: it serves to carry other objects.

With my walker I go from here to there [*circles the room with her finger*]. And I do four laps. Just great, I can go back and forth. [I15, woman receiving care, 76 years old].

She needs the walker. What she does is swap it for the shopping trolley, loading it up with goodness knows how many litres of milk. [I15, female, cares for mother, 57 years old].

The walker thus not only aids walking but enables the person to do their shopping. It ceases to be a technical aid and merges with an everyday object – the shopping trolley – becoming a facilitator of agency.

In contrast, the wheelchair is frequently associated with a sense of irreversibility and loss of autonomy. It represents an advanced stage of support that, unlike the walking stick or walker, is often perceived as a point of no return. This leads caregivers and their families to postpone its incorporation into daily life for as long as possible.

I try to use it as little as possible. I try. When you can't manage, you can't manage. If I put him in the wheelchair for three days, on the fourth he doesn't know how to walk. I've seen it with my own two eyes. I started using it recently, when he wasn't feeling himself. 'Do you like it?' 'Yes, I like it' [*recreating a conversation with her father*]. And then the next day he didn't want to go downstairs. He was waiting for the chair – he's not stupid. So, while he can, he walks; when he can't, he'll use the chair. [I3, female, cares for father, 57 years old].

This account illustrates how bodies and assistive technologies align and misalign. There is an active resistance to the wheelchair, driven by the fear that it will undermine the motor abilities of the person receiving care.

4.1.3. *Personal hygiene and postural changes*

For caregivers, certain devices are critical in situations of high dependency, particularly those designed for moving, washing and repositioning. Standing and mobilisation hoists emerge as key tools that reconfigure domestic space, enabling transfers – from bed to chair or vice versa – without compromising the physical integrity of the person receiving care or the health of the caregiver. In this sense, the hoist provides safety and reduces the risk of injury, and rather than replacing human contact, it facilitates interaction in a safe manner. A significant finding is the personification of the object. Giving it a name singles out this particular object – and no other – incorporating it into a shared framework of meaning that enables a common experience among those involved.

I found this hoist by searching the internet. It's a standing hoist – you put a harness on it, grab the two handles and it lifts you upwards. [...] I need it – I couldn't manage without it. It's called Manolito. We've even given it a name in our house. We couldn't live without Manolito because I couldn't lift her – I don't have the strength. So I really need this kind of mechanical infrastructure. [I13, female, cares for mother, 31 years old].

However, accessing these resources is far from straightforward, revealing economic and bureaucratic barriers for those without public assistance or sufficient financial means:

I cried a lot, because I came here asking for a hoist. This guy saw me – I can't remember his name now – and I was crying my eyes out. [I19, cares for mother, 57 years old].

The incorporation of these technical aids also requires a learning and adjustment process, which often requires the collaboration of others and involves considerable additional effort:

If you pay attention it's easy enough. Of course, I can't manage on my own [...] The harness has a kind of handle on the back that you have to pull to get her into the chair, and someone else has to press the button at the same time. I can't do it alone. My daughter can do it alone, and so can the carer. [I16, female, cares for spouse, 81 years old].

The acts of 'pressing the button' and 'pulling the harness' reveal a form of care in which humans and machines must work together. This stands in stark contrast with memories of how things used to be done, when such movements had to be carried out manually, taking a heavy physical toll. Hoists allow the task of mobilisation to be carried out more carefully and with less physical strain.

I used to do have to do that, so I remember it perfectly well. Oh, dear. I remember helping my mother – getting her up, putting her to bed, washing her. And then I'd have to look after my aunt for a month, as the person whose turn it was couldn't do it. [I17, female, cares for mother, 43 years old].

4.1.4. *Rest and repair*

Articulated beds and anti-bedsore mattresses are progressively incorporated into the home as care needs intensify. Entering everyday life as devices for repair and prevention, these technical aids bring hospital logic into the private space of the home, transforming the bedroom into a clinical support environment. However, this medicalisation of the home depends on the availability of economic resources, public assistance and the physical characteristics of the home itself, which must be adapted to accommodate such objects.

Technology offers increasingly specific and personalised solutions to improve quality of life, gradually becoming part of everyday care. As needs become more complex, and where resources allow, responses grow more sophisticated. One participant describes how her husband has an anti-bedsore mattress with a remote control, which allows it to be inflated and deflated as needed. This not only prevents pressure sores from forming but also helps improve blood circulation and muscle tone, therefore providing comprehensive care. Another describes how an articulated bed allows the body to be repositioned more gently, facilitating both rest and care tasks.

Since she already had a fall when she was 40, we have her in an articulated bed with a motor, which makes it easier to adjust her position – even getting her up is easier. [I12, female, cares for spouse, 63 years old].

In situations of great vulnerability, these technical aids are seen as essential to sustaining life:

We bought her a mattress so that she doesn't get bedsores... If it weren't for this device, she would surely be dead. [I14, male, cares for spouse, 50 years old].

4.1.5. *Prostheses*

Devices that complement or replace limbs or organs generate ambivalent relationships with their users. Hearing aids are a case in point: despite their capacity to improve hearing, they frequently meet with resistance owing to their high cost, erratic functioning and the symbolic associations that link their use with old age. Participants' accounts suggest that these devices frequently fall short of their advertised promise of natural hearing, introducing instead unwanted noises, buzzes and distortions that disrupt rather than facilitate communication. The device introduces a mediation that the person cannot always control, causing discomfort and frustration, and often requiring constant adjustment. Indispensable as they are for many people, hearing aids are thus perceived as artefacts whose imperfect functioning falls short of the needs that led to their use – giving rise, in turn, to an ambivalent relationship with technology.

These things? They're a real pain, because when there are lots of people around, it picks up noise from all over the place and it gets overwhelming. [I2, male, cares for spouse, 87 years old].

One works fine, but not the other [...] I can hear noise in my ears. [I7, woman receiving care, 82 years old].

As with the wheelchair, the adoption of hearing aids tends to be postponed for as long as possible, as it is experienced as an irreversible change. The process of adapting to these devices is consequently laden with emotions and reflections on identity, independence and ageing – mirroring, in many ways, how some people experience the transition to a wheelchair.

She would need a hearing aid, because she is very hard of hearing. [...] She would also have to pay four or five thousand euros, which is a lot. And she's not exactly... So she says: 'Well, if I don't have the money, why struggle to find it when I'm managing as it is?' She doesn't wear one because, she says, that's for old ladies. [I10, female, cares for mother, 58 years old].

He wears a device on his legs – a lift on one foot. [...] He had all the devices, the callipers and the... and the corset. To stand up, he'd grab the crutch and then he'd be able to walk. Without all of that, he can't, of course. [I12, female, cares for spouse, 63 years old].

In this case, the combination of crutch, lift and callipers makes it possible for him to stand.

What this brief analysis of prostheses reveals, then, is that the acceptance of technical aids hinges on a delicate balance between the functional benefits they provide and the economic and symbolic costs that the person is willing – or able – to bear.

4.2. The everyday: home automation, small-scale solutions and precarious arrangements

Infrastructures such as lifts, together with devices such as smoke detectors and stairlifts, function as caring technologies insofar as they enable people to maintain their daily lives and self-determination. The lift is a clear example of caring infrastructure: its absence exacerbates feelings of dependence and social exclusion, preventing activities as simple as going for a walk or doing the shopping. When lifts are present but inaccessible – for instance, too small to accommodate a wheelchair – technical adequacy becomes the linchpin of social integration and well-being:

If only the lift were bigger so he could get in. [I12, female, cares for spouse, 63 years old].

To go up and down, I've got one of those [*chair to go up and down stairs*]. And I also have a wheelchair, which I keep by there, because not long ago I went to a wedding and had to stay all day... [I2, male, cares for spouse, 87 years old].

Safety devices like smoke detectors clearly illustrate the notion of sociotechnical care networks. A detector alone does not provide security – it is merely an instrument of detection; its capacity to care lies in it being connected to an alert network comprising family members or emergency services. In this way, the detector becomes a component within a broader framework of care and protection, in which technology acts as a facilitator of rapid and effective response.

Yet this potential clashes with the digital divide, which emerges as a central obstacle to the use of certain devices. When devices require complex interaction – programming, remote controls, light codes – insufficient technological literacy translates into renunciation and exclusion. Unfamiliarity with devices can create significant barriers or lead people to abandon their use altogether, even when they could improve well-being:

The air conditioning – I don't understand it. Sometimes I've changed it, or it stops, or the little red light won't come on. [I7, woman receiving care, 82 years old].

This account points to a technological disconnect between person and device. The reference to the 'little red light' conveys the incomprehensibility of an object that, rather than making life easier, generates stress and frustration. At this point, technology ceases to care and begins to neglect: the person prefers to do without

thermal comfort rather than struggle with the device. The digital divide is not, therefore, merely a skills deficit – it is a barrier that disables people's agency within their own homes, underscoring the need for technological designs that are adapted to the particular circumstances of those who use them.

4.3. The more sophisticated: robots

Humanoid robots generate ambivalent emotions in the home care environment, ranging from fascination with innovation to fear of displacing the human aspect. The findings suggest a hierarchy of acceptability within the care framework: while robots are welcomed for maintenance tasks, they are not accepted as substitutes for care, and their acceptability is closely tied to the presence or absence of emotion. As one participant – the primary caregiver for her father – explains, the introduction of a robot into the home is perceived as a sign that the family is absent, an indication of abandonment. While acknowledging that technology could play a role in specific situations, participants express a clear preference for human presence and companionship. The robot is associated with 'cold contact' – a lack of the warmth and closeness provided by family – generating both emotional and ethical distance towards its use.

Lots of people are in the same situation as my father, alone and neglected when it comes to hygiene and things like that. I mean, if a robot can help with that, well, all the better... It's just that, in my case, I can't contemplate that, because we're here. [I11, female, cares for father, 58 years old].

A robot in your home as if it were a person. Personally, from what I've seen, no, I don't like it. Because what happens to... what we've always had? [I1, woman receiving care, 43 years old].

A robot is a robot. You can say to a robot: 'Now, make food...' But it can't think, and it doesn't have the same abilities a person has – like being able to give advice, for example. For me, a robot is a machine. What affection is a robot going to be able to show you? If you start to cry, it can't say: 'What's wrong?' It lacks the humanity that we humans have. [I9, female, cares for mother, 58 years old].

Yet perception shifts when the robot sheds its humanoid pretensions and becomes a functional object. In this guise, it is considered a suitable technological innovation for carrying out household tasks and even as a form of support or companionship:

Chatting with my mother [*laughs*]. It would be great if it could keep her entertained, and even better if it could cook her meals well. [I10, female, cares for mother, 58 years old].

In such cases, the robot is integrated into everyday life and personalised. The act of affectionately naming a cleaning robot ‘the turkey’ indicates that it has been incorporated into the care network in its own way. Here, technology frees up time and energy by taking on routine or repetitive tasks, without competing with the caregiver.

We have a robot, one of the ones that cleans for you... I call it ‘the turkey’. [I2, male, cares for spouse, 87 years old].

It really came in handy because in the mornings I’d turn the machine on and leave it going round the house, and when I got back the house would be fluff-free. [I1, woman receiving care, 43 years old].

The insurmountable barrier to the acceptance of robotics lies in the sensory, the affective and the embodied. A clear boundary emerges – one that is difficult to cross – when it comes to activities requiring closeness, affection and direct physical contact. While robots are valued for domestic tasks such as cleaning or transporting objects, responses become markedly more reticent when it comes to intimate care activities such as personal hygiene, direct attention or emotional companionship. Repetitive tasks that require no personal interaction are those most favourably regarded as candidates for replacement; this changes, however, when touch or the senses – hearing, feeling – are involved, as these are perceived as exclusively human properties.

More like mechanical things that help me [...] But a robot – what’s it going to do for me? Bring me pills on a tray? I can’t think of anything. I don’t know. Also, this illness is... It really needs a lot of sensory input. So, maybe an older person who is otherwise well... Maybe they could have some kind of smart alarm system that you can talk to and that sort of thing. But this kind of condition needs human contact – because there’s a kind of madness to it that can’t be communicated. I just can’t think of any electronic system that can recognise when someone falls or help out, you know? Because here you really need the human element. [I13, female, cares for mother, 31 years old].

We have a different touch... Believe me, we’re nothing like robots. And the touch I have – no robot could give her that, not a chance, nor the tone of my voice. [I14, male, cares for spouse, 50 years old].

Participants argue that human touch has a unique quality that no mechanical sensor can replicate.

4.4. The ambivalent: ICTs

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) simultaneously arouse interest, rejection, dependence and frustration. The continuous changes and advances in devices and applications force users to explore new resources, transforming what

they already know and altering established ways of relating. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by older people's preference for the landline over more modern devices such as mobile phones or tablets, which tend to provoke fear and insecurity. This fear is linked to a feeling of displacement in the face of dizzying technological change, leaving people feeling out of place – even incompetent – as devices change and are updated at an ever faster pace.

I have the landline and my daughter wanted to change it. And I said: 'No.' Because I don't understand it. Leave me my landline – I know how to make a call on it. [I5, woman receiving care, 76 years old].

The simplicity and familiarity of the landline offers a sense of control and security not found in mobile phones. When I7 reports that 'my mobile freezes on me', we witness a breakdown in the assemblage: the device ceases to facilitate communication and becomes instead a barrier, placing the person in a position of helplessness and displacement.

I don't really understand mobiles. Because sometimes when I dial a number – to call my daughter or call Marta or something – it freezes on me. [I7, woman receiving care, 82 years old].

Many of the ambivalences surrounding the use of ICTs, and the absence of any mention of artificial intelligence (AI) in participants' accounts, are deeply connected to the digital divide – a gap that manifests itself both in access to devices and in the lack of skills to use them effectively. As a result, despite recognition of their potential benefits, everyday use is often hindered. Fear of making mistakes, lack of support and the feeling of it being 'too late' to learn all contribute to reluctance.

The phone is a pain – it drives me mad. Half the time I don't know which button to press [...]. I bought a computer for the surgery back in eighty-two – I've been computerised from the start. [...]. You start using it, you press something, and before you know it everything goes pear-shaped. All these new technologies, it's unbelievable how much they keep changing. [I2, male, cares for spouse, 87 years old].

The reluctance to engage with a new device is an added barrier for many people, especially when it involves genuinely new technology. The feeling of not knowing where to start, or the struggle of having to learn new skills, can be a considerable obstacle. A key moment in overcoming this reluctance – and even the fear of not being able to get to grips with the device – comes when it begins to form part of daily routine. As interactions with the device are repeated, a degree of familiarity develops that reduces the effort involved and builds confidence. When this process is slow to occur, however, feelings of frustration or demotivation tend to arise, leading to the device being abandoned altogether – particularly when it involves constant updates, new features or settings.

I'm looking for a phone – I've seen one that lets you put a photo of the person or record number 1, Lola, number 2, such and such. When she wants to call us, she keeps getting the numbers wrong on the phone. Because she can't see them – she has one of those phones with big numbers, but she can't see them any more. She memorises them, but sometimes she gets it wrong. [I15, female, cares for mother, 57 years old].

Intergenerational collaboration emerges as a key source of support in first encounters with new devices, reflecting not only the adaptability of the family institution but also the continuity of affective ties, now mediated by screens and applications.

TikTok is plenty for me. When I want to find something out, I check the news, I look it up online. And I have my son, who's a psychologist, so I ask him too. [I3, female, cares for father, 57 years old].

Younger family members play a crucial role in facilitating older generations' adaptation to new technologies, acting as digital mediators and caregivers in their own right. They encourage older people to use social media and video-calling platforms to maintain ties with family and friends. The support they provide not only aids learning but also helps to reduce the anxiety that technology can provoke.

Important things like wishing people happy birthday, happy Christmas, making calls... I do all that too. I also have groups on my phone now, and I had no idea about that. Me. And they said: 'Mum, you need to have a phone and learn how to use it.' And I've started getting the hang of it. I even know how to send money by Bizum and make bank transfers now [*laughs*]. I'm learning little by little. [I4, female, cares for spouse, 79 years old].

Younger participants are more open to incorporating new devices into their lives and routines. Older participants describe having been obliged to learn to use many new devices – an experience that provokes some fear as new technologies come to occupy an ever greater place in their lives, though they recognise that they can adapt and that these tools are very useful, including for supporting the care of others or for self-care.

We've all had to learn to use it. Because mobile phones didn't exist before [...]. I'm good with technology – whether connecting remote controls, whatever, I manage just fine. I have no problems with new technologies. It's true that lately we've all been inundated with new technologies. [I1, woman receiving care, 43 years old].

I use Alexa to set me a timer for my injection. 'Alexa...' Because I have to... I have to inject myself, take it out, and that's half an hour. So I get Alexa to set a timer for me and she lets me know when the half hour is up – you don't have to keep an eye on the clock. [I8, woman receiving care, 43 years old].

Some devices can also play an important role in combating boredom, setting reminders or providing stimulation. Many participants, however, encounter difficulties in their use and struggle to pronounce device names correctly. Added to this, some devices carry biases in their design – Alexa, for instance, does not clearly understand the Andalusian accent – raising the question of who, precisely, these technologies are designed for.

A new device can also activate relationships with others:

I go to my neighbour's: 'Fix this for me, because my mobile has stopped working.'
[I7, woman receiving care, 82 years old].

In sum, objects reveal structural inequalities. Vision problems, or the difficulty that devices have in adapting to individual singularities and linguistic nuances, show that many technologies have been designed for a standard consumer and are poorly adapted to functional and social diversity.

4.5. The most widely used: telecare

Telecare is perhaps the most widespread and valued technology in home care networks. Combining various devices, it creates the sense that those who have it installed in their homes are under permanent care. All participants regard it as an essential resource; its value lies not so much in its technical functionality as in its capacity to generate a feeling of security. It is thus associated with companionship, autonomy and the possibility of continuing to live in one's own environment. While some concern about the loss of privacy can be detected, experiences are generally positive among those interviewed; the least positive relate to the limited resources available within the health and care system to respond to crisis situations.

I fell and couldn't get up. I pressed it and they called the fire brigade. They had to break the glass in the door to get in and help me up off the floor [...]. Since then, I've always worn it around my neck. [I5, woman receiving care, 76 years old].

The pendant alarm with 'the red button' ceases to be a mere object, becoming instead a kind of bodily extension – a life insurance policy. Telecare thus acts as the hub that mobilises an emergency network when needed, bringing together firefighters, medical staff and family members.

The red button, yes. Because I'm alone at night – who can I turn to? I'm not going to start calling my daughters or a neighbour, asking them to come. It's so easy with the red button – they answer you straight away. Yes, it's great. [I4, female, cares for spouse, 79 years old].

Telecare inspires a deep trust – it functions like a silent sentinel. The least positive experiences stem from shortcomings in the institutional framework rather than from failure of the device itself. Telecare thus represents sociotechnical interdependence: a small plastic button that symbolically and materially sustains the possibility of continuing to inhabit the world in a connected way, with a certain degree of independence. Its effectiveness, however, depends on the robustness of the system behind it.

Twice when things got worse, we pressed the button and the doctor came quickly.
[I16, female, cares for spouse, 81 years old].

Devices such as telecare and geolocation systems illustrate the tensions between security, privacy and autonomy. They enable people to remain at home and can locate those with cognitive impairment, even when functional limitations would otherwise make this unfeasible.

4.6. Technology and care assemblages

The analysis of participants' accounts reveals that technology acts as a support that makes remaining at home a viable option. Technology thus bridges the gap between physical limitation and the ability to continue living at home, extending what people are capable of through objects. Technologies are integrated into relational frameworks in which affection, responsibility and presence remain central.

The concern about how these networks are configured is present among our participants, and there is clear consensus: technologies can support care, but they cannot replace people in taking responsibility for it or in maintaining emotional bonds. It is assumed that technologies will be increasingly present in homes, even if the long-term sustainability of care remains uncertain.

Technology is there to be used and to help us in our day-to-day lives. [I10, female, cares for mother, 58 years old].

Believe me: technology helps, but it's people that save lives. There's no doubt about it... [I14, male, cares for mother, 50 years old].

As long as family affection is present, any object or device that makes daily life easier is welcome – the easier it is to use and maintain, the more appreciated it is.

I think all this external help – whether mechanical or device-based – is just as important as the emotional side. And the emotional side has to come from family, from your children in this case. [I15, female, cares for mother, 57 years old].

5. Conclusions

Approaching care through the lens of the interdependence that characterises the human condition brings into view challenges of a social, political, epistemological and ontological nature. Within this framework, although technologies did not emerge spontaneously in participants' accounts, once the topic was introduced, it became clear that they are an active and inseparable part of care networks. The analysis has sought to address not only what was said, but also the silences, on the assumption that what is not explicitly mentioned constitutes a central element in understanding the dynamics between care and technologies.

A fundamental finding is that everyday objects tend to become invisible in participants' accounts: their presence is so constant and fluid that they become taken for granted and simply fade into the background. Such invisibility is itself evidence that technology is woven into the fabric of domestic life. Only when an object fails, or when a crisis occurs, does its materiality re-emerge, revealing just how deeply it is embedded in the care network. Problems arise, however, when the sociotechnical fit breaks down – when technology does not function properly, when it fails to adapt to the singularity of each body, when it symbolises a loss of identity or when it cannot be fluidly incorporated into everyday life.

The technologies identified in care are varied: medical devices incorporated into daily routines, prostheses that become part of the body, mobility aids, infrastructures such as lifts and the progressive use of ICTs. Fear of technological development is expressed most intensely in relation to ICTs, owing to the demand for lifelong learning that clashes with the rhythms of old age, drawing on ableist assumptions. By requiring constant and conscious attention, these devices fail to fade into routine, generating frictions that hinder their integration into the care network. This feature hinders their silent incorporation into the daily lives of older generations, even when they have the support and encouragement of younger ones. By contrast, more traditional technologies – mobility aids, medical devices and domestic infrastructure – are integrated with less resistance.

Despite the central place that artificial intelligence (AI) occupies in public debate, our participants do not perceive a clear link between care and this technological innovation. There is no explicit mention of AI, yet care practices involve constant interactions between people, machines and devices. Technologies are part of care, but they do not operate alone: they require bonds, human mediations, maintenance, adaptation and accompaniment, as well as continuous adjustments in response to changes in bodies and life situations.

The description of these assemblages – in which people, objects, affections and responsibilities are interwoven – reopens questions about the effects of technological developments on the social organisation of care. In particular, it is worth asking whether proposals such as smart homes, remote monitoring systems or medication management applications contribute to reproducing the unequal sexual division of

labour within households, or whether, on the contrary, they can themselves generate conditions that favour greater equity or agency.

Participants' accounts constantly revisit these tensions and reflect on the use of these new – and not so new – tools. The question of whether technology contributes to people's autonomy or whether, on the contrary, it (re)produces relationships of dependence – both towards devices and towards other people – remains open. This question invites continued reflection from a situated perspective, on the understanding that all knowledge is partial and that transformations in the relationships between humans and non-humans cannot be analysed in isolation but in articulation with the social, gender and generational dimensions – and many others – that cut across care practices.

These debates, long-standing in the social sciences, remain fully pertinent in the present context. Far from offering closed answers, the analysis presented here underscores the need to continue investigating technocare from approaches that recognise the complexity of everyday networks, the centrality of human ties and the ethical dimension that runs through every care practice.

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ARTÍCULO/ARTICLE

Capital digital indirecto y el efecto ambivalente: habilidades y acción digital en la búsqueda de información sanitaria

Indirect Digital Capital and the Ambivalent Home Effect: Skills and Digital Action Searching for Health Information

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RESUMEN

La investigación analiza los factores que influyen en la búsqueda de información sanitaria en internet en Andalucía. Se ha utilizado la encuesta sobre digitalización y uso de datos personales realizada por el Instituto de Estadística y Cartografía de Andalucía (2021). Mediante análisis de regresión logística binaria, los resultados muestran cómo la intensidad y diversidad de usos de internet, así como el nivel de autoeficacia y la percepción de riesgos asociados a la privacidad condicionan la búsqueda de información sanitaria en internet. Finalmente, estos resultados sugieren que las brechas digitales deben analizarse desde una perspectiva relacional, mostrando la ambivalencia del fenómeno. El acceso indirecto al capital digital dentro del hogar puede mitigar la exclusión digital de sus miembros, pero sin eliminar las desigualdades previas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: brecha digital; autoeficacia digital; familia; capital digital; literatura salud digital.

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ABSTRACT

The research analyses the factors that influence the search for health information online in Andalusia. The survey on digitisation and the use of personal data conducted by the Institute of Statistics and Cartography of Andalusia (2021) was used. Through binary logistic regression analysis, the results show how the intensity and diversity of internet use, as well as the level of self-efficacy and the perception of risks associated with privacy, condition searching for health information on the internet. Finally, these results suggest that digital divides should be analysed from a relational perspective, showing the ambivalence of the phenomenon. Indirect access to digital capital within the home can mitigate the digital exclusion of its members, but without eliminating previous inequalities.

KEYWORDS: digital divide; digital self-efficacy; family; digital capital; digital health literacy.

1. Introducción

Partiendo del marco teórico, determinar la dirección causal de las repercusiones de la brecha digital sigue siendo complicado. Es esencial identificar los factores clave que influyen en la inclusión digital en los tres niveles. Este estudio postula que la participación digital depende del acceso, la competencia digital y la capacidad de obtener beneficios tangibles del uso de internet (Ragnedda, 2018). Las búsquedas en internet relacionadas con la salud sirven como un indicador que abarca las tres dimensiones, especialmente teniendo en cuenta la pandemia de COVID-19 (Tezanos, 2022).

Este artículo se centra en Andalucía, con un objetivo en mente: comprender los factores que influyen en la búsqueda de información sobre temas de salud en la población andaluza. Exploramos la forma en que los andaluces y las andaluzas usan, aprovechan y acceden a internet en relación con temas de salud. A través de un análisis detallado, intentamos arrojar luz sobre las disparidades digitales en Andalucía, así como identificar retos y oportunidades para mejorar la equidad en el acceso a la información sanitaria. En la era digital, el acceso a la información a través de internet se ha convertido en un elemento crucial para la promoción y el mantenimiento de la salud. Sin embargo, la capacidad de aprovechar al máximo este recurso no es uniforme (Ragnedda, 2018; Méndez-Domínguez *et al.*, 2023), como se puede observar en los datos estadísticos, que muestran un acceso y uso desigual de internet según la comunidad autónoma (INE, 2024).

George *et al.* (2013) informan sobre una brecha de conocimiento en el uso de la telesalud que refleja barreras personales y culturales, que convergen para determinar el uso efectivo de los recursos sanitarios digitales. En lugar de centrarse únicamente en el acceso, estudios recientes (por ejemplo, Goto *et al.*, 2021; Kontos *et al.*, 2014; Goggin y Ellis, 2020; Fang *et al.*, 2018; Ragnedda *et al.*, 2019; Park y Feng, 2023) documentan la importancia de cómo las personas comprenden, valoran e interactúan con las herramientas sanitarias digitales. Aquí es donde el estilo de vida familiar de los andaluces y las andaluzas entra en juego con un papel crucial (Pérez Yruela, 2002; Bericat, 2002; Gobernado, 2009).

La información sanitaria disponible sobre los datos públicos en la «Encuesta social 2021: Digitalización y uso de datos personales. Capacidades y actitudes de la población andaluza», realizada por el Instituto de Estadística y Cartografía de Andalucía en 2021, nos permite estudiar con precisión las brechas digitales conceptualizadas en la literatura casi por completo. El trabajo de campo se llevó a cabo entre octubre y diciembre de 2021, periodo que coincidió con la era pospandémica, lo que incidió en la búsqueda de información sanitaria. En ese momento, la telemedicina y la utilización de recursos sanitarios digitales eran frecuentes en Andalucía. En este sentido, la búsqueda de esta información está influenciada por: la frecuencia de uso de internet, la percepción del riesgo que implica proporcionar datos personales en internet y el tipo de hogar en el que se vive.

Este estudio explora tres hipótesis sobre la búsqueda de información sanitaria en internet. La hipótesis de la segunda brecha digital sugiere que las habilidades digitales y el «habitus digital» (De Marco, 2022) influyen en la reducción de la segunda brecha digital. Por lo tanto, las personas que usan internet con más frecuencia y con fines no médicos tienen más probabilidades de buscar información sanitaria (De Marco, 2022; Rubin, 1984; Rojas, 2004). La hipótesis informacional postula que una mayor percepción de los riesgos que implica proporcionar datos personales en internet dificulta la búsqueda de información sanitaria (Venkatesh, Davis y Davis, 2003; Rose y Fogarty, 2006). Por último, la hipótesis de la tercera brecha digital destaca que los hogares compartidos fomentan el capital y las habilidades digitales, lo que aumenta las búsquedas de información sanitaria (De Marco, 2022; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973; Ragnedda, 2018; Ragnedda, 2022).

El análisis de regresión logística confirma que el uso frecuente de internet con fines no médicos aumenta las búsquedas de información sanitaria, mientras que una mayor percepción de los riesgos que implica proporcionar datos personales en internet los reduce, y los hogares compartidos promueven estas búsquedas a través del apoyo social. Estos hallazgos destacan la intersección entre la tecnología, el acceso a la información y las desigualdades sociales, y destacan el papel de los lazos familiares e intergeneracionales en el uso de las tecnologías. También reclaman nuevas perspectivas sobre las brechas digitales, la salud y los lazos intergeneracionales en entornos familiares como Andalucía (Pérez Yruela, 2002), lo que ilustra la importancia de las redes de apoyo tanto en internet como fuera de este (Bericat, 2002) como forma de capital (Bourdieu, 2015; Willekens *et al.*, 2022).

Con base en la literatura sobre el capital digital, el capital social y la brecha de tercer nivel, la búsqueda de información sanitaria en internet puede verse como una práctica donde convergen el acceso, las habilidades y, sobre todo, el uso significativo de la tecnología digital. Este enfoque nos permite vincular perfiles individuales (género, edad, nivel educativo y patrones de uso), contextos domésticos (estructura y dinámica del hogar, disponibilidad de tiempo y privacidad) y disposiciones subjetivas hacia el entorno digital (como la sensación de comprensión y gestión de las reglas de privacidad). Tener en cuenta todas estas dimensiones ayuda a entender la búsqueda de información sanitaria no como un acto aislado, sino como el resultado de vías de socialización digital y configuraciones familiares y sociales que median el uso de la tecnología.

2. Marco teórico

2.1. Uso de internet en Andalucía

La lógica binaria de la brecha digital de primer nivel (Di Maggio *et al.*, 2004) es ahora solo un aspecto del estudio más amplio de la brecha digital de tres niveles (De Marco, 2022; Dodel y Mesch, 2018; Ragnedda, 2022; van Deursen y van Dijk, 2015). Los datos de la Encuesta sobre Equipamiento y Uso de Tecnologías de la Información y Comunicación (TIC) en los Hogares (INE, 2024) y el Ministerio de Economía, Comercio y Empresa (MINECO) (2022) confirman que el alto nivel de digitalización de Andalucía, a pesar de las persistentes desigualdades rurales, ha reducido en gran medida esta brecha. En la última década, el acceso a la banda ancha en los hogares andaluces ha pasado de estar por debajo del 75 % al 96,8 % (INE, 2024). Además, el 90,74 % de los hogares tienen ahora internet de fibra óptica (FTTH), y supera así la media nacional española (MINECO, 2022).

Sin embargo, sigue habiendo disparidades entre el uso diario de internet y el acceso a herramientas digitales (MINECO, 2022), especialmente en habilidades digitales. Más del 30 % de la población andaluza carece de la alfabetización digital básica necesaria para utilizar internet y las TIC; cinco puntos porcentuales por debajo de la media española, pero todavía por encima de la media europea (INE, 2024). Informes como los del Observatorio Nacional de Tecnología y Sociedad (ONTSI) (2022) también destacan las disparidades de género en las habilidades digitales. Aunque España ocupa el sexto lugar en la UE en cuanto a mujeres con competencias digitales básicas o avanzadas, los hombres siguen superándolas. Por otra parte, las generaciones más jóvenes son las más competentes en cuanto a internet (De Marco, 2022; Ragnedda, 2018), mientras que los adultos mayores experimentan importantes brechas de habilidades digitales (Chá, 2020; De Marco, 2022). Esta brecha generacional ejemplifica la brecha digital de segundo nivel, donde la exclusión surge de la falta de competencia digital.

Estudios empíricos enfatizan las consecuencias de esta brecha de segundo nivel, y consideran variables como la clase social, la edad, la educación, el género (Robles, Torres y Molina, 2010), la profesión y el lugar de residencia (Ragnedda *et al.*, 2020; van Deursen y Helsper, 2015). En España, las brechas digitales están determinadas por factores sociodemográficos y actitudes más amplias hacia el uso de internet (Torres, 2017; Pizzi *et al.*, 2023), lo que refuerza las disparidades en la participación digital.

2.2. Contribuciones al estudio de la brecha digital

La dimensión social de la Cuarta Revolución Industrial está marcada por la profunda integración de la tecnología en la vida cotidiana, que da forma a las estructuras e interacciones sociales contemporáneas (Piedad y Machueca, 2019). Estas transformaciones han provocado el surgimiento de la sociedad red en la era digital (Castells, 1997), que ofrece claves analíticas para entender las dinámicas de la globalización y la interconectividad en las sociedades modernas (Sassen, 2001). Las sociedades actuales se caracterizan cada vez más por la expansión económica global facilitada a través de estructuras en red, experiencias individualizadas y la flexibilización del trabajo y el consumo (Beck, 1999).

Dentro de estas configuraciones sociales en evolución, la digitalización ha adaptado los estilos de vida a las posibilidades tecnológicas y ha reconfigurado la vida cotidiana (Castells, 1997). Se ha identificado que la digitalización desempeña un papel crucial en la mejora de la prestación de servicios sanitarios (Shaw y Glover, 2024). Sin embargo, los mismos autores también destacan que las tecnologías sanitarias digitales tienen el potencial de aumentar las desigualdades sanitarias, e introducen el término «brecha digital relacionada con la salud» para describir cómo algunas poblaciones se benefician más que otras. Por lo tanto, enfatizan la necesidad de políticas de salud pública que integren la equidad en las estrategias de salud digital, particularmente a medida que la pandemia ha acrecentado estas brechas (Goggin y Ellis, 2020). Esta perspectiva es coherente con los esfuerzos previos para institucionalizar la participación digital en la administración pública, como lo demuestran las iniciativas en países como Estonia y España que han buscado mejorar la participación ciudadana a través de plataformas digitales. Estas iniciativas han demostrado el potencial que tiene la tecnología para transformar el ámbito social, que tratamos de mejorar a través de una perspectiva centrada en la familia como capital fuera de internet (De Marco, 2022; Park, 2017).

Este cambio quedó totalmente reflejado durante la pandemia de COVID-19, lo que subrayó la aparición de nuevos riesgos sociales y transformaciones en las sociedades digitales (Moreno, 2010). Goto *et al.* (2021), Kontos *et al.* (2014) o Park y Feng, (2023) exponen que una de las áreas de impacto más significativas fue la atención médica telemática. Esto abarca tanto las limitaciones de las infraestructuras de salud pública como la adaptabilidad de las poblaciones a los nuevos modelos sanitarios digitales en España (Tezanos, 2022). Además, han surgido nuevas vulnerabilidades sociales, especialmente entre las poblaciones de mayor edad, que enfrentan barreras para navegar por la información y las herramientas digitales de manera efectiva (De Marco, 2022; Ragnedda, 2020). Estos desafíos resaltan la intersección entre la tecnología y las desigualdades sociales en la búsqueda de una mejor calidad de vida y acceso a la atención médica (Chá, 2020).

El auge de los medios digitales omnipresentes y las comunidades en internet ha engendrado un nuevo paradigma cultural descrito como «virtualidad real» (Castells, 1997), que influye en los modos contemporáneos de socialización, cognición y expresión emocional. Esta transformación ha dado lugar a nuevas formas de interacción, que trascienden las limitaciones geográficas y fomentan interacciones sociales que antes eran inimaginables. Sin embargo, estos desarrollos también han intensificado las estratificaciones sociales, sobre todo en relación con la distribución desigual de los recursos digitales. Esta disparidad digital, integrada en el marco más amplio de la sociedad de la información (Crampton, 2003), perpetúa las estructuras culturales y sociales existentes. En este contexto, las desigualdades digitales reflejan los mecanismos tradicionales de exclusión, lo que refuerza la brecha entre «los incluidos y los excluidos» (García Canclini, 1990, p. 180). En consecuencia, investigar los procesos sociales y digitales que sustentan estas disparidades requiere una actitud crítica con el concepto de «brecha digital».

La brecha digital se enmarca en la literatura como un fenómeno multidimensional que abarca disparidades en el acceso a las herramientas tecnológicas, la información y las competencias digitales. Estos aspectos se conceptualizan como la brecha de acceso, la

brecha de uso y habilidades (Crampton, 2003) y la brecha de explotación (De Marco, 2022; Ragnedda, 2020). El primer nivel de la brecha, como destacó el Consejo Europeo (2000), se refiere a la distinción binaria entre usuarios y no usuarios de las Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación (TIC) (Varela, 2015). Esta brecha se traduce en exclusión socioeconómica, donde quienes no tienen acceso a internet se enfrentan a barreras para la movilidad económica y social (Hoffman y Novak, 1998; Katz y Aspden, 1997). Sin embargo, reducir las implicaciones sociales de la brecha digital al mero acceso descuida los factores socioestructurales más amplios en juego. Esto es especialmente relevante dado que el acceso básico a internet se ha vuelto casi omnipresente, con un 96,8 % de los hogares andaluces con conectividad diaria (INE, 2024).

Una brecha digital de segundo nivel (Di Maggio *et al.*, 2004) se extiende más allá del mero acceso, e incorpora variables socioeconómicas y demográficas que determinan la participación digital. Esta perspectiva enfatiza las disparidades en la frecuencia de uso, la alfabetización digital y las competencias tecnológicas (Dodel y Mesch, 2018; van Deursen y van Dijk, 2015; Hargittai y Hinnnat, 2008). Las poblaciones mayores, en particular, se topan con barreras pronunciadas debido a su falta de fluidez digital o «habitus digital» (De Marco, 2022), relegándolas a una posición de usuarios de tecnología instrumental (Rubin, 1984). Esta disparidad generacional se ha conceptualizado a través de la metáfora de la «inmigración digital» (Prensky, 2001; Román, Almansa y Cruz, 2016), y refleja las dinámicas sociológicas más amplias de adaptación y exclusión tecnológica dentro de las sociedades digitales.

En contextos donde la tecnología está integrada en la vida cotidiana, la exclusión digital es especialmente evidente entre quienes carecen de competencia regular en el uso de dispositivos electrónicos. Esta disparidad está determinada por factores como la edad, el nivel educativo y los ingresos del hogar (Hargittai y Hinnant, 2008; Peter y Valkenburg, 2006). Abordar esta brecha ha sido un aspecto crucial de la política social en las naciones desarrolladas, ya que afecta significativamente al bienestar de las poblaciones vulnerables (Cabe-ro-Almenara, Barroso-Osuna y Rodríguez-Gallego, 2020; Selwyn, 2010; Sancho, 2012).

En este segundo nivel, surgen enfoques teóricos que, a la vez que reconocen los determinantes estructurales, tienen como objetivo explicar cómo las personas interactúan con las TIC. El modelo de aceptación de la tecnología (TAM, por sus siglas en inglés) (Venkatesh, Davis y Davis, 2003) postula que la interacción de un individuo con la tecnología está influenciada por su percepción de la facilidad de uso y utilidad (Rose y Fogarty, 2006), lo que hace que el acceso a la información y los recursos sea crucial para adoptar o rechazar herramientas tecnológicas. Del mismo modo, la teoría de usos y gratificaciones (UandG, por sus siglas en inglés) sugiere que el uso de la tecnología se ve impulsado por la motivación y las preferencias personales (Park, 2010; Rosengren, 1974; Park *et al.*, 2007). Esto enmarca la participación como un cálculo racional de coste-beneficio en el que el conocimiento de las TIC determina la motivación y la satisfacción de las necesidades. Teniendo esto en cuenta, asumimos que la autoeficacia tiene dos dimensiones relevantes para la brecha digital: la conciencia percibida de los riesgos de los datos personales y la claridad percibida de las normas y políticas digitales dentro de las páginas institucionales. Ambas fomentan el dominio del entorno tecnológico (Gatti *et al.*, 2017) y predicen una mayor actividad en internet incluso a pesar de los riesgos percibidos (Eastin y LaRose, 2006).

Finalmente, en un tercer nivel, los académicos destacan el tema de la explotación digital (De Marco, 2022; Ragnedda, 2020), que se extiende más allá de las competencias digitales para examinar los recursos fuera de internet que poseen las personas (De Marco, 2022). A través del concepto de capital digital, los investigadores enfatizan cómo el capital social determina el acceso, la competencia y la capacidad de utilizar las herramientas digitales de manera efectiva (Park, 2017). Este marco subraya la interconexión de la inclusión digital y las estructuras socioeconómicas más amplias, lo que revela cómo las desigualdades digitales perpetúan las jerarquías sociales existentes. Teniendo en cuenta nuestro propósito de investigación, la comprensión de cómo funcionan todas estas divisiones es crucial para profundizar en lo que autores como Lambert *et al.* (2009) o Zimmerman y Shaw (2020) denominan «comportamiento de búsqueda de información».

2.3. Capital digital y familias

El capital digital abarca tanto el acceso a dispositivos tecnológicos como las competencias necesarias para una participación digital efectiva (Pizzi *et al.*, 2023). Una característica definitoria del capital digital es su convertibilidad, ya que facilita el acceso a otros recursos a través de la tecnología (Ragnedda, 2018). Por lo tanto, el uso de internet y la participación en él dependen no solo del capital social de un individuo, sino también de la disponibilidad de infraestructura y habilidades digitales (Ragnedda *et al.*, 2020).

La autonomía del capital digital se enmarca en un ámbito digital distinto (Ragnedda, 2018), en el que se diferencian los espacios culturales y sociales (Jordan y Taylor, 1998; Thomas, 2003). Si bien la dinámica de clase juega un papel, los conocimientos digitales (Goldfarb y Price, 2008) y la capacidad de traducirlos en beneficios tangibles fuera de internet son los factores predominantes (Ragnedda, 2018).

Para definir este concepto con más detalle, distinguimos entre «capital digital subjetivado», que se refiere al conocimiento internalizado (segunda brecha), y «capital digital objetivado», que se refiere al acceso material (primera brecha) (Pizzi *et al.*, 2023). Esta distinción permite analizar el conocimiento disponible para el uso y la explotación digitales, influenciado por las subculturas de internet (Holt, 2010; Thomas, 2003) y los perfiles digitales de los usuarios (Dutton y Blak, 2013). Sin embargo, el capital digital está integrado en las relaciones sociales, lo que quiere decir que el capital social fuera de internet condiciona, pero no determina completamente el capital digital (Calderón Gómez, 2020; van Deursen *et al.*, 2017; Ragnedda y Ruij, 2022; Helsper y van Deursen, 2015).

Entre las diversas formas de capital social, la familia surge como un factor particularmente significativo en Andalucía (López y González, 2008; Ussel y Ruiz, 1999). Desempeña un papel crucial, ya sea a la hora de mitigar o perpetuar las barreras digitales dentro de la región (Vázquez, 2017; Bericat y Menchón, 2006). La familia funciona como una red de relaciones (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973) que concede acceso al capital cultural (Bourdieu, 1984; Erikson, 1996; Chen, 2013), lo que facilita la transmisión intergeneracional de conocimientos y dispositivos tecnológicos (Chen *et al.*, 2022).

Las interacciones intergeneracionales dentro de las familias pueden influir significativamente en la inclusión digital. Los miembros más jóvenes y con mejor dominio de

las tecnologías (Calderón, 2019a) a menudo desempeñan un papel educativo para los familiares con menos habilidades digitales (Rojas *et al.*, 2004). Como señala Torres (2017, p. 20), «la dinámica de las relaciones intergeneracionales dentro de la familia constituye una de las formas en que se pone fin a la resistencia de ciertos grupos al uso de las TIC». Esta perspectiva destaca el potencial de vías de socialización alternativas para alterar los patrones de desigualdad digital (De Rivera *et al.*, 2021) con las relaciones familiares como mecanismo para vencerlos (Rojas *et al.*, 2004).

En este contexto, la influencia familiar (entendida como capital social fuera de internet) se convierte en un factor crucial para superar las tres barreras digitales: acceso, competencia y explotación. No obstante, cabe señalar que podría haber una ambivalencia de las interacciones sociales dentro de las familias que, a su vez, podría actuar como detonante para reproducir fenómenos como la delegación de tareas digitales en función del género (Ragnedda *et al.*, 2022; Holmes *et al.*, 2025).

Los aspectos culturales, como las actitudes y los patrones de uso de internet, operan independientemente de las limitaciones materiales (Alexander, 2000). Al examinar las culturas de internet que determinan las prácticas digitales (Dutton y Reisdorf, 2019; Gonzales *et al.*, 2021), podemos comprender mejor los diversos significados que se le atribuyen a la participación digital (Dutton y Blank, 2015; Lindell *et al.*, 2021). Este reconocimiento subraya la coexistencia de múltiples culturas digitales dentro de los hogares, lo que fomenta intercambios intergeneracionales que pueden ayudar a reducir las desigualdades digitales arraigadas (Robles, Torres y Molina, 2010).

2.4. Hipótesis

- H1: Hipótesis de la segunda brecha digital : las personas que usan internet con frecuencia tienen más probabilidades de buscar información relacionada con la salud en internet. Las habilidades digitales y el «habitus digital» (De Marco, 2022), como el uso de internet con fines no médicos, influyen en la reducción de la segunda brecha digital.
- H2: Hipótesis de la autoeficacia percibida : la mayor percepción de estar informado sobre los riesgos del uso de datos personales, junto con la claridad percibida en los estándares y las políticas digitales dentro de los sitios web institucionales, da lugar a una mayor búsqueda de información sanitaria en internet. La conciencia de la información condiciona la voluntad de los usuarios de interactuar con la tecnología (Venkatesh, Davis y Davis, 2003). La aceptación o el rechazo de las herramientas digitales depende en parte de la facilidad de uso percibida, que está determinada por el conocimiento previo (Eastin y LaRose, 2006; Rose y Fogarty, 2006).
- H3: Hipótesis de la tercera brecha digital : las personas en hogares compartidos tienen más probabilidades de buscar información sanitaria en internet. Las familias funcionan como un catalizador del capital social e influyen en la adopción digital (De Marco, 2022). Los hogares con redes interpersonales amplias (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973) facilitan la adquisición de habilidades y el desarrollo de capital digital (Ragnedda, 2018; Rojas, 2004). Estas dinámicas están condicionadas además por los recursos culturales basados en la familia (Bourdieu, 2015; Willekens *et al.*, 2022).

3. Metodología y datos

Este estudio utiliza datos de la *Encuesta social 2021: Digitalización y uso de datos personales. Capacidades y actitudes de la población andaluza*, realizado por el Instituto de Estadística y Cartografía de Andalucía (IECA) en 2021. Esta encuesta de dominio público abarca toda la Comunidad Autónoma de Andalucía y se dirige a residentes de entre 16 y 75 años que viven en viviendas familiares. Podríamos justificar que el uso de esta fuente secundaria puede proporcionar información importante que podemos introducir en futuras encuestas autodirigidas. Se excluyeron los hogares colectivos (hospitales, residencias, cuarteles militares) y aquellos con nueve o más residentes. Los datos se recopilaron a través de entrevistas telefónicas asistidas por ordenador (80,7 %) y encuestas web (19,3 %).

Se aplicó un método de muestreo aleatorio simple estratificado que diferenciaba 24 zonas geográficas. La asignación provincial fue proporcional al tamaño de la población dentro de los estratos de urbanización. Todas las personas de cada estrato tenían la misma probabilidad de ser seleccionadas. El tamaño teórico de la muestra fue de 8750, con una muestra final alcanzada de 4675 personas encuestadas. El trabajo de campo se realizó entre el 18 de octubre y el 31 de diciembre de 2021. La reponderación del estimador se realizó utilizando datos demográficos de sexo, edad, nacionalidad y provincia de la Base de Datos de Población Longitudinal de Andalucía (BDLPA).

3.1. Variables

Las variables se han tratado de forma sistemática y a partir de ellas se han extraído las respuestas que distorsionaban la parsimonia de los datos. Con este fin, se eliminaron las respuestas que no proporcionaban información significativa, como «No lo sé» o «Sin respuesta». Además, los análisis de valor ausentes se han descartado, ya que las respuestas no fueron lo suficientemente numerosas como para generar interpretaciones significativas. Finalmente, las pruebas de colinealidad realizadas sobre las variables independientes muestran que se pueden incorporar en el mismo modelo de regresión logística.

3.1.1. Variable dependiente

La variable dependiente utilizada en el modelo es *la búsqueda de información sobre temas de salud en los últimos tres meses*, que aparece como elemento de la batería en la pregunta 2g. de la *Encuesta social 2021: Y, en relación con las siguientes actividades relacionadas con la salud, ¿en los últimos tres meses ha utilizado internet para...?* Cuyas categorías de respuesta son: *Sí, No, No lo sé, Sin respuesta*. Esta variable se ha dicotomizado en (1) *Sí* y (0) *No*.

3.1.2. Variables independientes y de control

La variable independiente incluida en la H1 se refiere a *la frecuencia de uso de internet en la vida diaria*. No se modificó, pero se convirtió en dicotómica. Sus categorías son

Tabla 1

Variables utilizadas en el modelo de regresión logística

	N	Mín.	Máx.	Medios	DE
Variable independiente					
H1. Frecuencia de uso de internet					
Diariamente, al menos 5 días a la semana (Ref.)	4409	0	1	0,9190	0,27282
Semanalmente, pero no todos los días	4409	0	1	0,0703	0,25569
Menos de una vez a la semana	4409	0	1	0,0106	0,10270
Variables de control					
Masculino	4409	0	1	0,4601	0,49846
Edad					
Entre 16 y 29 años (Ref.)	4409	0	1	0,1998	0,39990
Entre 30 y 44 años	4409	0	1	0,2996	0,45814
Entre 45 y 59 años	4409	0	1	0,3406	0,47398
Más de 60 años	4409	0	1	0,1599	0,36655
Nivel educativo					
Primaria o inferior (Ref.)	4369	0	1	0,0938	0,2916
Secundaria	4369	0	1	0,2721	0,44511
Bachillerato o formación profesional	4369	0	1	0,2549	0,43589
Grado universitario o superior	4369	0	1	0,2327	0,42264
Máster o doctorado	4369	0	1	0,1462	0,35340
Información obtenida de sitios web o aplicaciones gubernamentales (proxy de la H1)	4376	0	1	0,6236	0,48453
Realizar trámites bancarios (proxy de la H1)	4401	0	1	0,7191	0,44946
Alguna vez ha comprado productos o servicios a través de internet (proxy de la H1)	4403	0	1	0,7220	0,44806
H2. Se considera una persona informada sobre los riesgos de proporcionar datos personales					
Muy informada	4393	0	1	0,0994	0,29933
Bastante informada	4393	0	1	0,3601	0,48008
No muy informada	4393	0	1	0,4693	0,49911
Nada informada (Ref.)	4393	0	1	0,0710	0,25689
Claridad y simplicidad de la información y las políticas de privacidad en los sitios web (continua)	4409	0	10	3,8970	3,05155
H3. Tipo de hogar					
Hogar unipersonal (Ref.)	4410	0	1	0,1036	0,30484
Familia monoparental que vive con un hijo	4410	0	1	0,1016	0,30216
Pareja sin hijos que viven juntos en el hogar	4410	0	1	0,1911	0,39329
Pareja con hijos que viven juntos en el hogar	4410	0	1	0,0703	0,25569
Variable dependiente					
En los últimos tres meses, ¿ha utilizado internet para buscar información sobre temas de salud?	4400	0	1	0,7038	0,45660

Nota: «Digitalización y uso de datos personales. Capacidades y actitudes de la población andaluza» (IECA 2021).

Nota: Todas las variables categóricas se han tratado como dicotómicas y la categoría de referencia se indica entre paréntesis.

(1) Diariamente, al menos 5 días a la semana, (2) Semanalmente, pero no todos los días y (3) Menos de una vez a la semana. La categoría de referencia es (1).

Con esta variable sumamos tres variables de control que sirven como *proxy* para una mejor comprensión de los fenómenos aparte de la frecuencia de uso, como para qué fines utilizamos las herramientas de internet. Esas variables hacen referencia a tres preguntas diferentes sobre *el uso de internet para obtener información de sitios web o aplicaciones gubernamentales, para realizar trámites bancarios y para comprar productos o servicios por internet*. Estas tres variables son todas dicotómicas de (1) Sí y (0) No. Estos usos funcionales se toman como indicadores de habilidades operativas transversales y autoeficacia digital, en línea con la noción de utilización de tercer nivel.

Para la *segunda* hipótesis, se añade una variable dicotómica que representa *el auto-conocimiento percibido sobre los riesgos de proporcionar datos personales*. Las categorías de respuesta son: (1) Muy informada, (2) Bastante informada, (3) No muy informada y (4) Nada informada. Al igual que con la primera hipótesis, añadimos una variable de control que sirve para entender que la autoeficacia percibida puede estar intermedia por la percepción de facilidad en los sitios web. Esta variable es continua y representa el grado de acuerdo del 1 al 10 con la afirmación *Claridad y simplicidad de la información y las políticas de privacidad ofrecidas por los sitios web*.

Para la *H3*. La variable *Tipo de hogar* se ha tratado con su codificación original: 1 (hogar de una sola persona), 2 (familia monoparental que vive con un hijo), 3 (pareja sin hijos que viven juntos en el hogar), 4 (pareja con hijos que viven juntos en el hogar). La última categoría (otro tipo de hogar) se elimina debido a la escasez de casos recogidos.

El sexo se ha tratado como una variable de control; se ha cambiado su numeración, pero no sus códigos: 0 (Femenino) y 1 (Masculino). La edad se ha recodificado en cuatro grupos, lo que ha simplificado los análisis y ha garantizado que se refleje la heterogeneidad de la variable. Por lo tanto, la edad se agrupa en «Entre 16 y 29 años», «Entre 30 y 44 años», «Entre 45 y 59 años» y «Más de 60 años». Por otro lado, se ha registrado el nivel de estudios para hacer los análisis más parsimoniosos. Así, las categorías resultantes son «Primaria», «Secundaria», «Bachillerato y formación profesional», «Grado universitario o superior» y «Máster o doctorado». Estas cinco nuevas categorías agrupan los diferentes niveles de estudio sin influir significativamente en las codificaciones originales.

3.2. Método de análisis

La muestra para los análisis surge de aplicar la variable dependiente como criterio discriminatorio. Las características de esta variable permiten distinguir dos grupos de datos: personas que han buscado información sobre temas de salud en los últimos tres meses y que no lo han hecho. La naturaleza dicotómica de esta información la hace adecuada para el análisis de regresión logística en términos de las otras variables explicativas y de control (Everitt y Dunn, 2001). Mediante este método se extraen las probabilidades asociadas a los eventos registrados en la variable dependiente y se especifican los perfiles de los actores implicados en este fenómeno (Escobar, 2012).

A través de la variable dependiente, se posibilita el análisis de la brecha digital, lo que permite obtener los factores explicativos que determinan la superación de todas las barreras digitales mencionadas en el marco teórico. Buscar información sobre temas de salud a través de internet implica superar la brecha de a) acceso a internet, ya que la pregunta requiere su posesión, b) uso y habilidades necesarias para acceder a la información, y c) superar la barrera sacándole provecho, desarrollando estrategias que permitan un uso beneficioso, como la búsqueda de información sanitaria.

4. Resultados

En respuesta a la pregunta de qué factores influyen más en la probabilidad de haber utilizado internet para buscar temas de salud, destacaremos la capacidad explicativa de las variables seleccionadas contenidas en la tabla 1, que resume los resultados obtenidos. Para una mejor interpretación de los datos, nos referiremos a la presentación de los resultados por *razón de momios*¹, así podemos ver la magnitud de la probabilidad de utilizar internet para buscar información sobre temas de salud.

Modelo I según sexo, grupos de edad y nivel educativo (las variables de control). Muestra un Pseudo R² del 15,5 %, que no extrapola la capacidad explicativa del modelo al 100 %, pero sí indica cierta capacidad explicativa del modelo. El modelo sugiere que los hombres tienen menos probabilidades que las mujeres de haber utilizado internet para temas de salud. Como lo demuestra su *índice de probabilidad*, 2 mujeres por cada hombre tienen más probabilidades de haber utilizado internet para estos fines cuando todas las demás variables son iguales en relación con la categoría de referencia. La edad tiene una influencia significativamente negativa y lineal. A medida que aumenta la edad, la probabilidad de usar internet para búsquedas relacionadas con la salud disminuye drásticamente. Del mismo modo, a medida que aumenta el nivel educativo, también lo hace la probabilidad de usar internet para buscar temas de salud.

En el *Modelo II*, el Pseudo R² se eleva al 22,4 % al controlar las variables sobre la frecuencia y el uso de internet. El uso diario de internet influye positivamente en la probabilidad de usarlo para buscar información sanitaria, en comparación con aquellas personas que no están tan acostumbradas a su uso (0,325**). Del mismo modo, las personas que tienen citas médicas y obtienen información sobre otras administraciones tienen más probabilidades de usar internet para buscar información sanitaria. Además, aquellas que acceden a otros servicios médicos a través de aplicaciones móviles tienen 6,84 veces más probabilidades de acceder a información sanitaria en internet que aquellas que no usan *aplicaciones*.

En el *Modelo III*, manteniendo el resto de las variables, controlamos las incluidas en la H2. sobre la percepción de estar informado sobre los riesgos de internet y la claridad y simplicidad de las políticas de información y privacidad percibidas en los sitios web. Al incorporar estas variables vemos un aumento en Pseudo R² al 23,2 %. Este modelo refleja la importancia de contar con información, lo que indica una cierta linealidad en los resultados y señala que la probabilidad de utilizar internet para buscar temas de salud es

Tabla 2

Factores que influyen en el uso de internet para buscar información sanitaria

	Modelo I	Modelo II	Modelo III	Modelo IV
Variable independiente				
Frecuencia de uso de internet				
Diariamente, al menos 5 días a la semana (Ref.)	---	—	—	—
Semanalmente, pero no todos los días	0,607***	0,781	0,750**	0,713*
Menos de una vez a la semana	0,272***	0,415*	0,403*	0,387*
Haber obtenido información de sitios web o aplicaciones gubernamentales				
No (Ref.)	---	—	—	—
Sí	3,171***	3,437***	3,383***	3,494***
Realizar trámites bancarios				
No (Ref.)	---	—	—	—
Sí	1,948***	1,908***	1,903***	1,901***
Alguna vez ha comprado productos o servicios a través de internet				
No (Ref.)	---	—	—	—
Sí	2,037***	1,688***	1,675***	1,720***
Sociodemográfico				
Sexo				
Femenino (Ref.)	---	—	—	—
Hombre	---	0,301***	0,288***	0,269***
Edad				
Entre 16 y 29 años (Ref.)	---	—	—	—
Entre 30 y 44 años	---	1,012	1,090	1,091
Entre 45 y 59 años	---	0,634***	0,701**	0,699**
Más de 60 años	---	0,457***	0,494***	0,474***
Nivel de educación (reconfigurado)				
Primaria o inferior (Ref.)	---	---	—	—
Secundaria	---	2,379***	2,292***	2,445***
Bachillerato o formación profesional	---	3,182***	3,078***	3,347***
Grado universitario o superior	---	2,340*	2,270***	2,431***
Máster o doctorado	---	2,628***	2,500***	2,570***
Se considera una persona informada sobre los riesgos de internet.				
Muy informada	---	---	1,156	1,150
Bastante informada	---	---	1,860***	1,898***
No muy informada	---	---	1,438*	1,486*
Nada informada (Ref.)	---	---	---	---
Claridad y simplicidad en la información y las políticas de privacidad ofrecidas en los sitios web (continua)	---	---	1,060*	1,064*
Tipo de hogar				
Hogar unipersonal (Ref.)	---	---	---	—
Familia monoparental que vive con hijos	---	---	---	0,567*
Pareja sin hijos que viven juntos en el hogar	---	---	---	0,691*
Pareja con hijos que viven juntos en el hogar	---	---	---	0,717*
Constante	0,8065**	0,9700	0,5258**	0,6800
N	3829	3797	3797	3780
Pseudo R2	0,155	0,224	0,232	0,243
Aic	3493,02	3189,69	3162,97	3095,63
Bic	3530,52	3277,08	3275,32	3232,86

Nota: Elaboración propia basada en «Digitalización y uso de datos personales. Capacidades y actitudes de la población andaluza» (IECA 2021). [* p<0,05; ** p<0,01; *** p<0]

mayor en las personas que se consideran a sí mismas más informadas. Además, aquellas que perciben una mayor claridad y simplicidad en la información y las políticas de privacidad que ofrecen los sitios web tienen más probabilidades de utilizar internet para obtener información sanitaria. Sin embargo, estar bien informado sobre los riesgos del uso de datos personales parece tener una mayor influencia que la simplicidad o la claridad.

En el último modelo (*Modelo IV*) sumamos la variable tipo de hogar y el Pseudo R² sube al 24,3 %. Vivir solo aumenta la probabilidad de buscar información sanitaria en comparación con vivir con una pareja o familia.

5. Discusión

En la creación del modelo de regresión logística se han incorporado algunas variables significativas a la investigación, relevantes para la brecha digital. El territorio es un aspecto clave para el acceso a internet en España (Robles, Torres y Molina, 2010), así como en Andalucía (Bericat y López, 2006). Sin embargo, en nuestro modelo, los lugares de residencia y su grado de urbanización no influyeron en el uso de internet.

Una mayor participación digital, ya sea habitual (Rubin 1984) o basada en habilidades (Rojas 2004), es más común entre los usuarios más jóvenes. El sexo y el nivel educativo corroboran en Andalucía la evidencia presentada en la literatura reciente sobre España (Ragnedda *et al.*, 2020): los perfiles que más utilizan internet para buscar información son las mujeres jóvenes, lo que destaca el papel de la educación como algo transversal a estas categorías. Asimismo, se reitera una vez más la importancia de estas variables sociodemográficas específicas (Bericat y López, 2006) para el uso de internet y su uso con fines sanitarios y médicos.

En la literatura se dice que el capital social *fuera de internet* perteneciente a la familia permite la inclusión tecnológica y social de sujetos en internet (Calderón Gómez, 2020; van Deursen *et al.*, 2017; Ragnedda y Ruii, 2017; Helsper y van Deursen, 2015). En nuestro caso, podemos ver cómo la familia puede actuar como una red de apoyo a través de la cual circula el capital cultural (Bourdieu, 1984; Erikson, 1996; Chen, 2013) que inhibe el acceso y uso de la tecnología de forma individual.

Esto quiere decir que dentro de las familias hay una ambivalencia en las interacciones sociales. En primer lugar, se observa que las personas que viven solas tienen más probabilidades de utilizar internet para obtener información sanitaria. No obstante, esto no significa que el uso sea menor en los hogares compartidos porque la ayuda dentro de las familias no necesariamente soluciona las desigualdades digitales (Rojas *et al.*, 2004). El fenómeno podría verse alterado por las normas sociales y los roles implícitos que la institución familiar reproduce en el mundo digital (Ragnedda *et al.*, 2022; Holmes *et al.*, 2025).

Por lo tanto, modificando ligeramente los enfoques de Pizzi *et al.* (2023) y Ragnedda (2018; 2020), podríamos destacar un tipo de acción digital indirecta a través de los recursos contenidos en las relaciones sociales, donde asumimos que tal acción es indirecta-

ta porque sirvió como fuente de interacciones que exceden lo instrumental y podrían estar vinculadas al cuidado. La institución familiar logra hacerse cargo de aspectos relevantes para la digitalización y la transición digital, lo que afecta principalmente a las poblaciones mayores (Calderón Gómez, 2019a; Robles, Torres y Molina, 2010).

Además, nos permite demostrar las dinámicas familiares contemporáneas, los nuevos modelos familiares y cómo esto está vinculado a la implementación de la tecnología en las relaciones. Se reconoce que la familia puede tener efectos ambivalentes. Por un lado, puede promover el apoyo intergeneracional o una mayor autonomía funcional en los hogares unipersonales, pero también puede llevar a la delegación de tareas digitales o a la sobrecarga de cuidados. Es imperativo que estos resultados se interpreten en el contexto de la pandemia de 2021, ya que puede haber tenido un impacto significativo en la tendencia general de búsqueda de información sanitaria. Las réplicas posteriores facilitarán la verificación de la persistencia de estos efectos en situaciones que no se caracterizan por la crisis.

Los resultados pueden llevarnos a proponer futuras líneas de investigación que consideren la influencia que tienen las profesiones en las habilidades para usar internet y los dispositivos asociados a él (Helsper y Reisdorf, 2017). Además, se explorará la investigación sobre los roles digitales como un medio para diversificar las competencias virtuales en la sociedad digital. La investigación abarcaría la frecuencia de realización de tareas digitales por parte de los miembros de la familia, así como la funcionalidad de estas tareas dentro de las redes familiares.

6. Conclusiones

El objetivo de este estudio fue identificar los factores que influyen en la búsqueda de información relacionada con la salud entre la población andaluza. Para ello, se plantearon tres hipótesis que posteriormente se probaron.

Los hallazgos confirmaron la hipótesis de la segunda brecha digital, e indicaron que las personas que usan internet con más frecuencia (y para fines más allá de preocupaciones estrictamente médicas) tienen más probabilidades de buscar información relacionada con la salud en internet. Además, el estudio reveló que la participación en diversas actividades en internet, como comprar bienes y servicios, realizar trámites bancarios y acceder a sitios web o aplicaciones de la administración pública, influyen significativamente en la probabilidad de utilizar internet con fines relacionados con la salud.

La segunda hipótesis sugería que las personas con mayor autoeficacia y menos riesgos percibidos en relación con la divulgación de datos personales en internet tendrían más probabilidades de buscar información relacionada con la salud a través de este medio. Esto fue respaldado por la evidencia que demuestra que las percepciones subjetivas de la claridad y simplicidad de la información, así como el grado de comprensión de las políticas de privacidad del sitio web, son factores clave. Se encontró que ambos aspectos tienen un impacto significativo en el enfoque de la población andaluza a la hora de buscar información sanitaria en internet.

En nuestra tercera hipótesis, argumentamos que al buscar más información sobre temas de salud, se supera la tercera brecha digital. En cambio, si lo miramos desde un punto de vista crítico, el fenómeno debe investigarse dentro de un grupo. Esto se debe a que la búsqueda de menos información no necesariamente tiene que estar asociada con la desconexión digital. Más bien, puede estar asociado con el uso indirecto del capital digital de la persona que busca información o la delegación de tareas digitales (Ragnedda *et al.*, 2022; Holmes *et al.*, 2025).

Las brechas digitales no se superan dentro de la familia, pero sus consecuencias se minimizan y aún pueden reproducir roles sociales fuera de internet. Llamamos a esta ambivalencia paradoja del capital digital, de acuerdo con lo que se ha denominado anteriormente como *brecha digital doméstica* (van Deursen *et al.*, 2017; Ragnedda, 2018). Si lo analizamos desde una perspectiva individual, puede parecer que las personas que más se benefician son quienes más lo utilizan. Sin embargo, cuando lo vemos dentro de un grupo, el beneficio indirecto desempeña un papel importante a la hora de abordar las desigualdades sociales. Esto permite estudiar la acción indirecta digital como una cuestión de delegación de tareas generacional o en función del género.

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Notas

- 1 Una razón de momios (RM) mayor que uno indica una mayor probabilidad de búsqueda en comparación con la categoría de referencia, mientras que una RM menor que uno indica una menor probabilidad.

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Gender and Governance in Andalusian Public University Departments: An Empirical Exploration

La cuestión de género en el gobierno de los departamentos universitarios públicos andaluces: una exploración empírica

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ABSTRACT

The unequal representation of men and women in the leadership of university departments remains a significant challenge to the advancement of gender equality in higher education. To examine this phenomenon, an original ad hoc census of departments across Andalusian public universities was constructed. The census was designed *ex ante*, with a set of indicators defined prior to fieldwork to capture key organisational characteristics of the department as the unit of analysis. In particular, indicators were operationalised to measure the sex composition of management teams and selected institutional characteristics associated with departmental governance, including equality plans and indicators related to academic performance. As an exploratory exercise, an Exhaustive CHAID segmentation model was applied to illustrate the potential of the census for identifying organisational configurations associated with female leadership. Taken together, the census provides evidence that is rarely available at the departmental level and offers a valuable resource that can be used by universities for the diagnosis, monitoring and evaluation of gender equality policies.

KEYWORDS: gender inequality; university governance; academic leadership; higher education governance; university departments

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RESUMEN

La desigual representación de hombres y mujeres en la dirección de los departamentos universitarios es un problema para el avance de la igualdad de género. Para analizar este fenómeno, se ha elaborado un censo original ad hoc de departamentos de universidades públicas de Andalucía. El censo se diseñó ex ante: antes del trabajo de campo se definieron un conjunto de indicadores para captar rasgos organizativos del departamento como unidad de análisis. En particular, se operacionalizaron indicadores sobre la composición por sexo de los equipos de dirección y algunos rasgos institucionales asociados (como planes de igualdad y señales de desempeño académico). Como ejercicio exploratorio, se aplicó un modelo de segmentación Exhaustive CHAID para ilustrar el potencial del censo en la identificación de configuraciones asociadas al liderazgo femenino. En conjunto, el censo aporta evidencia poco disponible a escala departamental y puede transferirse a las universidades para diagnóstico, seguimiento y evaluación de políticas de igualdad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: brecha de género; gobierno universitario; liderazgo académico; gobernanza universitaria; departamentos universitarios.

1. Introduction

Research on gender within higher education systems has, for decades, documented the persistence of barriers that reproduce inequalities between women and men. The literature identifies these inequalities at different yet interconnected levels, including disciplinary segregation (Zheng *et al.*, 2023; Else, 2024), disparities in academic career progression (Meza-Mejia *et al.*, 2023) and access to leadership positions. In the latter area, the evidence points to two recurring patterns: women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, and regulatory advances tend to have limited or uneven effects on the distribution of authority (Burkinshaw and White, 2017).

A substantial body of this research has focused on the central governing bodies of universities, including rectors' offices, vice-rectors' offices and other senior institutional positions. However, less attention has been paid to the meso-organisational level of governance, particularly to academic departments and their management teams. This gap is especially relevant in the Spanish higher education system, where departments constitute a core unit for teaching coordination, the organisation of academic work and routine administration. Consequently, the empirical issue extends beyond gender parity in senior leadership to encompass the level at which responsibilities are allocated, tasks are organised and everyday decisions are made, with cumulative effects on career trajectories and opportunities. Against this backdrop, this research note addresses two questions: (1) what is the sex distribution within departmental management teams? and (2) how is representation by sex distributed across positions with different levels of authority within departmental governance structures (headship, deputy headship and departmental secretary)?

For the sake of conceptual clarity, this study distinguishes between a theoretical and an empirical level of analysis. At the theoretical level, it examines gender inequality in access to departmental governance. At the empirical level, it uses representation by sex in departmental governance positions as an indicator of that inequality. Measurement is based on the inference of sex from the names of the individuals holding these positions. This procedure does not capture gender identities or non-binary categories. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as patterns of representation by sex in formal governance positions that may, or may not, align with gender. On this basis, the study describes the sex gap in departmental leadership and analyses its internal distribution across positions within management teams.

The research forms part of the project *Institutions, Academic Labour Markets and Mobility: An Analysis of the Andalusian University System* (PRY043/22), which includes a specific focus on departments because of their value as a lens through which to observe professional and governance dynamics within the higher education sector. The study design constructs a census from institutional web sources and records 19 organisational indicators, described in the methodology section. These indicators make it possible to explore patterns associated with both vertical segregation (the relative underrepresentation of women in departmental headship positions) and horizontal segregation (the unequal distribution of men and women across roles within management teams, distinguishing between headship, deputy headship and departmental secretary positions). The contribution of this research note is threefold: (i) it provides a department-level database in an area where standardised records are scarce; (ii) it offers an up-to-date overview of representation by sex in departmental leadership positions; and (iii) it explores departmental profiles associated with different patterns of management team composition.

Following this introduction, the note is organised into four sections. The literature review examines the principal concepts relating to gender inequality and situates the Spanish case within the broader scholarly debate. The methodology section describes the research design, the census variables and the analytical procedure. The following section presents the findings on representation by sex in departmental governance. Finally, the discussion considers the implications of these findings for institutional gender equality policies in higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender inequality and authority in university governance

The literature on gender in higher education consistently shows that inequalities are particularly visible within university governance structures, where questions of power and the distribution of formal authority come most clearly into view (Long, 2001; Fox, 2010). Within higher education systems, these inequalities are associated both with the formal design of governance arrangements (the structure of governing bodies and the rules governing access to them) and with the differential allocation of responsibilities.

As a result, the gender gap cannot be reduced to workforce composition alone. Rather, it manifests cumulatively across hierarchical levels that exercise greater control over resources, agendas and institutional recognition (Bird *et al.*, 2004).

To structure this analysis, the study draws on two complementary concepts. Vertical segregation refers to the relative underrepresentation of women in positions of greater authority within governance structures (here, departmental headship). Horizontal segregation refers to the relative concentration of women in particular governance roles – especially those involving support, coordination or organisational ‘maintenance work’ – which tend to carry lower public visibility and status despite forming part of the management team (Bird *et al.*, 2004). At the departmental level, and for operational purposes, this dimension is conceptualised as positional horizontal segregation and is observed through the unequal distribution of men and women across positions within management teams, distinguishing between headship and deputy headship/departmental secretary roles.

Research on the situation in Spain broadly supports this diagnosis. A number of studies have documented patterns of both vertical and horizontal segregation (Castro *et al.*, 2019; Gallego-Morón and Matus-López, 2023; Rekalde and Iglesias, 2017). However, the available evidence exhibits a scale bias, as it focuses primarily on senior governing bodies and provides only limited insight into the meso-organisational level, particularly the department (Navarro-Astor *et al.*, 2017). This level is especially significant because departments perform a dual function: they structure academic coordination (teaching and research) while also translating formal rules into concrete practices of work organisation.

2.2. The formal institutionalisation of equality and the Spanish regulatory framework

In Spain, the regulatory framework governing equality was consolidated through Act 3/2007. Within the higher education system, the Act promoted the development of equality plans with explicit objectives aimed at reducing inequalities and improving the representation of women in governance structures (Ministry of Equality, 2007). Subsequently, the Framework Act on the University System (LOSU, 2023) reinforced this approach by establishing gender equality as a cross-cutting principle of higher education policy and introducing guidelines for balanced representation in collegiate bodies.

At the same time, the implementation of these policies encouraged the creation of equality units and gender equality committees. These structures have contributed to embedding equality as an organisational norm while providing the technical capacity required for institutional intervention. However, the specialised literature highlights considerable variation in their organisational positioning, resource allocation and effective influence over decision-making processes (Pastor *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, the formal adoption of equality measures does not automatically translate into observable changes in the distribution of authority, particularly where internal mechanisms for monitoring and accountability are absent within specific organisational units.

2.3. The indicator deficit and the blind spot in middle leadership

A central concern in the literature is that the evaluation of equality plans is constrained by the scarcity of longitudinal indicators and the discontinuity of available data (Pastor *et al.*, 2020; Castaño Collado, 2023). Within higher education, this problem is reflected in the lack of indicators measuring representation by sex in intermediate governance positions. Data sources aggregated by sex and professional category – such as institutional reports and general statistical records – tend to omit the sex composition of departmental leadership positions. This limits the capacity to identify internal inequalities within intermediate decision-making arenas and weakens the design of evidence-based corrective measures (Rekalde and Iglesias, 2017; Navarro-Astor *et al.*, 2017).

From an organisational perspective, this deficit is linked to the incomplete integration of a gender perspective into information systems, strategic planning and institutional evaluation processes (Pastor *et al.*, 2020). Some analyses interpret this gap as a consequence of equality being recognised as a legitimate organisational norm while remaining diluted in practice, in the absence of indicators, incentives and clearly defined responsibilities (Castaño-Collado, 2023). This absence effectively renders departments a blind spot (Navarro-Astor *et al.*, 2017; Pastor *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, departments constitute a level of governance that remains insufficiently visible within institutional information systems, which justifies empirical strategies aimed at reconstructing evidence on intermediate forms of university governance.

Accordingly, this study proposes an operational indicator of representation by sex in intermediate university governance positions, based on the systematic reconstruction of their sex composition. The methodology section details the indicators employed, the operationalisation of the variables and the coding criteria applied.

3. Methodology

This research note constructs a census of 506 departments across the Andalusian public university system.³ The census was compiled through the direct observation of institutional web sources. This approach was necessary given the absence of official records at departmental level. It also provides a replicable baseline for comparative research.

The study population comprises the 506 departments recorded by the Integrated University Information System (SIIU) for the 2022/2023 academic year. In terms of coverage, three figures are distinguished: (i) the theoretical SIIU universe/census ($N = 506$); (ii) the observed database with active institutional websites ($n = 498$); and (iii) the departments valid for analyses for which the sex of the department head could be determined ($n = 496$).

Data collection was carried out manually during the first half of 2023. For each department, all information available on its website and associated published documents (including annual reports where accessible) was recorded. Data collection followed a standardised

protocol for data recording and coding. Departmental websites were accessed through the main website of each university (via the departments section and corresponding links), after which their internal pages were systematically explored. As certain types of information tend to be concentrated in recurring locations (for example, 'Contact' or 'Department Information'), the protocol incorporated a navigation strategy specifically targeting these sections. Only information located on the department's own website was considered valid (including its pages, tabs and integrated documents), with external, non-integrated sources (e.g. independent repositories) being excluded.

To standardise coding procedures and minimise discretionary decisions, the protocol established operational rules for each variable. A limited search rule was applied, whereby each indicator was investigated for up to 30 seconds. Where information was ambiguous or incomplete, a conservative coding criterion was adopted, assigning the lowest-value category. This procedure reduces the risk of overestimating information availability (false positives) and therefore provides a cautious estimate of public visibility. Accordingly, the proxies employed capture the presence, clarity and accessibility of publicly available information on organisational practices and resources.

Substantively, the variables were grouped into five domains (see Table 1 in the Appendix): (a) departmental identification and contact information; (b) departmental structure and gender balance in leadership; (c) research output and knowledge transfer; (d) academic career policies (recruitment and promotion); and (e) current affairs and communication. From a measurement perspective, four types of variables were distinguished: (i) nominal; (ii) ratio; (iii) dichotomous nominal; and (iv) ordinal-scale variables. Most proxies were coded using an ordinal scale ranging from 1 to 3 (1 = absent/inaccessible; 2 = partial or insufficient; 3 = clear and complete). In ambiguous cases, the conservative criterion was again applied, assigning the lowest-value category. This minimum-value assignment rule was used specifically for the information-related proxies. Where a variable could not be coded (for example, where it was not possible to identify the sex of the department head), the case was treated as missing data, thereby avoiding unwarranted imputations.

The analytical strategy combines (i) descriptive tables and (ii) segmentation models using Exhaustive CHAID with cross-validation (SPSS). First, descriptive tables are used to provide contextual insight into patterns across categorical variables, offering a transparent and readily interpretable point of comparison.

Second, two Exhaustive CHAID segmentation trees are estimated, each with a different dependent variable: (1) the sex of the department head and (2) the proportion of women within the management team, calculated after excluding the department head. In the latter case, the term 'management team' refers to the proportion of women occupying deputy headship and departmental secretary positions (i.e. the management team excluding the department head). This definition prevents the indicator from being mechanically determined by the sex of the department head and makes it possible to observe positional horizontal segregation as a pattern of differential role allocation within leadership structures (headship versus deputy headship/departmental secretary positions).

The choice of CHAID reflects the exploratory nature of the study and the measurement scale of the available data. Most predictors are categorical or ordinal, including the 1–3 proxies measuring the visibility and accessibility of publicly available information. Moreover, the analysis is not based on a strictly specified causal hypothesis. Unlike parametric approaches, which impose assumptions regarding functional form and additivity, CHAID enables the iterative identification of combinations of conditions through successive partitions based on χ^2 tests, generating a hierarchical set of segmentation rules that classify departments into internally homogeneous subgroups with respect to the outcome variable. This structure facilitates the substantive interpretation of the findings in terms of organisational configurations associated with a greater or lesser presence of women in positions of formal authority.

To reduce the risk of overfitting and trivial segmentation, the algorithm was parameterised using cross-validation and minimum node sizes of 40 (parent node) and 20 (child node). This configuration maximises both the stability of the tree and the interpretability of the terminal nodes. Given the potential imbalance between outcome categories, and the resulting difficulty of accurately classifying the minority category, the model is interpreted primarily as a tool for identifying profiles and segmentation patterns rather than for individual-level prediction. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as configurational associations and complemented by descriptive analyses.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics for the departmental population and observed dataset

The population comprises 506 departments (SIIU, 2022/2023 academic year). The analyses are based on the 496 departments with active websites and publicly available names and surnames for all members of the management team, from which sex was inferred. The data reveal the presence of vertical segregation, understood as the underrepresentation of women in the position with the highest level of formal authority.

Table 1
Distribution of departmental leadership positions by sex (unit: departments)

Total	% men (n)	% women (n)
% department heads	70.56 (350)	29.44 (146)

Note: Valid N_dep = 496 (departments for which the sex of the department head could be identified).
Source: own research.

For deputy headship and departmental secretary positions (excluding department heads), as well as for management team positions overall (including department heads), the proportion of women indicates a relatively greater female presence in deputy headship and departmental secretary roles than in departmental headship. This pattern is consistent with positional segregation, understood as the relative concentration of women in roles with lower hierarchical status and visibility (department headship versus deputy headship and departmental secretary positions).

Table 2
Distribution of positions by sex (unit: positions)

Total	% men (n)	% women (n)
% deputy headship and departmental secretary positions (excluding department heads)	62.67 (639)	37.33 (383)
% management team positions (including department heads)	65.1 (985)	34.9 (528)

Note: These figures refer to coded positions/persons rather than departments. The percentages describe the distribution of positions by sex, not the proportion of departments with a given composition.
Source: own research.

4.2. CHAID analysis results

The analysis estimates two decision trees using the Exhaustive CHAID algorithm to identify segmentation patterns associated with the presence of women in departmental governance. The first model uses as its dependent variable the proportion of women within the management team (deputy headship and departmental secretary positions), excluding the department head. The outcome variable is grouped into three categories (less than 40%, between 40% and 60% and more than 60%). The second model uses the sex of the department head as the dependent variable (0 = man; 1 = woman). In both models, the procedure selects predictors with significant discriminatory power ($p < 0.05$) from the sixteen indicators described in the methodology section, subject to the predefined stopping criteria (minimum parent and terminal node sizes, and cross-validation).

First model: proportion of women within the management team (deputy headship and departmental secretary positions)

The first model yields no additional partitions under the specified stopping criteria (risk = 0.444; standard error = 0.022). The algorithm selects only the sex of the department head as the root node. Where the department is headed by a man, the representation of women in departmental secretary and deputy headship positions tends to fall within the lower ranges. Conversely, where the department head is a woman, female representation tends to fall within the higher ranges.

The tree structure introduces no further branches and, consequently, given the variables included and the parameterisation adopted, the model identifies no additional predictors with significant discriminatory power for the proportion of women within the management team (excluding the department head). This absence of further partitions should be interpreted with caution. The result is consistent with a comparatively weak association between the outcome and the remaining variables, but it may also reflect limitations relating to effective statistical power and model specification (for example, categorisation into ranges, minimum node thresholds and the distribution of cases across categories).

Second model: sex of the department head

The second tree identifies a segmentation structure dominated by a compositional predictor: the sex composition of the deputy headship and departmental secretary positions (excluding the department head). This pattern should be interpreted as evidence of an endogenous configuration of departmental governance – that is, how the management team is structured – rather than as a set of external conditions that determine the sex of the department head. Building on this primary structure, two institutional proxies (the existence of an equality plan and the accessibility of information on academic staff research output) operate as secondary partitions within a specific branch of the tree.

The model generates eight nodes, five of which are terminal nodes, and reaches a maximum depth of three levels (Figure 1). The risk estimate is 0.176 ± 0.016 , indicating a relatively low overall classification error for this type of exploratory procedure.

As shown in Figure 1, the primary segmentation is organised around the sex composition of the management team. The root node separates three branches: mixed deputy headship and departmental secretary teams (men and women), teams composed entirely of women and teams composed entirely of men. Within the branch of mixed teams (Node 1), departmental leadership remains predominantly male. Within the branch consisting exclusively of women (Node 2), the department head is female in 100% of cases. Within the branch consisting exclusively of men (Node 3), departmental leadership is predominantly male, while female department heads appear only marginally.

Within the ‘all-male’ branch, the tree introduces additional subdivisions that should be interpreted as marginal variations within an underlying pattern of strong male predominance. First, the predictor ‘equality plan’ distinguishes subgroups displaying small differences in the proportion of female department heads, without altering the overall predominance of male leadership. Second, within the subgroup lacking an equality plan, the ‘accessibility of information on academic staff research output’ introduces a further secondary partition, again producing only limited variation. In short, these proxies do not structure the tree at its primary level; rather, they act as modifiers within the segment composed entirely of male management teams.

Nevertheless, the analysis remains exploratory in nature. The interpretation should take into account that the principal predictor is compositional and forms part of the organisational phenomenon under examination itself, namely the configuration of the management team. Accordingly, its association with the sex of the department head should not be interpreted as the effect of an external condition, but rather as evidence that positions within departmental leadership teams tend to be organised in a sex-linked and mutually reinforcing manner. Within this framework, the proxies ‘equality plan’ and ‘accessibility of research output information’ should be regarded as secondary partitions rather than as primary substantive determinants.

Furthermore, the model exhibits uneven performance across classes. It correctly classifies 100% of cases with male department heads and 46.6% of cases with female department heads. This pattern is consistent with the underlying imbalance in the population, which is characterised by the predominance of male leadership. Consequently, overall accuracy alone is insufficient for assessing the substantive performance of the classifier. Interpretation should instead draw on class-specific metrics and, ideally, balanced measures such as sensitivity and specificity for each class.

Taken together, the findings point to two empirical regularities. First, there is a close internal association between the sex of the department head and the sex composition of the deputy headship and departmental secretary positions: both elements appear jointly as part of a broader governance configuration. Second, once the segment of entirely male management teams is established, the proxies capturing the formal institutionalisation of equality and the visibility of research-related information introduce only minor variations in the residual presence of female department heads, without altering the dominant pattern.

5. Discussion

This study addresses a deficit in observability at the departmental level through a census-based protocol for reconstructing management teams from institutional web sources and through an indicator of representation by sex disaggregated by position (headship, deputy headship and departmental secretary). This strategy enables both intra- and inter-university comparisons and provides an empirical basis for the study of departmental governance. The descriptive findings reveal patterns of representation by sex consistent with a dual form of segregation: vertical segregation, reflected in the underrepresentation of women as department heads, and positional horizontal segregation, reflected in the unequal distribution of men and women across positions within management teams. The exploratory segmentation analysis further suggests that certain conditions relating to the transparency of research output and the formal institutionalisation of equality are associated with patterns of office-holding, although the available evidence does not permit the identification of underlying mechanisms or the establishment of causal effects.

The results of the segmentation analysis should therefore be interpreted with caution. First, Exhaustive CHAID is employed here as an exploratory technique aimed at identifying combinations of conditions associated with outcome categories rather than as a method of causal inference. The structure of the tree depends on stopping criteria (minimum node sizes, tree depth and cross-validation) as well as on underlying imbalances between categories (for example, the high prevalence of male department heads), both of which affect classification performance and the stability of terminal nodes. Second, the interpretation of the findings depends on issues of construct validity. The indicators used as proxies for 'research output transparency' and 'institutional commitment to equality' capture only partial dimensions of these concepts. The former refers to the public accessibility of information on the research outputs of academic staff (for example, publication lists), rather than to research productivity itself. The equality plan constitutes an institutional characteristic within which the department is embedded, without assuming that the department itself actively publicises or promotes it.

In light of these considerations, the observed patterns are consistent with broader debates on gender and university governance, including the persistence of vertical segregation, positional horizontal segregation and the potential decoupling of formal institutionalisation from substantive changes in the distribution of authority. Accordingly, although the exploratory design and the indirect nature of the indicators preclude the conclusive identification of underlying mechanisms, the findings provide valuable indications that may guide future lines of inquiry: (a) internal rules governing the selection, appointment and rotation of office holders; (b) the distribution of administrative and managerial workloads, together with the incentives and reputational rewards associated with departmental governance; (c) conditions affecting the availability of candidates and the expected returns associated with standing for office; and (d) the informal dynamics of nomination and co-optation. Future research could extend this approach through more refined measurement strategies and confirmatory research designs (for example, logistic and/or multilevel models), as well as through replication across different institutional contexts.

Finally, the implications of the study extend to the practical domains of university policy and institutional information management. If part of the problem lies in the lack of indicators on the sex composition of departmental leadership positions, one immediate implication is the need to standardise the production and publication of a core set of data on departmental governance. In this way, the diagnostic components of equality plans would no longer rely solely on information aggregated by professional category and would instead incorporate the meso-organisational level into analyses of gender equality. A second practical application would be to integrate the proposed indicator into institutions' internal monitoring systems. While such integration would not, in itself, guarantee substantive change, it would reduce the deficit of comparable and verifiable data, facilitate the identification of persistent imbalances and support the design of evidence-informed interventions.

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Notes

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- 3 The International University of Andalusia was excluded due to its multi-campus structure and distinctive institutional arrangement, as were private universities.

Appendix

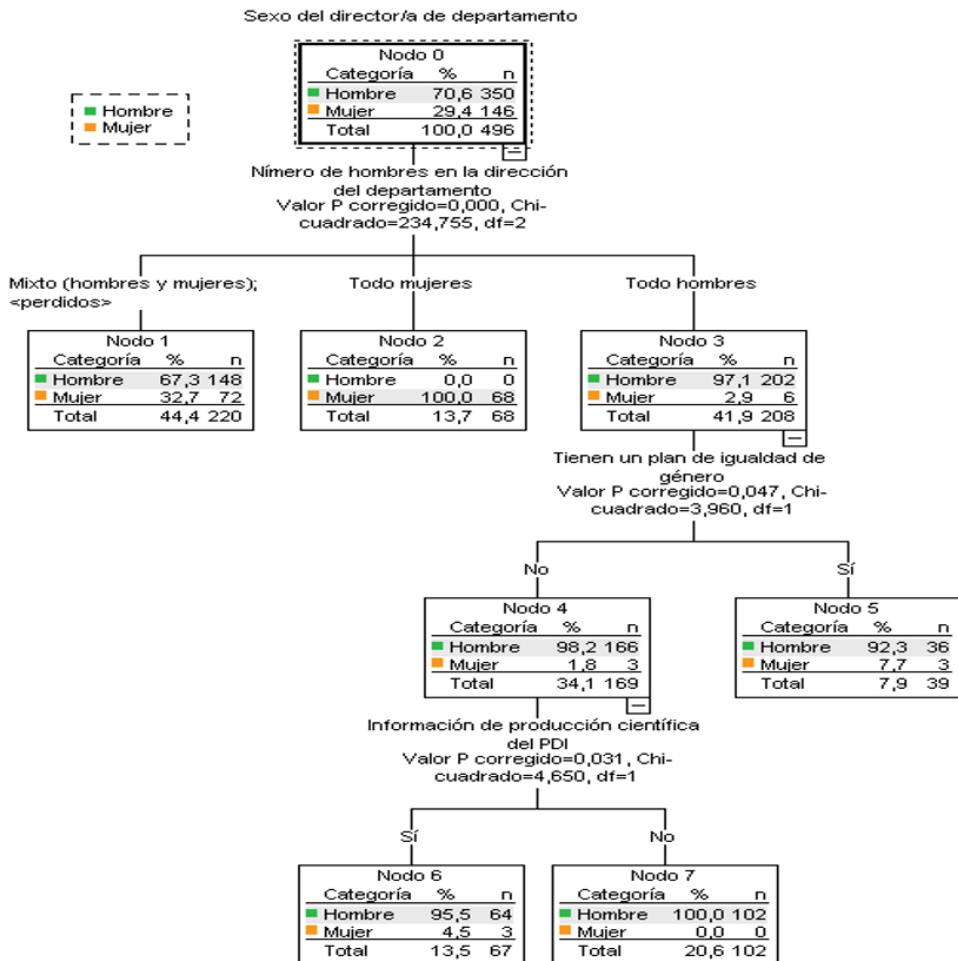
Table 1
List of dimensions and indicators

Dimension	Variables and indicators	Level	Coding
A. Identification	Field of knowledge to which the department belongs	Nominal	1 = Engineering; 2 = Sciences; 3 = Social Sciences and Law; 4 = Arts and Humanities; 5 = Health Sciences
B. Departmental structure and representation by sex in leadership	No. of women in the management team	Ratio	
	No. of disciplinary areas	Ratio	
	Equality plan in place	Dichotomous nominal	1 = Yes; 0 = No
	Internal departmental regulations in place	Dichotomous nominal	1 = Yes; 0 = No
	Publishes the sex distribution of staff	Dichotomous nominal	1 = Man; 2 = Woman
	Sex of the department head	Dichotomous nominal	
C. Research output and knowledge transfer	Information on academic staff research output	Ordinal	1 = Absent/inaccessible; 2 = Partial; 3 = Clear/complete
	Information on staff CVs and academic achievements		
	Information on funded research projects		
	Information on research groups		
D. Academic career policies: recruitment and promotion	Information on degree programmes and doctoral studies	Ordinal	1 = Absent/inaccessible; 2 = Partial; 3 = Clear/complete
	Information on predoctoral and postdoctoral recruitment opportunities		
	Information on academic staff vacancies		
	Information on assessment criteria for contracted academic staff positions		
E. Current affairs and communication	Public engagement news channel for general audiences	Ordinal	1 = Absent/inaccessible; 2 = Partial; 3 = Clear/complete
	Academic news and dissemination channel		
	Overall assessment of departmental website quality		
	Overall assessment of information accessibility		

Source: own research.

Figure 1

Segmentation tree: profiles associated with the sex of the department head



Note: The sex composition of the management team refers to deputy headship and departmental secretary positions; departmental headship is excluded.

Source: own research based on primary data.

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DEBATE

DEBATE

DEBATE/DEBATE: A LOOK AT ADOLESCENCE FROM THREE PERSPECTIVES/UNA
MIRADA HACIA LA ADOLESCENCIA DESDE TRES PERSPECTIVAS

Editorial: Adolescence, Political Socialisation and Early Citizenship

Editorial: Adolescencia, socialización política y ciudadanía temprana

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ABSTRACT

This editorial introduces the two articles that form the discussion section. It approaches political socialisation in adolescence from a sociological perspective, reviewing the significance of citizenship through past research alongside recent studies published in social sciences journals indexed in SCOPUS and Web of Science between 2021 and 2026. The findings point to both change and continuity. The family remains central to political socialisation, alongside the school, the peer group and digital environments. While the family continues to be the primary site for the transmission of values and civic customs, the peer group and the school reinforce civic learning, and social media offers unprecedented opportunities for political engagement – though with significant inequalities of access. Adolescence is understood here as a stage of active rather than passive agency in the formation of citizenship, in which participation is conceived broadly and multidimensionally, and socialisation processes interact with emotions, identity and social structures to shape differentiated political trajectories and pathways towards democratic participation.

KEYWORDS: political socialisation; adolescence; early citizenship; youth participation; socialisation agents.

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RESUMEN

El presente editorial tiene como objetivo presentar los dos artículos que forman el debate. Para ello aborda la socialización política en la adolescencia desde una perspectiva sociológica. Se revisa la importancia de la ciudadanía en las sociedades democráticas mediante investigaciones clásicas. Además, se seleccionan investigaciones recientes publicadas en ciencias sociales en SCOPUS y Web of Science (2021–2026). Los resultados muestran cambios y permanencia. La familia sigue teniendo importancia en la socialización política junto con la escuela, el grupo de iguales y los entornos digitales. Aunque la familia sigue siendo central en la transmisión de valores y hábitos de participación, los pares y la escuela refuerzan aprendizajes cívicos, mientras que las redes digitales ofrecen oportunidades inéditas de compromiso político, aunque con desigualdades de acceso. Se subraya la adolescencia como etapa de agencia activa, no pasiva, en la construcción de la ciudadanía, donde la participación se entiende de manera amplia y multidimensional, y donde los procesos de socialización interactúan con emociones, identidad y estructuras sociales, configurando trayectorias políticas diferenciadas y potenciales caminos hacia la participación democrática.

PALABRAS CLAVE: socialización política; adolescencia; ciudadanía temprana; participación juvenil; agentes de socialización.

1. Introduction

This editorial contextualises the debate on political socialisation in adolescence from a sociological perspective and presents the articles that comprise this section. Against simplifying, homogenising or stigmatising accounts of adolescence, the articles gathered here draw on data and evidence to illuminate the diversity of experiences, attitudes and political orientations among young people, offering a scientifically grounded, empirically based analysis of particular relevance to contemporary political life and citizenship. The editorial reviews both earlier research and the results of searches in the Web of Science (WoS) and SCOPUS social sciences databases for the period 2021–2026, addressing the importance of adolescent political participation and the changes undergone by socialisation agents.

Following the editorial, the first article, ‘Spanish Adolescence: A Political and Emotional Characterisation’, offers a detailed examination of adolescents’ opinions, attitudes and concerns, drawing on microdata from the Spanish Institute of Youth’s (INJUVE) 2023 Youth Survey. The analysis maps adolescents in Spain ideologically, charts their emotional and affective situation, and identifies their main social concerns and civic affinities.

Far from presenting young people as a homogeneous collective – and challenging narratives that characterise them as apathetic or disengaged from politics – the results reveal a remarkable complexity and plurality of positions which enrich public and academic debate. The data depict a generation that is critical of institutional politics, raising important questions about the possibilities and forms of political re-enchantment at this stage of the life cycle, while also attending to their emotional situation, a dimension of growing interest in research.

The second article, ‘Arguments and Evidence in the Debate on Lowering the Voting Age to 16,’ addresses a timely question in the field of democratic citizenship: the possible reduction of the minimum voting age to 16. Through a rigorous review of the international literature, drawing primarily on research conducted across various European countries, the article systematically sets out the arguments for and against this measure and evaluates them in the light of available empirical evidence. It also incorporates findings from the INJUVE and the May 2025 barometer of the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, survey 3510), which shed light on the views of Spanish citizens on the issue. Together, these results move the debate beyond normative or intuitive positions and connect it directly to the processes of political socialisation that precede coming of age.

Taken as a whole, the contributions in this Discussion section situate the analysis of political attitudes in adolescence and voting at 16 within a broader framework of reflection on political socialisation and the construction of citizenship. In doing so, they advance a more complex, nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of youth political participation and of the challenges posed by the expansion of democratic rights in contemporary societies.

2. The importance of participation in democratic societies

The word ‘participation’ derives from the Latin *participare* and carries the sense of intervening, engaging, collaborating, contributing and helping. It concerns, on the one hand, the democratic representation of power and, on the other, the democratic accountability of those entrusted with authority – the two legs, as Murillo (1963) put it, on which the democratic body walks. Citizens are called upon to participate and to commit themselves across domains as varied as consumption, food, agriculture, health and education. This requires that they are aware of their rights and obligations and that they engage in different settings. One example is the call to conscious consumption: knowing one’s rights, how to lodge complaints or demonstrate for causes in which one acts as a consumer, activist or citizen (Novo and Lozano-Cabedo, 2021).

Political sociology has long engaged with these questions. More than twenty years ago, Benedicto and Morán (2002) argued for the need for an active citizenship in which young people could become engaged and involved in participatory contexts, their presence constituting a fundamental experience in forming a competent citizenship conscious of its obligations. Fostering social practices in the construction of civic identities also entails creating the spaces in which those practices can take place; today, the digital space has emerged as one such site for encounter and debate.

Participation, moreover, cannot be reduced to voting and organisations. An expanded and diversified understanding of the channels and forms through which citizenship can be exercised is needed (Parés, 2014). According to Alarcón (2022), public debate on youth participation consistently overlooks the multiple ways in which new generations engage politically. Drawing on the European Social Survey (2018), Sobczyk *et al.* (2022) identify the activities that attract the highest proportions of young people, which include signing petitions, sharing or posting political content online, and boycotting or avoiding certain products. Rather than treating these as evidence of apathy or disaffection, research today focuses on understanding the meanings young people themselves attach to these actions and on recognising the role these forms play in youth activism (Aarab *et al.*, 2025).

In the educational sphere, two participation-related issues stand out. The first is the involvement and engagement of families in schools. Families are essential agents of both individual and collective participation; in this regard, Joyce Epstein was a pioneer, from her doctoral thesis (1974, unpublished) onwards, in studying the family–education relationship and proposing six types of family involvement (Epstein, 1992) – work she continues today through the development of research-based programmes for family and community engagement. In Spain, Jordi Garreta has pursued a similar line of inquiry (Garreta, 2008), with particular attention to diversity and intercultural mediation in schools.

The second concerns the role of the educational system and the family as agents of primary socialisation, transmitting values and norms through the curriculum. Discussing, forming opinions, taking on leadership roles and participating in the community can all be learned in the classroom. Thirty years after the publication of Apple and Beane's *Democratic Schools* (1995), their argument remains pertinent to the debate presented here. The authors lamented that, for many, democracy was an adult prerogative; against this, they insisted that education in a democracy was obliged to empower young people to become active participants in the *public sphere*, while also working through the tensions and contradictions this involves.

3. The role of agents in political socialisation in adolescence

3.1. The family

The family has long been regarded as the primary agent of socialisation in general and of political socialisation in particular (Jaime-Castillo, 2000; 2010). Two contemporary issues raise questions about the declining importance of the family in this process. The first is that during adolescence the peer group moves to the fore: in the search for autonomy and independence, conflict within the family is a common feature of this stage. The second is the significant role that relationship, information and communication technologies (RICTs) now play in adolescent socialisation, generating considerable tension in family life (Sanmartín *et al.*, 2025).

Research indexed in SCOPUS for the period 2021–2026 suggests that, despite these pressures, the family remains an important agent in political socialisation. Beyond parents, siblings also contribute (Kudrnáč *et al.*, 2026), as does the extended family – grandparents, aunts and uncles in particular (García-Espín, 2025; Tamariz *et al.*, 2026). The family is key to institutional trust: it transmits not only ideology or partisan identification but affective orientations towards the political system (Elsayed, 2024). Voting intention is likewise shaped by both family and school, though the school complements rather than replaces the family (Wiseman, 2025).

Kestilä-Kekkonen *et al.* (2025) offer a robust response to this question drawing on Finnish adolescent panel data. Their study, tellingly titled *Family Beats School?*, concludes that family background and parental voting habits outweigh the effect of educational track on voting intention. Even within a strong education system such as Finland's, the political *habitus* cultivated at home – the understanding of voting as a civic duty – proves the most resilient predictor.

This transmission is not, however, a process of ideological cloning. Weiss (2023) examines the complexity of left–right ideological transmission, showing that it is strongly mediated by gender and parenting styles: mothers and fathers influence daughters and sons differently, and parenting style – authoritarian versus democratic – acts as a moderator, with a family environment open to debate facilitating more effective value transmission than dogmatic imposition (Adorno *et al.*, 1950; Baumrind, 1966). Ideology, then, is not inherited as a genetic trait but negotiated through the dynamics of power and affection within the home.

A further finding relevant to family socialisation concerns its early onset. Family socialisation begins well before adolescence. Carballo-Losada *et al.* (2025) offer a revealing perspective by studying children aged 5 to 8, demonstrating that children's concern for global issues such as climate change depends directly

on parental perception and communication. If parents do not verbalise the importance of an issue or act as models of ecological concern, children are unlikely to integrate it into their own hierarchy of concerns, regardless of environmental education at school. This underscores the family's role as a kind of 'gatekeeper' that decides which problems in the world deserve attention.

Finally, the family can also be a source of disaffection. Jungkunz and Weiss (2024) explore the link between negative relational experiences and populism, finding that adolescents who experience conflictual or rejection-based relationships with parents, teachers or peers are more likely to develop populist attitudes. Relational discomfort and a lack of recognition in the immediate environment translate into generalised distrust of authority figures and institutions. Youth populism, in this reading, may be rooted in microsocial relational dysfunction as much as in macrostructural conditions.

3.2. The school

Research on socialisation within the education system highlights the influence of subject choice on political orientations: studying arts and humanities or business and economics each leaves a distinct imprint on voting behaviour (Martin *et al.*, 2025). Popular culture, too, educates and politicises. Sun (2023), through an analysis of international youth literature, shows that cultural products are powerful transmitters of ideology: youth literature constructs imaginaries of justice, rebellion, authority and historical memory, and the narratives young people encounter at this stage become cognitive frameworks through which they interpret contemporary political reality.

Classroom debate has been shown to promote gender equality in political participation, given that girls tend to participate less in this sphere (García-Albacete and Hoskins, 2025), and activities such as simulated voting experiences in secondary schools increase political interest (Jung and Lee, 2025; Sun and Janmaat, 2025). Discussions with peer groups and adults predict subsequent political motivation.

The school is also the site where cultural identities are negotiated. Kubi *et al.* (2022) show that 'school ethnic-racial socialisation' is decisive: the implicit and explicit messages schools convey – through a Eurocentric curriculum or differential disciplinary treatment – shape critical awareness among young people. When the school fails to validate students' identities, it can paradoxically foster resistance activism; the democratic ideal, however, requires that the school be a space for empowerment rather than merely one of defensive conflict.

3.3. The peer group

During adolescence, young people orient themselves increasingly towards their peers. Classical sociology tended to view the peer group as a potentially ‘deviant’ agent capable of undermining civic values; recent research, however, complicates this picture.

Karkdijk *et al.* (2025) introduce the concept of ‘congruence’ in civic attitudes. Examining the similarity of values among adolescents and their mothers, fathers and friends, they find a high degree of homophily: young people tend to associate with peers who share the core values of their families. In many cases, then, the peer group functions as a social echo chamber that reinforces and consolidates primary socialisation rather than challenging it. Rather than the image of a rebellious adolescent breaking with everything learned at home, the data reveal continuity: friendships are formed with those who resemble the family in terms of institutional trust and civic values, creating consensus bubbles that can limit exposure to divergent perspectives.

3.4. Digital socialisation

On social media, adolescents tend to recognise the importance of politics while simultaneously distancing themselves from political debate, associating it with conflict and the fear of judgement and exclusion. Social media subtly shapes their opinions through entertainment and contributes to normalising polarised narratives (Paz-Rebollo *et al.*, 2026). As for the influence of online messages, the research shows that adolescents are no more susceptible than adults: in both cases, what proves most persuasive is not the number of likes a message receives but whether it is endorsed by a party one already identifies with (Arceneaux *et al.*, 2025).

In the era of the algorithm, Maurissen and Claes (2023), drawing on comparative data from 21 countries, confirm that the digital environment offers unprecedented opportunities for political engagement – but caution against *techno-optimism*. One reason for this is that access to these forms of participation remains unevenly distributed: second-order digital divides in skills and usage replicate offline socioeconomic inequalities. Not all young people use the internet for political activism; for many, it remains primarily a space for entertainment, a dynamic that widens rather than closes the civic divide.

3.5. Other factors influencing socialisation

It is also important to consider socialisation in the most extreme contexts. Bähr and Taylor (2023) propose a ‘Developmental Peacebuilding Model’, based on research in areas of armed conflict, challenging the dominant narrative of young people as either traumatised victims or violent perpetrators. Their findings show that, even in conditions of violence, young people can develop meaningful agency as

peacebuilders: through community engagement and the cultivation of empathy for the ‘other’ group, they are capable of breaking intergenerational cycles of violence. This is a powerful testament to resilience and to democratic socialisation even when institutions have failed.

4. Conclusion

Recent literature on political socialisation in adolescence has moved away from classical vertical and unidirectional models towards approaches that conceive of it as a dynamic, multidimensional and bidirectional process. The family remains a central agent, though its influence depends on relational context, political communication and adolescent interest. The school contributes not only through the curriculum but above all through a participatory and deliberative climate. Peers and associations reinforce forms of lateral socialisation tied to early participatory practices. Media and digital networks shape political knowledge, attitudes and participation in ways whose effects are ambivalent and context-dependent. Research consistently highlights adolescents as active agents in their own socialisation and underlines the importance of structural context, inequalities and social diversity in shaping differentiated political trajectories. Contemporary debate, in short, understands political socialisation at this stage of life as contextual, interactive and non-deterministic – not as the passive transmission of values.

5. Acknowledgements

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DEBATE/DEBATE: A LOOK AT ADOLESCENCE FROM THREE PERSPECTIVES /UNA
MIRADA HACIA LA ADOLESCENCIA DESDE TRES PERSPECTIVAS

Spanish Adolescence: A Political and Socio-Emotional Characterisation

La adolescencia española: una caracterización política y socioemocional

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ABSTRACT

To contribute to the characterisation of Spanish adolescence in political and socio-emotional terms, we draw on microdata from the latest INJUVE survey (2023), extracting the subsample corresponding to the population aged 15 to 19 ($n = 1,228$). Overall, the findings portray a tolerant population that is highly engaged with a broad range of social concerns, strongly critical in political terms, yet not predominantly conservative in its ideological orientation. Adolescent boys are somewhat more conservative and more critical of democracy, less supportive of the feminist movement and considerably more likely to consume pornography. Girls show greater exposure to unwanted sexual experiences, a more pronounced sense of loneliness and appear to be more sensitive to certain social issues.

KEYWORDS: sociology; adolescence; Spain; survey research; gender; age.

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RESUMEN

Para tratar de aportar una caracterización de la adolescencia española en términos políticos y socioemocionales hemos usado los microdatos de la última encuesta del INJUVE (2023), extrayendo la submuestra que corresponde a la población de 15 a 19 años ($n = 1.228$). Los resultados generales muestran un colectivo tolerante, volcado hacia una serie amplia de preocupaciones sociales, muy crítico en el plano político, pero no conservador. Los varones adolescentes son algo más conservadores y críticos con la democracia, reacios a apoyar la lucha feminista y frecuentadores en mucha mayor medida de pornografía. Las chicas muestran mayor exposición a las relaciones sexuales no deseadas, una sensación más acusada de soledad y parecen estar más sensibilizadas ante ciertos problemas sociales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: sociología; adolescencia; España; encuesta; género; edad.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is an age category that has not always received adequate attention from a sociological perspective, owing to the ambiguity of its boundaries, which tend to overlap with the end of childhood while also merging into early youth. At the same time, it occupies a discursive space rooted in the psychosocial sphere and sociocultural analysis, without a corresponding status in the normative realm, where the only formal distinction is between minors and adults. As a result, within adolescence itself, the crossing of the threshold into legal adulthood means that both categories coexist, reinforcing the inherently ambivalent nature of this stage, situated between adulthood and childhood subordination.

Nevertheless, adolescence is a phase of the life course that is receiving growing attention from a global perspective. Various studies warn, for example, that mental health problems among adolescents are widespread across the world, with increases in depressive symptoms and anxiety-related conditions. Adolescent girls are disproportionately affected, although these issues are also shaped by broader social determinants linked to poverty and social exclusion, educational pressures, family dynamics and peer relationships (Shorey and Wong, 2021; Tamarit *et al.*, 2021). It should also be noted that adolescents, including those in Spain, appear to be facing a range of interconnected global challenges, such as managing the impact of the pandemic on their emotional well-being and educational development, transitioning into employment, and exposure to violence and other risks associated with the digital environment (Jafar *et al.*, 2025; Ventura, 2025).

It is also important to recognise that scientific knowledge regarding adult social representations of adolescence in Spanish society has not been sufficiently updated over the past decade. Nevertheless, some evidence is available on how such representations are often shaped by adult prejudice. For example, Casas

(2010) describes the construction of an image of adolescents based on the pathologisation of many of their behaviours and lifestyles, portraying them as a group characterised by confrontation with adults and resistance to social norms. Similarly, Oliva (2003) highlights the contrast between representations of childhood, which centre on vulnerability, and those of adolescence, where young people are more often portrayed as self-sufficient, transgressive or even as potential aggressors. Scholars specialising in the study of adult-centric biases, such as Duarte (2012), argue that adolescent and youth practices and discourses are frequently interpreted by adults through a lens of conflict and viewed as a threat to social order and social cohesion. This intergenerational tension also extends to key aspects of adolescent life, including young people's attachment to new forms of digital interaction and their use of technological devices, as more recently demonstrated by Larrañaga and Monguí (2021).

This framework invites us to consider that the social reality encompassing Spanish adolescence, as we seek to illustrate in this article, is complex and cannot be reduced to a headline. It requires a broad perspective that remains attentive to the specificities of adolescent life.

A number of very recent studies support this analytical picture, in which highly positive signs of resilience and strength among adolescents coexist with warning signs regarding specific issues that warrant further examination. For instance, the latest report based on the international *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) study depicts a landscape characterised by high levels of life satisfaction, good health and a well-informed population that is also highly engaged and aware of issues such as climate change. At the same time, it identifies a clear gender and socioeconomic divide, with many mental health problems concentrated among girls and adolescents from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Moreno *et al.*, 2025). Another prominent issue linked to adolescent mental health and emotional well-being is the clear prevalence of unwanted loneliness (Ruiz *et al.*, 2023). Other studies have also drawn attention to a widening gender divide among adolescents in perceptions of the importance of the struggle for equality and related issues such as gender-based violence (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2021).

Against this complex analytical backdrop, our aim is to shed empirical light on several selected aspects of contemporary Spanish adolescence that frequently feature in public debate and have generated media headlines since at least the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we focus on how this population is characterised in ideological, romantic, sexual and emotional terms, as well as in relation to its civic concerns and commitments. More specifically, drawing on an analysis of the microdata from the latest Spanish Youth Institute (INJUVE) report (2024), with particular emphasis on the influence of gender and age, we examine adolescents' political and ideological orientations and their views on democracy; their emotional, sexual and relationship experiences, including pornography use; and, finally, their concerns regarding a range of social issues, together with their commitment to civic causes, including feminism and the pursuit of gender equality.

2. Methodological Note

The analysis presented below is based on a secondary analysis of the microdata provided by INJUVE for its survey conducted as part of the Youth in Spain 2024 Report, with fieldwork carried out between October 2023 and January 2024. This was a large-scale national survey based on a semi-proportional, multi-stage and stratified design targeting male and female residents of Spain aged between 15 and 34 years.¹

Of the slightly more than 5,000 interviews conducted, only those corresponding to the population aged between 15 and 19 years were selected, reducing the sample size to $n = 1,228$. Thus, the lower age limit (15 years) is determined by the characteristics of the available dataset, while the upper limit follows the age boundaries proposed by institutions such as the WHO, which defines adolescence as spanning the ages of 10 to 19 years, thereby avoiding excessive overlap with the category of youth.

For analytical purposes, this population was divided into two broad age groups: 15–17 years and 18–19 years. Although the first group covers a wider age range, it accounts for just over 39% of the sample (421 cases), while the second comprises 747 cases. This subdivision into age groups is also analytically relevant, as it incorporates the age of majority as a natural boundary. The analysis also presents information disaggregated according to a binary gender variable. Consideration was given to distinguishing respondents according to their household's economic situation. However, this variable proved less precise and involved a very high level of non-response, and was therefore ultimately excluded from the analysis.

3. Spanish Adolescence on the Ideological Spectrum

One of the most widely debated aspects of the adolescent profile in a social context marked by concern over the electoral growth of parties representing ultraconservative political positions is adolescents' ideological orientation. In the media, this population is frequently portrayed as sympathetic to such political formations. Here, we present evidence relating to the adolescent population concerning a possible ideological shift among young people towards the political right which, as Díez (2025) argues, conceals a far more diverse and complex reality. To begin with, it is important to note that adolescents do not identify strongly with the formal functioning of politics and its institutions. Among respondents aged 15–19 years, 53.2% reported having little or no interest in politics, while almost a quarter (22.1%) stated that they have no trust at all in political parties. This context should be borne in mind when interpreting the remainder of the information provided by respondents.

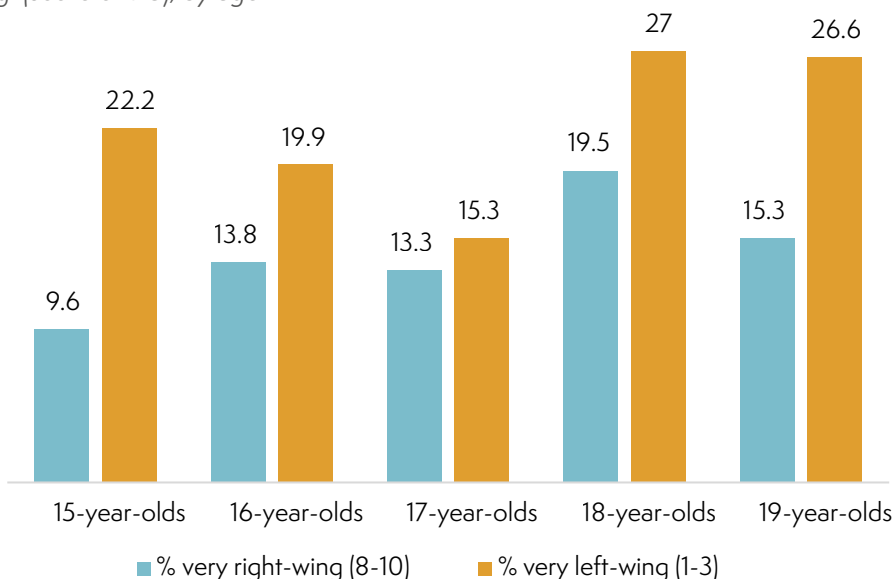
Although adolescent ideological positioning is complex, the data clearly indicate that it is not founded on a broad base of sympathy for conservative ideology. In

reality, most adolescents tend to position themselves in the more moderate areas of the ideological spectrum or towards the left. On a scale from 1 to 10, where the latter represents the strongest identification with the political right, 12.7% place themselves between 8 and 10, that is, on the far right or in an ultraright position. The proportion identifying as strongly left-wing (between 1 and 3) is higher, at 19.5%, while 23% place themselves at the very centre of the ideological distribution. Consequently, the mean score on this scale lies very close to 5 across all groups considered.

Another interesting point of debate concerns the possible existence of a gender gap in ideological positioning, reflected in a more conservative orientation among boys. The data do not strongly support this impression, however, as the difference is very small: 13.6% of boys identify as ‘very right-wing’, compared with 11.7% of girls.² The difference is somewhat more pronounced by age. While 12.6% of those aged 15–17 place themselves in very right-wing positions, the figure rises to 17.4% among older adolescents (18–19 years). Figure 1 shows how the proportion of adolescents who place themselves at the extreme right and extreme left of this ideological self-placement scale varies with age. The results reveal a clear upward trend, albeit with some fluctuation, in identification with ultraconservative positions. Nevertheless, this group continues to represent a minority within the adolescent population as a whole. Thus, although 15.3% of 19-year-olds identify as ‘very right-wing’, a considerably larger proportion at the same age – 26.6% – place themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum, identifying as ‘very left-wing’.

Figure 1

Percentage of adolescents identifying as ‘very right-wing’ (score of 8-10) or ‘very left-wing’ (score of 1-3), by age



What emerges clearly is the highly critical view that people aged 15–19 hold of the functioning of democracy and political parties. Table 1 presents a breakdown of several indicators in this regard by gender and age group, revealing some marked differences. For example, the proportion giving the most negative assessments of democracy (a score of up to 3 on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 represents a very poor evaluation) reaches 31% among boys and 20.6% among girls, representing a substantial gender gap of 10 percentage points. Similarly, this figure stands at 29.7% among those aged 15–17 and does not increase with age. This disenchantment with the democratic system is likely directed more towards its formal political mechanisms than towards democracy as a system of government itself. It is difficult to argue that this critical assessment reflects a desire to transform the political system, given that only 8% of this population consider it not at all important to ‘always vote in elections’, while just 1.3% believe it is not at all important to ‘always obey laws and regulations’. Consequently, the image that best characterises adolescence is probably not one that challenges the political status quo but rather one that is critical of its outcomes. Other indicators included in the table point to a tolerant population that shows strong support for the idea that people should ‘accept and respect those with different opinions’, as well as for respect for and compliance with laws and regulations, although this tendency is once again more pronounced among girls.

Table 1
Indicators of political positioning and political attitudes among Spanish adolescents, by gender and age group

	Total	Girls	Boys	15–17	18–19
% assigning high importance* to ‘Always obeying laws and regulations’	78.8	83.1	74.6	76.7	79.9
% assigning high importance to ‘Accepting and respecting people with different opinions’	84.5	84.9	84.2	83.6	85.3
% giving a negative assessment** of the functioning of democracy	26.5	20.6	31	29.7	29.7
Assessment of the functioning of democracy (mean score)	4.7	4.9	4.5	4.7	4.6
% expressing high concern about disagreements between political parties	30.9	31	31.1	21.3	37.2
Political self-placement (mean score on a 1–10 scale, where 1 = left and 10 = right)	5.1	4.9	5.3	5.1	5.1

* Score ≥ 7 on a scale where 1 = not at all important and 10 = very important
** Score ≤ 3 on a scale where 1 = very poor and 10 = very good

Source: own research based on data from the 2023 Youth Survey (INJUVE).

4. The Emotional and Romantic Lives of Adolescents in Spain

4.1. Romantic relationships: between commitment and an uncertain sexuality

A very different dimension concerns the romantic and relationship status of Spanish adolescents. The reality of adolescents' romantic relationships and sexual behaviours is diverse and displays significant differences with regard to both gender and age.

Contrary to the notion of a population reluctant to form lasting emotional bonds and make commitments, Spanish adolescents continue to broadly subscribe to elements of the so-called 'romantic love' ideal. This is reflected in the fact that just over 48% still believe that there is such a thing as 'the perfect partner' (rising to 51.7% among girls). Although relatively few report being in a personal (rather than virtual) relationship involving 'a shared project and common future' (22.3%), this figure is more than five percentage points higher among girls than among boys (25.6%). It also tends to increase with age as part of adolescents' personal maturation, reaching 30% among 19-year-olds (see Figure 2). In any case, this remains a minority situation within this segment of the population, suggesting a delay in the formation of stable long-term relationships.

Figure 2

Percentage of adolescents reporting a romantic relationship involving a shared project and common future, by age

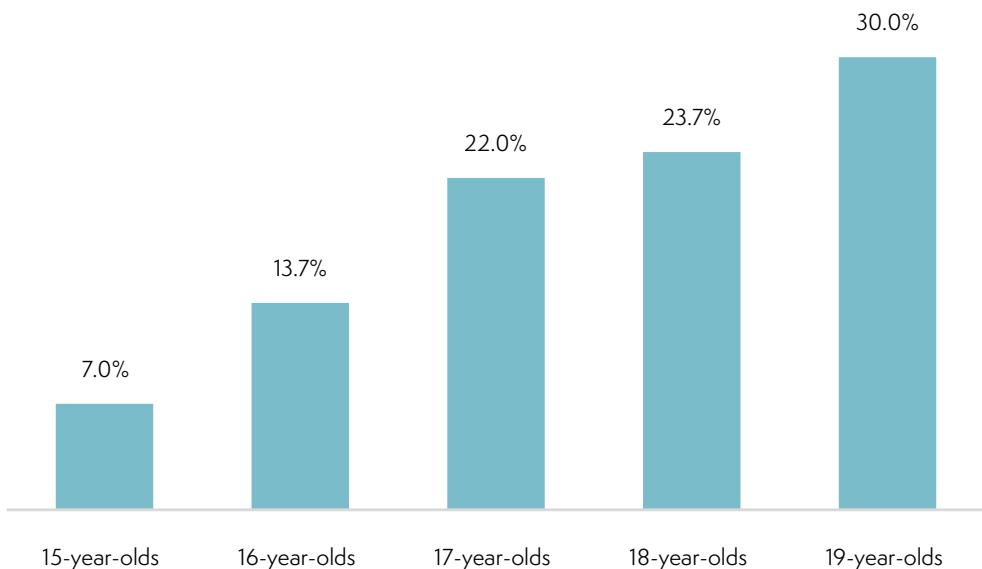


Table 2 presents several indicators relating to romantic beliefs and relationship status among adolescent girls and boys, as well as aspects of their sexuality that have recently attracted considerable media attention, such as access to pornography. We provide information on certain aspects of adolescent sexuality that have become an increasing focus of public concern, including unwanted sexual experiences and access to pornographic content as a potential influence on sexual relationships. In both cases, the evidence calls for careful interpretation.

Table 2

Attitudes towards relationships and sexuality

	Total	Girls	Boys	15–17	18–19
% defining themselves as ‘in a relationship involving a shared project and common future’	22.3	25.6	19.2	15.4	26.8
% agreeing that ‘for every person there is someone who is the perfect partner’	48.7	51.7	46	52.2	46.4
% stating that, in their sexual relationships, they have only done things they wanted to do	69.5	65.3	73.2	72.9	68.6
% viewing pornography daily or weekly*	26.7	9.8	42.6	22.9	29.1
% reporting that pornography inspires them ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal’ in their sexual relationships	8.6	4.1	13	7.1	9.7

* Sum of: ‘almost every day’ + ‘two to three times a week’ + ‘at least once a week’.

Source: own research based on data from the 2023 Youth Survey (INJUVE).

On the one hand, it is encouraging that the overwhelming majority of adolescents who responded to these questions (here, the non-response rate was substantial, reaching 39% of the total sample) report having had only desired sexual experiences. This applies to 69.5% of respondents overall, with age introducing no major differences, although the figure is somewhat higher among those aged 15–17. At the same time, it is concerning that girls appear more likely than boys to have experienced unwanted sexual encounters. While 73.2% of boys report never having had such experiences, the figure falls to just 65.3% among girls. This suggests a greater exposure among girls to situations in which they may feel pressured, to a greater or lesser extent, into unwanted sexual practices.³ This circumstance also appears to become somewhat more common with age, particularly among those aged 18–19.

With regard to access to pornography and its possible influence on adolescent relationships, the picture again requires nuance. The evidence suggests the need for continued attention but does not support the existence of a widespread problem within these age groups. To begin with, the proportion of adolescents who report never viewing pornography is notably high: 46% of the total sample, rising to 53.7% among those aged 15–17. There is, however, a striking difference associated with gender. Only 26.8% of boys report never using pornography,

compared with 66.5% of girls. This is not particularly surprising given the strongly male-oriented nature of this type of content. Table 2 also identifies the groups most likely to consume pornography frequently (daily or weekly): boys (42.6%) and adolescents who have reached the age of majority (29.1%). According to respondents themselves, however, pornography appears to exert only a limited influence on their sexual relationships. Relatively few report using pornography as a frequent model or source of inspiration in their sexual lives, although the gender difference once again emerges. Among boys, 13.1% report drawing substantial inspiration from pornography in their relationships, compared with 4.1% of girls, which is consistent with the previously noted differences in levels of exposure. The figure also rises slightly among the older age group, reaching 9.7%. INJUVE (2024) itself notes that, for the youth population as a whole, this indicator has declined noticeably compared with the previous edition of the survey conducted in 2019.

4.2. Emotional well-being: a complex picture

The well-being and mental health of adolescents have become a frequent source of concern in contemporary society, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. What do the INJUVE survey data tell us about the emotional health of those aged 15–19? Table 3 presents several indicators relating to this issue.

Table 3
Emotional well-being

	Total	Girls	Boys	15–17	18–19
% reporting feeling lonely ‘often’	13.0	16.2	10.1	8.1	16.2
% reporting feeling cheerful and in good spirits ‘all or most of the time’	59.4	64.2	54.3	65.4	55.4
% reporting that their daily life is full of things that interest them ‘all or most of the time’	50.0	46.7	53.1	55.2	46.6

Source: own research based on data from the 2023 Youth Survey (INJUVE).

The overall picture of this population’s emotional well-being cannot, of course, be characterised as wholly negative. A substantial proportion of adolescents report feeling cheerful and in good spirits all or most of the time (more than 59% overall), with this sentiment being more pronounced among girls (64.2%) and among those aged 15–17 (65.4%). Similarly, half of the sample stated that their daily lives were full of interesting things all or most of the time. In this case, however, the proportion was higher among boys (53.1%) than among girls (46.7%), and declined with age, falling to 46.6% among those aged 18–19.

At the same time, 13% of respondents reported feeling lonely often. This proportion increases sharply with age, doubling from 8.1% among those aged 15–17 to 16.2% among those who have reached the age of majority. As previous

research has highlighted, this is a circumstance that affects girls more intensely (16.2%, six percentage points higher than among boys), who generally report poorer emotional well-being (Moreno *et al.*, 2025; Ruiz *et al.*, 2023). It also disproportionately affects adolescents experiencing material and social deprivation (Rodríguez and Berasategi, 2025).

5. Main Social Concerns and Civic Affinities

This section examines key indicators that shed light on Spanish adolescents’ attitudes towards a range of social and civic concerns, beginning with their positioning on gender inequality before moving on to a broader set of issues.

5.1. The feminist question: a contradictory divide

One of the issues attracting the greatest attention in discussions of contemporary adolescence is the apparent decline in support for the feminist movement and for efforts to combat gender inequality. Alongside the shift towards the conservative end of the ideological spectrum discussed above, it is often assumed that support for the goal of equality between men and women is also declining, particularly among boys. We may therefore pose two broad questions: (a) has support for feminism and the struggle against gender inequality declined among adolescents in Spanish society? and (b) does this decline vary according to gender? We seek to answer both questions using the data presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Positioning towards feminism and gender equality

	Total	Girls	Boys	15–17	18–19
% strongly identifying* with the feminist movement	47.6	64.9	32	45.5	48.9
% strongly identifying* with the struggle for gender equality	56.4	74.8	38.2	53.5	58.4
% expressing high concern** about inequalities between men and women	63.2	78.9	48.7	59.3	65.7

* Score ≥ 7 on a scale from 1 = not at all to 10 = completely
** Score ≥ 7 on a scale from 1 = not concerned to 10 = very concerned

Source: own research based on data from the 2023 Youth Survey (INJUVE).

With regard to the first question, the proportion of adolescents reporting a strong identification with the feminist movement has indeed declined compared with previous waves of the survey, falling to 47.6%, whereas in 2019 it stood at 64% for the youth population as a whole (INJUVE, 2024). However, it is more difficult to conclude that this lower level of support translates into an equally widespread rejection of the struggle for gender equality. Identification with

this cause rises to 56.4%, while an even greater proportion of those aged 15–19 report being highly concerned about gender inequalities (63.2%), a concern that increases with age. Among this population, therefore, it is feminism itself, as the principal movement mobilising the struggle for gender equality, that appears to command lower levels of support.

In response to the second question, these figures conceal a substantial gender divide. Among girls, strong identification with feminism reaches 64.9%, whereas among boys the proportion identifying strongly with the feminist movement is only half as high, at just 32%. Similarly, girls are more likely than boys to identify with the struggle for gender equality (74.8%) and to express concern about inequalities between men and women (78.9%). This is a clear and substantial divide that undoubtedly warrants more in-depth study and careful analysis. Such analysis must account for what is immediately apparent: the tendency among boys to adopt a position of rejection or, at the very least, disengagement from active support for gender equality. At the same time, it must also address what may prove more difficult to explain: the decline in support for feminism among girls themselves.

5.2. A population engaged with social concerns, though not uniformly

Which social issues are of greatest concern to Spanish adolescents? Table 5 presents a broad range of issues⁴ and shows the proportion of those aged 15–19 who express a high level of concern about them.

Table 5

Percentage expressing a high level of concern (score ≥ 7 on a scale from 1 = not concerned to 10 = very concerned) about social issues, by gender and age group

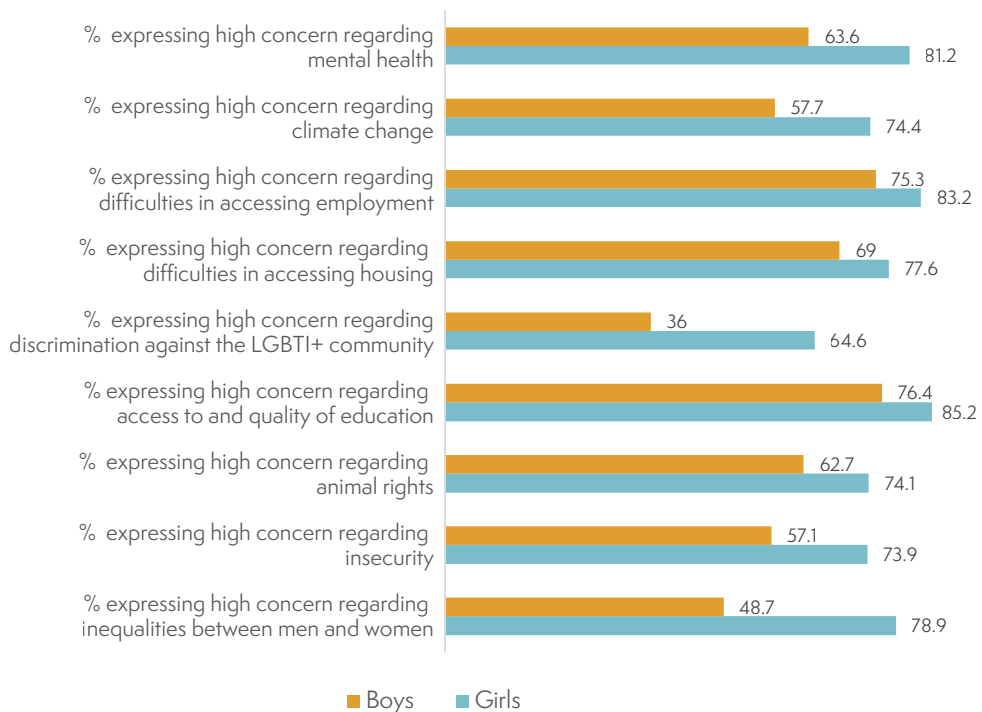
	Total	Girls	Boys	15–17	18–19
Immigration	48.0	47.9	48.1	42.6	51.5
Disagreements between political parties	30.9	31	31.1	21.3	37.2
The economic situation	78.5	80	77	74	81.5
Insecurity	65.2	73.9	57.1	61.9	67.1
Animal rights	68.2	74.1	62.7	64.8	70.2
Access to and quality of education	80.7	85.2	76.4	77.5	82.6
Discrimination against the LGBTI+ community	49.7	64.6	36	46.5	51.7
Difficulty accessing housing	73.1	77.6	69	68.3	75.5
Difficulty accessing employment	79.1	83.2	75.3	74	82.3
Climate change	65.7	74.4	57.7	62.2	68
Mental health	71.8	81.2	63.6	66.3	75.8

Source: own research based on data from the 2023 Youth Survey (INJUVE).

With the exception of disagreements between political parties, which, consistent with the low level of interest in formal politics observed among this sample, do not appear to generate widespread concern, all of the issues listed above rank prominently among adolescents' concerns. Several conclusions can be drawn from these findings. First, there are concerns that are broadly shared across the adolescent population, such as immigration and the economic situation. Second, some concerns are clearly shaped by gender and affect girls and boys to different degrees. Girls report substantially higher levels of concern, particularly regarding insecurity, discrimination against the LGBTI+ community, climate change and mental health, as illustrated in Figure 3. Third, some concerns are largely explained by age and tend to become more pronounced after the age of 18, among older adolescents. This is especially true of issues associated with the transition to adulthood, such as the economic situation (81.5%), access to and quality of education (82.6%), and difficulties in accessing housing (75.5%) and employment (82.3%).

Figure 3

Social issues displaying the largest gender differences in the proportion of adolescents expressing a high level of concern



5.3. The logic of civic support: adolescents investing in the future

Contrary to portrayals of adolescence as disengaged from, or indifferent to, the major issues affecting society, the data analysed here suggest a rather different picture. To begin with, adolescents appear to constitute a tolerant population, particularly in relation to civic issues. For example, 74.2% support ‘marriage between people of the same sex’, while 73.3% support the possibility of ‘assisting a terminally ill person to die at their request’. At the same time, adolescents are evenly divided on the issue of the ‘death penalty for people convicted of very serious crimes’, with approximately half expressing support. By contrast, they tend to reject measures such as ‘religious education in schools’ (supported by 26%) and the ‘occupation of vacant dwellings’ (supported by only 18.8%).

Beyond this general picture, girls and boys aged 15–19 also express substantial support, as shown in Table 6, for three measures aimed at addressing societal challenges, with levels of support varying little by gender or age. Specifically, 58.8% support the use of public funds to promote renewable energy, 61.4% support banning the use of plastics in packaging and 69.1% support increasing awareness campaigns on waste separation and recycling. In the latter case, support is particularly high among girls, reaching 72.7%. By contrast, one issue fails to attract broad support within this population: increasing taxes on petroleum products. This proposal receives support from only 20.7% of respondents and is even less popular among older adolescents, among whom support falls to 16.7%, perhaps because they would be more directly affected by such a measure.

Table 6
Civic positioning: support for policy initiatives, by gender and age group

	Total	Girls	Boys	15–17	18–19
% in favour of increasing taxes on petroleum products	20.7	21.1	20.3	26.8	16.7
% in favour of using public funds to promote renewable energy	58.8	57.3	60.1	57.2	59.8
% in favour of banning the use of plastics in packaging	61.4	64.1	58.7	65.1	59
% in favour of increasing awareness campaigns on waste separation and recycling	69.1	72.7	65.9	71.3	67.6

Source: own research based on data from the 2023 Youth Survey (INJUVE).

6. Conclusion

Following our analysis, it is difficult not to conclude that the Spanish adolescent population is sufficiently diverse to make any attempt to characterise it sociologically through a headline or a simple diagnosis highly problematic. On the contrary, as befits a life stage that is itself complex, situated between the end of childhood and entry into an adult world that is increasingly delayed by a range of social circumstances, adolescence requires nuance and multiple analytical perspectives if its reality is to be properly understood.

For example, with regard to the ideological positioning of Spanish adolescents, it has become clear – although this is by no means a novel finding – that there is a marked lack of interest in, and a highly critical view of, the formal mechanisms of the democratic system and some of its principal actors, such as political parties. What is less clear is whether this criticism extends to a questioning of democracy itself. We have also seen that, taken as a whole, this adolescent population is not characterised by a predominantly right-wing ideological orientation, even though support for such positions increases significantly with age. On the contrary, most adolescents place themselves either in the political centre or towards the left. A gender difference does exist, although not necessarily where one might expect to find it. The gap is relatively small when it comes to preferences for right-wing ideological positions among boys, yet it becomes much more pronounced in relation to critical assessments of the functioning of democracy.

The romantic and relationship landscape of Spanish adolescence is equally diverse. Certainly, only a minority report relationships that conform to the traditional model of courtship, involving commitment or a shared life project, although, as might be expected, the importance of such relationships increases with age. Given that belief in the existence of an ideal partner remains widespread among adolescents, we are probably observing a postponement of commitment-based relationships rather than a rejection of them. By contrast, sexual initiation appears to be occurring at increasingly younger ages, exposing part of this population to the possibility of engaging in sexual practices that are neither wanted nor desired, including coercive experiences. Here, too, there is a clear gender dimension, with girls being more affected. This highlights the need to focus attention on an issue that feminism has brought to the forefront of the political agenda during a critical stage of sexual development such as adolescence: consent. We also identified a particularly pronounced gender gap in pornography use, which remains an overwhelmingly male practice. However, if the impressions conveyed by respondents are accurate, pornography may exert less influence on adolescent sexuality than many adults assume.

With regard to emotional well-being, the evidence relating to those aged 15–19 largely confirms what is already known about young people more generally. Although the overall picture is not negative and a large proportion of adolescents report leading lives that are both happy and meaningful, we cannot overlook

the fact that a significant proportion experience loneliness. This loneliness is not always well understood by adults, who tend to portray adolescents as 'hyperconnected'. However, among these groups, loneliness may be less an indication of a lack of relationships or social contacts than a way of expressing dissatisfaction with the quality of those relationships, and it affects girls more strongly.

Finally, it is important to characterise adolescents in terms of their social concerns and civic orientations. The data show that, far from being disengaged from the social problems around them, adolescents constitute a tolerant population that is particularly aware of civic causes linked, for example, to the climate emergency. Likewise, they express a broad range of concerns that become more pronounced around issues likely to shape their opportunities during the transition to adulthood, particularly housing, the economic situation, and access to and quality of education and employment. These concerns intensify among older adolescents as they move closer to the point of emancipation. Other social issues, however, are less widely shared and are of much greater concern to girls, particularly insecurity, discrimination against the LGBTI+ community and, above all, inequality between men and women.

This further gender divide brings us to a final issue that has attracted considerable attention in public debate: the polarisation between girls and boys in relation to support for feminism and the struggle for gender equality. We have indeed identified a very substantial gender gap, with boys being considerably less likely to identify with these causes. However, it would be a mistake to overlook other important nuances. For example, our findings suggest that it is feminism itself, understood as an active political and social movement, that is losing support among adolescents. This decline is not limited to boys; support has also fallen among girls. A similar pattern can be observed with regard to the importance attributed to the struggle for gender equality. Although levels of support remain higher in this case, including among boys, they too appear to have declined relative to previous years. These developments, which point to a potentially concerning future landscape, are almost certainly connected to broader social transformations and reflect the deep political polarisation currently characterising Spanish society, from which adolescents can scarcely remain insulated.

7. Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 Full details of the survey, together with the questionnaire used, are available on the INJUVE website: <https://www.injuve.es/observatorio/demografia-e-informacion-general/informe-juventud-en-espana-2024-y-encuesta-de-juventud-2023>

2 This tendency among boys to position themselves further to the right has a long trajectory. As INJUVE itself (2024) notes, it has been consistently identified in its studies since 2004.

3 At least 6% of respondents overall acknowledged that these unwanted sexual experiences occurred 'because I was forced or threatened into engaging in them'. This figure rises to 8.7% among girls, compared with 3.8% among boys.

4 In the interests of keeping the table concise and focusing on less contingent issues, we have not included two additional topics featured in the original questionnaire: 'war' (without specifying any particular conflict) and 'relations between Catalonia and Spain'. In the latter case, moreover, the proportion of adolescents expressing a high level of concern is also relatively low (29.6%).

DEBATE/DEBATE: A LOOK AT ADOLESCENCE FROM THREE PERSPECTIVES/
UNA MIRADA HACIA LA ADOLESCENCIA DESDE TRES PERSPECTIVAS

Arguments and Evidence in the Debate on Lowering the Voting Age to 16

Argumentaciones y evidencias en el debate sobre rebajar a 16 años la edad mínima para votar

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ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the arguments and empirical evidence surrounding the debate over lowering the voting age to 16. Drawing on political philosophy and the sociology of childhood, it combines a narrative review of studies from countries where this electoral right has been fully or partially recognised with a statistical analysis of political attitudes in Spain, and makes the case for reducing the voting age further. Empirical research suggests that adolescents are capable of making informed political decisions and extending suffrage to this group could increase their interest in politics, boost electoral participation in the medium term and strengthen trust in democratic institutions. Nevertheless, both adult and young populations in Spain remain reluctant to support an extension of the right to vote.

KEYWORDS: political participation; adolescence; childhood; voting age reform; electoral behaviour; youth political engagement; democracy; enfranchisement at 16.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo explora algunas de las argumentaciones y evidencias empíricas acerca de cuestiones que circulan en el debate sobre rebajar a 16 años la edad mínima para votar. Se ha llevado a cabo una revisión bibliográfica narrativa de ensayos e investigaciones realizadas en países donde está reconocido total o parcialmente este derecho electoral y se ha complementado con un análisis estadístico de opiniones políticas en España. Desde la filosofía política o la sociología de la infancia se argumenta en favor de reducir aún más la edad del voto. De la investigación empírica se concluye que las personas adolescentes son capaces de tomar decisiones políticas y que esta medida electoral podría aumentar su interés por la política, la participación electoral a medio plazo o la confianza en la democracia. Sin embargo, la población española adulta y joven sigue mostrándose reacia a la ampliación del derecho al voto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: participación política; adolescencia; infancia; rebaja edad del voto; elecciones; participación juvenil; democracia; 16 años.

1. The political participation of children and adolescents

The participation of persons under the age of 18 is a right recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and elaborated in General Comment No. 20 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the realisation of the rights of the child during adolescence (2016). Article 12 of the Convention addresses the right to express opinions on matters that affect children, Article 13 covers freedom of expression and information, Article 14 addresses freedom of thought and conscience, Article 15 covers freedom of association and assembly and Article 31 recognises the right to participate in cultural, recreational and leisure activities.

Despite this international recognition of the right to participation, children and adolescents are rarely identified as political agents – a further instance of adultcentrism, or adultism, in various contemporary societies (Liebel, 2022; Morales, 2024). Adultism refers to the asymmetry of power between age groups and its explicit legitimisation, which entails the separation or exclusion of children and adolescents from various areas of social life, such that they are no longer considered full subjects (Rodríguez Pascual, 2025). Political adultism may therefore be defined as discrimination against these groups in political affairs – at the structural, institutional and interpersonal levels – on the grounds of their age (Preclik, 2024). It is underpinned by social representations of childhood: the notion that children are the property of the family, which therefore has the right to determine what they may do or learn; the belief that they are still developing and consequently have a reduced capacity for reflection or the assumption of responsibilities; and the idea that they are the citizens of tomorrow, whose participation may therefore be deferred (Casas, 2010).

Within political adulthood, two phases may be distinguished: an initial period of disenfranchisement and electoral exclusion affecting those under the age of 18 (or 16 in some countries), and a subsequent phase in which the right to vote has been granted but the political capacity to represent or govern is not yet recognised (Preclik, 2024). During the period of electoral exclusion, children and adolescents can participate politically through other institutionalised mechanisms and bodies – most commonly councils (Trillo and Novella, 2011). These operate primarily at the local level, although they also exist at the provincial, regional, national and supranational levels.¹

There are also forms of non-institutionalised, or grassroots, political participation in which the agency of children and adolescents is undeniable: in social movements such as Fridays for Future (Wahlström *et al.*, 2019), in organisations of working children and adolescents (Liebel, 2019) and in student mobilisations.

Those under the age of 18 are affected by the decisions of elected representatives and, as members of democratic societies, should be able to have a say in who occupies such positions (Runciman, 2021). Their needs and interests must be reflected in the regulations and policies that concern them; they should therefore have the right to influence these directly, and not only through mobilisations or protests – which may entail risks to their physical integrity or their freedom (UNICEF, 2025) – or through advisory bodies, which have been criticised for their lack of autonomy, their limited capacity for political influence, and, ultimately, for diverting attention from the claim for the right to vote (Liebel, 2022).

2. Vote at 16: facts and intentions

The first country in the Americas to lower the voting age to 16 was Cuba in 1976, followed by Nicaragua in 1984, Brazil in 1988, Ecuador in 2008 and Argentina in 2012 (Sanhueza, 2020). In the United States, 16-year-olds may vote in certain municipal elections in Maryland (National Youth Rights Association, 2025).

In Europe, Austria was the first country to lower the voting age to 16 across all types of election – municipal, regional, state, national and European – in 2007, followed by Malta in 2018. In Germany, the United Kingdom, Estonia and Switzerland, 16-year-olds may vote only in certain territories or in specific types of elections (Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024; World Population Review, 2025). In Germany, 16-year-olds voted for the first time in a state election in 1996; most German states now recognise this right in municipal and state elections², though the minimum voting age for general elections remains 18 (Leininger *et al.*, 2023). In the United Kingdom, residents of Scotland have been able to vote at 16 since the 2014 independence referendum, and those in Wales since 2020, though this right is currently limited to local elections and elections to their respective parliaments (Eichhorn, 2018); it is anticipated that 16- and 17-year-olds will be eligible to vote in the next UK general election (Johnston,

2025). In Switzerland, 16-year-olds have been able to vote in cantonal and municipal elections in the canton of Glarus since 2007, though not elsewhere in the country (Gut *et al.*, 2025). In Estonia, 16-year-olds voted for the first time in the municipal elections of 2017.³

In 2006, the European Youth Forum adopted a resolution on the right to vote at 16, invoking arguments including the promotion of democratic participation among adolescents, the influence such a measure would have on the development of robust youth policies, the need to achieve a degree of democratic balance between younger and older generations in the context of demographic ageing, and the importance of recognising the rights – and not only the responsibilities – of adolescents who are already able to work and pay taxes (Youth Forum Jeunesse, 2006).

In 2011, Resolution 1826 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe made the case for recognising the right to vote from the age of 16 as a means of increasing electoral participation and broadening democratic engagement. It argued that the measure would foster awareness of social responsibilities among adolescents, and called for the integration of democratic citizenship education into school curricula and for greater adolescent participation in school governance (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2011).

In 2022, the European Parliament adopted a legislative resolution recommending that the minimum voting age across the European Union be unified at 16 (European Parliament, 2022). In 2024, 16- and 17-year-olds in Germany, Belgium, Austria and Malta, as well as 17-year-olds in Greece, were eligible to vote in the European Parliament elections (European Parliament, 2023).

In Spain, the proposal to lower the voting age to 16 is included in the Youth Strategy 2030 (Ministry of Social Rights and 2030 Agenda, 2022), which, alongside measures to promote participatory education and renew the democratic system, advances this electoral reform as a means of addressing the socio-economic disadvantage faced by young people in Spain.

3. Questions and answers, arguments and evidence

Voting at 16 is already a reality in a number of countries, and a body of research and scientific evidence has accumulated in relation to several of the arguments circulating in the debate over lowering the voting age. Approaching the subject from an interdisciplinary standpoint, this article reviews the findings of that research and explores a range of theoretical reflections in order to address questions that commonly arise in this debate.

In methodological terms, the article draws on two complementary approaches. The first is a narrative bibliographic review conducted using the databases and search tools provided by ProQuest, Elicit and Scopus, among others. The second is a bivariate

statistical analysis of data from the May 2025 barometer of the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, 2025) and the 2023 Youth Survey by the Youth Institute (INJUVE, 2025), employing cross-tabulation, Pearson's chi-square (χ^2) and the contingency coefficient (c) for categorical variables, and Spearman's rho (rs) for associations between quantitative and ordinal variables. Each statistic is accompanied by a single asterisk (*) where the significance level was below 0.05, or a double asterisk (**) where it was equal to or below 0.01.

The studies reviewed were conducted predominantly in countries where the right to vote at 16 exists in full, partial or experimental form (Bergh, 2013; Eichhorn, 2018; Eichhorn and Huebner, 2025; Franklin, 2020; Godli, 2015; Hooghe and Stiers, 2020; Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024; Johann *et al.*, 2022; Lang, 2023; Leininger *et al.*, 2023, 2024; Okolikj and Hooghe, 2023; Sanhueza, 2020; Stiers *et al.*, 2020; Toots and Idnurm, 2020; Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014; Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2013), and have been published chiefly in political science or psychology journals. They address a range of issues: the cognitive capacity of adolescents; their political maturity; the congruence of their voting choices; their trust in democracy; their ideological preferences and intergenerational political alignment; their long-term political and electoral participation; and their views on lowering the voting age.

The review of sociological and political philosophy essays and publications (Gaitán, 2009; Liebel, 2022; Moral, 2009; Munn, 2021; O'Neill, 2022; Runciman, 2021, 2023; Silbaugh, 2020; Wall, 2022; Weinstock, 2020) has served to enrich the article with reflections that challenge received wisdom regarding the right to vote in adolescence and expand the boundaries of what is considered possible.

Finally, the bivariate statistical analysis of data from the May 2025 barometer of the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, 2025) and the 2023 Youth Survey by the Youth Institute (INJUVE, 2025) has made it possible to explore the political opinions and attitudes of adolescents, young people and adults in Spain – a country in which the right to vote at 16 is not yet recognised.

The findings of this review are structured as responses to questions arising from arguments for and against lowering the voting age to 16, as well as from the wider literature on the subject: Why 16 and not younger? What do citizens think about lowering the voting age? Are adolescents capable of making mature political decisions? Are there gaps in their political knowledge? Are they more susceptible to manipulation? Are they more likely to hold extreme or inconsistent views? Will being able to vote increase their interest in politics? Will it strengthen their trust in democracy and boost electoral participation? Can lowering the voting age contribute to democratic renewal? Will the interests of children and adolescents be better represented as a result?

3.1. Why 16 and not younger?

While practical efforts focus on lowering the voting age to 16, theoretical and philosophical arguments are more expansive, proposing minimum ages of 6 (Runciman, 2021), 12 (O'Neill, 2022) or 14, or even the abolition of age limits altogether (Wall, 2022; Weinstock, 2020), advocating a model of voluntary universal suffrage in which children may vote whenever they feel inclined to do so and wish to exercise that right (Munn, 2021).

With a view to reducing intergenerational inequalities and injustices, O'Neill (2022) proposes lowering the voting age to 12, which would redistribute power towards those who will be affected for longer by the economic and political decisions taken today. Guaranteeing their right to vote, he argues, would bring the interests of this age group more fully onto political agendas. O'Neill also contends that it is preferable for young people to cast their first vote while still within the educational system, where they receive training in political participation that supports the development of their capacities and political maturity. The case for 12 as the threshold rests on the view that preparation for democracy is a role of secondary rather than primary education, and on the significance that this stage has traditionally held in rites of passage to adulthood.

O'Neill (2022) raises another argument worth considering: the burden that would be placed on younger children to engage with political issues, when the 'best interests of the child' might instead call for freedom from civic responsibilities. For Weinstock (2020), there is little doubt that the votes of children benefit democracy; what is less clear is whether voting benefits the children themselves, insofar as it may undermine their right to be shielded from difficult decisions and electoral responsibilities. Yet, given that children and adolescents are not insulated from society, information and misinformation, he asks whether it is not worse for them to be aware of social problems while feeling that they cannot – or are not permitted to – do anything about them.

3.2. What do citizens think about lowering the voting age?

According to the May 2025 CIS barometer, 40.5% of the adult Spanish population disagrees with lowering the voting age to 16, and 38.8% strongly disagrees. Only 18.4% agree or strongly agree with the measure.

Analysis of the barometer database reveals weak but statistically significant associations between opinions on this issue and age ($r_s: -0.216^{**}$), educational attainment ($c: 0.211^{**}$), subjective social class ($c: 0.234^{**}$), and very weak associations with household income ($r_s: -0.150^{**}$), political ideology ($r_s: 0.180^{**}$) and gender ($c: 0.102^{**}$). Agreement with lowering the voting age to 16 is higher among older respondents and decreases with educational attainment and household income. There is also a somewhat higher degree of agreement among those on the left and those who identify as lower class, working class or poor. By contrast, the proportion of women who disagree with the measure is slightly higher than that of men.

The resistance of the adult Spanish population to lowering the voting age is clear; however, majority opinion could shift considerably, as has occurred in other contexts where this electoral reform has been implemented. Following the Scottish independence referendum, in which 16- and 17-year-olds were able to vote, support for lowering the voting age in all UK elections increased markedly (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021).

It might be expected that young people would be more favourably disposed towards lowering the voting age than adults. Although the most recent Youth Survey in 2023 (INJUVE, 2025) does not address this question, data from two decades ago show that 62% of people aged 15–17 in Spain viewed the measure favourably or very favourably (Moral, 2009), as did 50.4% of those aged 15–19, 33.7% of those aged 20–24 and 27.2% of those aged 25–29. In terms of gender, 37.2% of males aged 15–29 and 34.6% of females agreed with the measure. At the same time, most young people were inclined to agree that 16- to 18-year-olds do not have sufficient maturity to vote – a view more prevalent among girls (62.4%) than boys (55.8%) and less common among those aged 15–19 (45.5%). Among those aged 15–19, 53.6% considered that granting the vote at 16 would stimulate interest in politics and 44.5% that it would represent a significant advance for democracy; considerably lower proportions were recorded among those aged 20–29 (INJUVE, 2005).

In a recent survey of students aged 12 to 18 in state schools in the Metropolitan Area of Porto, Portugal, 40.4% fully agreed with lowering the voting age to 16 and 18.3% agreed. Agreement was higher among those aged 12 to 14 than among those aged 15 to 18. Among those in favour, the principal arguments centred on the maturity, awareness and sense of responsibility of adolescents, and, to a lesser extent, their right to have a say in their own future. Among those who opposed, immaturity was by far the most commonly cited objection (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023).

A study by Ooterhoff *et al.* (2022) in the United States surveyed a sample of respondents aged 16 and over on whether 16- and 17-year-olds should be able to vote. Among 16- and 17-year-olds, one third were in favour, one third were opposed and one third were unsure. The contrast with the adult population was stark: two thirds of adults were opposed and only 16% were in favour.

It is perhaps surprising that fewer than half of the adolescents surveyed agreed that their right to vote should be recognised. Hooghe and Stiers (2020) ask whether family political congruence may be one of the factors behind the limited advocacy for this electoral measure among adolescents – perhaps their political voices are not so far removed from those of their parents.

3.3. Are adolescents capable of making mature political decisions?

In the debate on lowering the voting age, arguments invoking the immaturity of children and adolescents or their inability to make political decisions are commonplace. Authors such as Wall (2022) argue that the electoral competence of children is better defined by the desire to vote than by maturity, knowledge or the ability to understand complex political issues. Adult voters, after all, are not required to demonstrate political ability or understanding. In Spain, for example, Organic Law 2/2018 extended the right to vote to all persons with intellectual disabilities, including those deprived of legal capacity and those in institutional care.

In the case of 16- and 17-year-olds, arguments about political immaturity have served as the starting hypothesis for a number of studies.

In 2011, a trial was conducted in 21 municipalities in Norway in which voting from the age of 16 was provisionally permitted. According to Godli (2015), levels of political maturity were lower among 16- and 17-year-olds than among 18-year-olds, despite the fact that turnout among the younger group was higher. By contrast, Icenogle *et al.* (2019), drawing on a sample from 11 countries, conclude that cognitive ability and logical thinking reach maturity at around the age of 16, while psychosocial maturity – or the capacity to regulate responses to emotional stimuli – may not be achieved until after the age of 18. According to these authors, 16-year-olds are sufficiently mature to make deliberative decisions in non-emotionally charged conditions.

Analysis of a Swiss survey of 16- to 25-year-olds on political participation finds that adolescents display levels of maturity comparable to those of young adults, greater willingness to vote in future elections and higher consumption of political information than those aged 24 to 25 (Gut *et al.*, 2025).

In the context of the 2021 German federal elections, Lang (2023) conducted an experiment comparing a sample of 16- and 17-year-olds with one of 18- to 75-year-olds to assess voting competence – defined as the quality or congruence of voting choices relative to political preferences. Excluding undecided voters from the analysis, the results show that the voting decisions of 16- and 17-year-olds are as consistent with their political preferences as those of the adult population, regardless of age.

In a similar vein, Stiers *et al.* (2020) analysed the ideological congruence of voting behaviour in a mock municipal election held in Ghent, Belgium, in 2018, involving adolescents aged 16 and 17 and using their parents as a comparison group. No differences were found in ideological congruence between adolescents and their parents. Nor was there a clear influence of socioeconomic position: adolescents with more books at home showed greater political knowledge, but those from more affluent family backgrounds did not.

In the US context, Ooterhoff *et al.* (2022) identify the main arguments against lowering the voting age to 16 as insufficient political knowledge, inadequate

cognitive ability, lack of political independence, limited political interest and insufficient life experience. The arguments in favour centre on adequate levels of political information, sufficient maturity, the social contract – the principle that those affected by political decisions should have a say in them – and the benefits for democracy in terms of increased participation and political interest. These authors find that 16- and 17-year-olds display greater elaboration of reasoning – drawing on multiple arguments – and greater complexity in integrating different perspectives for and against lowering the voting age than adults, perhaps because the measure concerns them directly.

3.4. Are there gaps in their political knowledge? Are they more susceptible to manipulation?

In the US context, Silbaugh (2020) argues that lowering the voting age to 16 would increase adolescents' exposure to political communication campaigns and could undermine institutional safeguards, parental oversight and supervision of their contacts with adults.⁴ Concern about the susceptibility of teenagers to manipulation is frequently anchored in their use of social media as sources of political information (Sanhueza, 2020). Yet this concern extends beyond vulnerability to political advertising; manipulation may also occur within the family. According to Weinstock (2020), democracy has its own mechanisms to offset the negative effects of voter ignorance, regardless of age. Regulation of the veracity and emotional manipulation of advertising directed at children already exists; polling stations could additionally be located in schools to help reduce susceptibility to parental influence.

Moreover, increasing turnout by lowering the voting age need not mean an increase in the uninformed electorate. On the contrary, mobilisation for electoral participation can itself motivate people to become informed about politics (Shineman, 2018). Leininger *et al.* (2024) find that German teenagers who are eligible to vote discuss politics more with their families and make greater use of a voting advice application, with this effect being more pronounced at 16 than at 18. They conclude that access to political information about an election is itself a function of having the right to vote in it.

Hooghe and Stiers (2020) find that 16- and 17-year-olds who participated in a mock local election in Ghent, Belgium, in 2018 discussed politics more with their families, in part because they were the subject of an experimental electoral mobilisation campaign. Frequent family discussions did not, however, increase ideological alignment within families, which was already considerable. The influence of families on adolescent participation is undeniable, whether through their level of political interest, their own electoral participation or the practical support they can provide in electoral registration processes (Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024). In the same context, Okolikj and Hooghe (2022) observe that children tend to share their parents' ideological orientations, particularly when they discuss politics regularly, and that this holds regardless of age

or whether they voted in the mock election. Family influence on voting is not confined to adolescence (Hooghe and Stiers, 2020), and family congruence is not always strong: in the Scottish referendum, more than 40% of adolescents voted differently from their parents (UNICEF, 2024).

Several studies have examined the role schools might play in counteracting misinformation and undue family or other political influence. Ribeiro *et al.* (2023) conclude that political education must be integrated into the school curriculum so that young people can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exercise the right to vote in an informed and aware manner. According to Menezes *et al.* (2023), mock elections in schools are a useful pedagogical tool in this regard, though they do not appear to influence subsequent electoral participation.

3.5. Are they more likely to hold extreme or inconsistent views?

The political preferences of adolescents are also a source of concern for those who oppose lowering the voting age. Fears that young people would vote for extremist parties were already present in the debate preceding Austria's electoral reform (Wintersberger, 2007), and in Spain today the growing sympathy of young people for the far right has raised similar concerns (García *et al.*, 2020).

The results of the Ghent mock election do point to 16- and 17-year-olds having voted for more extremist parties than their parents, both on the right and on the left (Stiers *et al.*, 2020).

Historically, left-wing and centre-left parties have played a prominent role in campaigns to lower the voting age (Sanhueza, 2020), although this has not always benefited them electorally (Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024). In practice, adolescents have opted for the Green Party in several German elections, while in Austria they supported the right in the 2019 general election (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021).

Franklin's (2020) comparative analysis identifies greater political volatility among the adolescent population, as was evident in the Scottish independence referendum, where 16- and 17-year-olds, who had previously been less pro-independence than the general population, ultimately voted for independence in greater proportion (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021).

This volatility is in some respects connected to indecision. The experiment conducted by Lang (2023) during the 2021 German federal elections found a higher proportion of adolescents than adults who did not wish to vote and who did not know which party to vote for.

To examine the ideological preferences of adolescents in Spain, the 2023 Youth Survey (INJUVE, 2025) database was analysed. No correlation was found between age and ideological self-placement. However, when respondents are grouped into minors and adults, statistically significant differences (χ^2) of weak intensity emerge (c: 0.247**) in ideological self-placement, the most notable of which is the proportion who say they are unable to place themselves ideologically: 25.6% of those aged 15–17, compared with 5.2% of those aged 18–34.

3.6. Will being able to vote increase their interest in politics?

Lack of political interest among teenagers is another argument commonly invoked in the debate on lowering the voting age. One cannot help but ask to what extent this disinterest is genuine, at least in the Spanish context. Analysis of the 2023 Youth Survey database (INJUVE, 2025) reveals a striking disparity between the proportions of adolescents (43.3%) and young adults (16.3%) who report no interest whatsoever in politics – a statistically significant difference (χ^2) of weak intensity (c: 0.213**). Deeper analysis reveals further differences – though less pronounced – in the importance that adolescents and young people attach to certain democratic practices and in the trust they place in various institutions (Mann–Whitney U test). On average, 15- to 17-year-olds place less value on always voting in elections**,⁵ staying informed about government actions** and participating in political or social associations**. They also express greater trust in the security forces**, the European Union*, the United Nations* and the monarchy** than those aged 18 to 34.

In terms of political participation, adolescents are more likely than young adults never to have expressed their opinions to politicians or public officials; worn campaign badges or stickers; signed a petition; attended a strike, demonstration or protest; boycotted products for political reasons; made a donation to a political cause; or engaged in political debate online – differences that are statistically significant, though of very weak intensity. A higher proportion of adolescents have also never been active members of a political party (98.9%), nor participated in environmental, territorial defence or animal protection groups (94.6%), NGOs (93.3%) or student organisations (89.8%).

These findings raise the question of whether the limited interest among many adolescents in practices such as voting or following government affairs reflects, at least in part, their exclusion from electoral participation and other political rights, alongside other constraining factors such as family, economic and social dependence, which limit their freedom of action and political decision-making. Disinterest may be a consequence of the absence of meaningful opportunities to participate politically on equal terms. As Lourdes Gaitán puts it, ‘children’s disinterest in politics is explained by the fact that it is something they know is off limits to them’ (2009, p. 14).

Šerek *et al.* (2017) conclude that it is participation that drives political interest and efficacy, not the other way around. Their longitudinal study in the Czech Republic shows that participation in protests during adolescence predicts greater internal political efficacy – understood as interest in politics and belief in one’s capacity to participate – while participation in volunteering predicts greater external political efficacy, understood as confidence in the political system’s responsiveness to citizen demands. Participation in activities closer to representative democracy, however, does not predict political interest, commitment or confidence in one’s political capacity.

In Austria, Zeglovits and Zandonella (2013) analysed the political interest of a sample of adolescents in 2004 and 2008. In 2004, when they did not yet have the right to vote, political interest was more strongly shaped by the family environment and by gender, with boys showing greater interest. By 2008, after they had voted for the first time, political interest was significantly influenced by school, which also contributed to an increase in political knowledge. Gender differences in political knowledge persisted, with girls more likely to select the ‘don’t know’ option. The authors conclude that lowering the voting age fosters political interest in adolescence, both situational and individual – a result that was not replicated in the Norwegian trial, in which the right to vote was a one-off, experimental measure confined to the municipal level (Bergh, 2013).

Austria’s 2007 electoral reform, which lowered the voting age to 16 across all elections (presidential, federal, local and European) and was accompanied by civic awareness and citizenship education measures in secondary schools, led to an increase in political interest among adolescents (Zeglovits and Zandonella, 2014).

3.7. Will it strengthen their trust in democracy and boost electoral participation?

Several studies conclude that the electoral turnout of 16- and 17-year-olds is higher than that of 18- and 19-year-olds in their first elections (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021). Authors such as Franklin (2020) argue that voting for the first time at 16 can help consolidate electoral participation over the course of a lifetime, on the grounds that adolescents are more likely to be living with their families and still in education – conditions conducive to receiving political information and turning out to vote. The rising age of emancipation means, however, that research such as that of Mahéo and Bélanger (2020) in the Canadian context finds few meaningful differences between those aged 16–17 and those aged 18–20 in terms of political interest or family and school support.

In Latin American countries, Austria and Scotland, those who were able to vote at 16 or 17 maintain higher levels of electoral participation than those who first voted at 18 (Huebner and Sanhueza, 2024). Adults who had cast their first vote at 16 or 17 rather than at 18 turned out in greater numbers in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections (Eichhorn and Huebner, 2025).

Those who voted at 16 or 17 also appear to have greater trust in democracy, both in Latin American countries and in Austria (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021). Drawing on a 2015 survey, Eichhorn (2018) analyses the political participation – actual and intended – trust in democracy, political understanding, sources of information and the importance attached to elections and government among 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Scottish respondents scored higher on trust in democracy, sources of political information and the importance attached to elections and government, and were particularly supportive of voting at 16. The author concludes that, following the independence referendum, political participation among 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland – including non-electoral forms – increased markedly, and that, while they discuss political issues more in schools, with their families and with friends, school and parental socialisation only partially explains the differences in actual political behaviour.

Jonnah *et al.* (2020), however, find that 16- and 17-year-olds in Austria have a weaker sense of civic duty to vote than those over 21, associating this with lower levels of political interest and knowledge and more limited participation in political discussion networks.

A further question worth considering is what effect the temporary withdrawal of the right to vote may have on trust in democracy among young people who voted at 16 in some elections but are unable to do so in others until they turn 18. In Germany, Leininger *et al.* (2023) conclude that this temporary deprivation is associated with reduced satisfaction and a diminished belief in democratic functioning – effects that partly persist over time – though these individuals do not lose political interest or capacity; on the contrary, their participation in protests and other non-electoral political activities increases in the short term.

3.8. Can lowering the voting age contribute to democratic renewal?

In the European context, extending the right to vote is seen by some as a means of reinvigorating democracy. Allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, it is argued, would bring a degree of renewal to an electorate that is ageing as a result of demographic trends (Moral, 2007).

The concept of gerontocratic government has been invoked in Germany (Preklik, 2024), and the situation in Spain is not markedly different. In 2024, those aged 18 to 29 accounted for 14% of registered voters with Spanish nationality, while those aged 60 and over accounted for 35%. Were this reform to be implemented in Spain, the 16- to 17-year-old population would represent approximately 2.6% of the expanded electoral roll – that is, the roll extended to include those aged 16 and over – with Spanish nationality, and 2.9% of the electoral roll in Andalusia (National Institute of Statistics, 2025).⁶ On these figures, lowering the voting age to 16 seems insufficient if the aim is to rejuvenate democratic systems; this might call for consideration of a minimum voting age of 12, or even an assessment of proposals in favour of child suffrage.

Democratic renewal, however, is surely more than a demographic question. As Wall (2022) observes, previous extensions of the franchise have historically benefited not only the newly enfranchised group: ‘Children’s suffrage would systematically benefit children, children’s rights, adults, social institutions, and democratic processes’ (p. 78).

3.9. Will the interests of children and adolescents be better represented as a result?

Lowering the voting age to 16 might be expected to give greater weight to the needs of adolescents on the public agenda (Moral, 2009) and to raise the profile of their interests in political programmes (O’Neill, 2022).

Granting the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds does not, however, guarantee an end to political adulthood. For Preclik (2024), it could even prove counterproductive: bringing 16- and 17-year-olds closer to the threshold of legal adulthood might distance them from the population group defined as ‘childhood’, thereby weakening the broader claim for an extension of voting rights to younger children.

This argument gains weight in light of the data: in Spain, the proportion of 18- to 29-year-olds who agree with lowering the voting age to 16 (10.4%) is lower than the corresponding figure for the general population (18.4%) (CIS, 2025).

4. Conclusion

This article has sought to address, with varying degrees of success, the questions commonly raised in the debate on lowering the voting age to 16. Several conclusions emerge: that political maturity in adolescence is demonstrable, and that this electoral measure has the potential to increase political interest, sustain electoral participation over time and strengthen trust in democracy. It has also become clear that further research is needed on questions such as access to political information and vulnerability to manipulation (UNICEF, 2024) – though such gaps do not, in themselves, justify denying young people the right to participate in elections.

In countries where the right to vote at 16 is recognised and data are available, no known negative consequences have been recorded (Eichhorn and Bergh, 2021). Were the measure to be implemented in Spain, the evidence suggests it would be advisable to do so across all elections simultaneously – as in Austria – rather than gradually, so as to preserve confidence in democracy (Leininger *et al.*, 2023). Given the resistance among both adult and young populations in Spain, it would also be valuable to examine what the implementation of such a top-down reform might entail, as was the case in Ecuador and Argentina (Sanhueza, 2020).

The views of children and adolescents on this issue should be given greater consideration; to exercise their political and participatory rights, they need information and training (UNICEF, 2024). Adolescents themselves (Ribeiro *et al.*,

2023) and researchers in the field (O'Neill, 2022) stress the need for the involvement of the educational system; the role of the media and other institutions is equally important, through programmes that encourage learning about politics and electoral participation and that support informed decision-making (Jonah *et al.*, 2020).

Future research should engage more deeply with arguments in favour of further reductions to the minimum voting age and with mechanisms of political representation for early childhood (Wall, 2022), and should broaden the geographical scope of inquiry beyond the predominantly Eurocentric perspective that currently characterises the literature.

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Notes

1 In Andalusia there are around a hundred municipal councils for childhood and adolescence (Ministry of Social Inclusion, Youth, Families and Equality, 2024). In Spain there is the State Council for Child and Adolescent Participation; at the supranational level, examples include the Adolescent and Young People Action Board of the UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean.

2 In Germany, 16-year-olds may vote in state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Schleswig-Holstein, and in municipal elections in Baden-Württemberg, Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein and Thuringia (World Population Review, 2025).

3 In several European countries, including Serbia, Bosnia and Slovenia, 16-year-olds have been permitted to vote provided they are in employment (World Population Review, 2025).

4 This would also call into question the legal status of 16- and 17-year-olds as minors.

5 Where the significance level was below 0.05, results are marked with a single asterisk (*); where it was equal to or below 0.01, with a double asterisk (**).

6 Estimating the proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the electoral roll expanded to include those aged 16 and over would require subtracting from the denominator the number of persons subject to a penalty entailing deprivation of voting rights – data that have not been available for this study. For municipal elections, it would also be necessary to include nationals of Bolivia, Cape Verde, Chile, Colombia, South Korea, Ecuador, Iceland, Norway, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, the United Kingdom and Trinidad and Tobago who meet the established eligibility requirements (Spanish Observatory of Racism and Xenophobia, 2023).

REVIEWS

RESEÑAS

REVIEWS/RESEÑAS

F. Morente (coord.). *Historia y devenir de la sociología andaluza*. Granada: Comares, 2025

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El libro responde a un compromiso asumido por la Asociación Andaluza de Sociología en el XI Congreso Andaluz de Sociología, celebrado en Córdoba en noviembre de 2022. Los textos que lo componen responden a un doble esfuerzo: uno más introspectivo, una sociología de la sociología (la sociología de los/as sociólogos/as) al modo de una sociología reflexiva, y otro que contribuye a la elaboración de una identidad colectiva de la sociología andaluza, una radiografía de la comunidad sociológica andaluza (p. 2). Quizás sea este un ejercicio necesario de memoria colectiva (Halbwachs, 2004) dirigido a las nuevas generaciones, o bien un ejercicio de reconsideración de la solidez de las bases de la institucionalización de la disciplina sociológica en un contexto geográfico y social atravesado por múltiples procesos de transformación. Ambos resultan oportunos y necesarios, más que excluyentes.

Las ideas y contribuciones se articulan en torno a un doble pilar: la primera parte realiza un repaso histórico de la sociología andaluza que se desarrolla en los tres primeros capítulos; y la segunda parte se centra en la diseminación geográfica de la diversidad de «las sociologías andaluzas» que ocupa los capítulos 4 a 13.

El primer capítulo, escrito por M. Pérez Yruela, es una excelente introducción a las cuatro etapas que ha recorrido la sociología en Andalucía, desde los orígenes de M. Sales y Ferré hasta la consolidación institucional con la Asociación Andaluza de Sociología (AAS). Su reflexión, de obligada lectura, se detiene en autores, obras académicas e investigaciones empíricas que han dado forma a la sociología dentro y fuera del territorio al que se circunscribe este esfuerzo colectivo, donde aparecen los primeros manuales, el estudio de los conflictos agrarios, las reformas sociales y los avatares de la modernización. He leído con sumo placer el capítulo dedicado a la «década prodigiosa», a Murillo Ferrol y a la «escuela de Granada», escrito por J. Iglesias de Ussel, que se detiene en los pioneros de la sociología andaluza de la década de los años sesenta. El autor lamenta, con razón, el olvido de las nuevas generaciones respecto de lo aprendido y transmitido por la sociología andaluza a lo largo de las cuatro

décadas que precedieron a este siglo, así como la falta de «poso académico» en los trabajos y publicaciones actuales. Esta «falta de memoria-falla de la memoria» (p. 48) tiene consecuencias en la formación de las cohortes más recientes de estudiantes de sociología. Pero una parte del capítulo está dedicada a cuestionar el alcance del apelativo de «escuela» para los primeros pasos de una generación de profesores de sociología, que fueron poblando las plazas y las cátedras de sociología de otras universidades españolas a lo largo de las décadas de los años setenta y ochenta. Desde mi perspectiva, las actividades de dicho «núcleo promotor de la sociología en Granada» reúnen todos los requisitos de una verdadera «escuela»: autoría de libros e investigaciones, orientación y preparación de discípulos, formalización académica e impulso de la nueva disciplina sociológica (p. 48). A ello habría que añadir la realización de seminarios internos de debate, conferenciantes visitantes, una intensa vida intelectual, actividades con alumnos, intercambio continuo de lecturas y actividades fuera de la universidad en época estival, que tuvo cierta continuidad hasta la creación de la Facultad de CC.PP. y Sociología en la Universidad de Granada (1988), con el impulso de J. Cazorla Pérez. Formar parte de una «escuela sociológica» no implica que todos sus miembros compartan completamente sus postulados, ya que suelen existir diferencias y tendencias, en ocasiones muy relevantes (véanse, por ejemplo, la escuela de Chicago [Becker, 2025], la escuela de Frankfurt [Jay, 2024]), pero la existencia de una «escuela» descansa tanto en la autopercepción y autodefinición de sus miembros, sus prácticas y producción como en cómo estos son percibidos desde fuera. En ambos sentidos, «la sociología de Granada» ha sido definida, con razón, como una escuela de la que se han nutrido tanto la sociología andaluza como la española. El tercer hito de la historia institucional de la sociología andaluza, obra de E. Bericat, se centra en la evolución de los congresos andaluces de sociología desde la refundación del celebrado en Granada (2006) y la creación de la AAS en 2008, y define esta larga etapa como «una historia de éxito ... sin excesiva complacencia» (p. 72). Los doce congresos celebrados hasta 2025 han supuesto la consolidación de una estructura de redes y de circulación de saberes que cristaliza cada dos años en un nuevo evento en el que han participado los departamentos de sociología de las ocho provincias andaluzas. El segundo elemento es el papel desempeñado por la AAS, sobre el que el autor ofrece un balance de logros y retos para el futuro inmediato (pp. 81-82). En esta dirección, ofrece dos posibles objetivos: crear «una revista sociológica de nuevo cuño», con un sistema de publicación en dos partes (p. 83), y un Programa de Doctorado Interuniversitario de Sociología en Andalucía (p. 84).

La segunda parte aborda la diversidad geográfica de la «aventura sociológica». Si bien la persona lectora interesada puede encontrar un resumen muy útil del contenido de cada capítulo redactado por F. Morente, merece la pena profundizar en la genealogía del discurrir en/por cada provincia. Como señalan J. S. Fernández y M. J. González, la sociología en Almería tiene sus orígenes en los estudios de magisterio, de graduado social y, en especial, en la Fundación Almería Social y Laboral. El Departamento de Sociología se consolida progresivamente a partir de 1994, con un grupo reducido de profesores/as que han visto el afianzamiento de sus carreras profesionales en torno a las décadas pre- y pos-2000, con el desarrollo de numerosos proyectos de investigación y contratos con instituciones de diversos ámbitos territoriales. A partir de

2002, la constitución del grupo de investigación GISA (Grupo Indalo de Sociología Aplicada), enfocado en el análisis de las transformaciones sociales contemporáneas, la inmigración, el racismo, la xenofobia y la exclusión social, supone un paso significativo hacia la cohesión grupal mediante la elaboración de «diagnósticos sociales aplicados y propuestas de intervención específicas» (p. 96). Como en otros muchos casos, las actividades científicas de este grupo de docentes tienen su encaje en la presencia o la colaboración con el sector público de la provincia, con los sectores privados, con el tercer sector y con los medios de comunicación. La sociología en Cádiz (Marta Dodero) da sus primeros pasos en un contexto de movilización y conflictos sociales en torno a su estructura industrial y económica, y se consolida a partir de la fundación de la Universidad de Cádiz en 1979, con su presencia inicial en la Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales y en la Escuela Normal de Magisterio, y su progresiva expansión hacia otras diplomaturas y licenciaturas. La actividad investigadora se ha centrado en torno al grupo de investigación «Trabajo, política y género» con un «enfoque particular en las dinámicas de trabajo, las cuestiones de género y la vida cotidiana en contextos diversos» (p. 110); y al grupo «Transformaciones y conflictos en las sociedades contemporáneas» en torno al desarrollo del sindicalismo y las relaciones laborales, las migraciones, las relaciones de género, la alimentación, el patrimonio, la comunicación, el empleo, la política social y los cuidados.

La Universidad de Córdoba (UCO) ha sido un faro pionero de la sociología en Andalucía, con la creación del Instituto de Sociología y Estudios Campesinos (ISEC) centrado en los estudios rurales y la agroecología, tarea que ha compartido con el Instituto de Estudios Sociales Avanzados (IESA-CSIC). Como en muchos casos de las universidades andaluzas, señalan J. Aja y A. López, su crecimiento fue transversal al desarrollo de otras disciplinas, ampliando progresivamente el foco inicial de «lo rural y las dificultades de la modernización». La ampliación de los temas de investigación y la expansión han ido de la mano de la implantación de los programas de Máster y Doctorado, así como de la colaboración progresiva entre la UCO y el IESA-CSIC. Visto desde la distancia de quien escribe estas líneas, la sociología practicada en Córdoba ha tenido un fuerte componente aplicado y con proyección social, lo que catalogaríamos como una sociología con transferencia e impacto en múltiples campos de «lo social y lo político» (p. 127). La Universidad de Granada es otro faro histórico de la sociología, tanto dentro como fuera de Andalucía, antes incluso de la puesta en marcha de la Facultad de CC.PP. y Sociología en el curso 1988-1989. Como explican pormenorizadamente F. Entrena, A. Trinidad, D. Becerril y M. Sánchez, el Departamento y la Facultad de Sociología tienen una gran responsabilidad en la expansión de la sociología en la propia comunidad autónoma, así como en la progresiva especialización de las nuevas generaciones de profesionales de la sociología en un buen número de familias disciplinares: salud, turismo, trabajo, problemas sociales, ciclo vital, familia, urbana y rural, entre otras (p. 141). Los numerosos grupos de investigación y la presencia continua en proyectos de investigación de todo tipo son otros de los indicadores de su protagonismo. La cristalización de la sociología en la Universidad de Huelva (UHU) tiene sus precedentes en una sociedad civil, «una ciudadanía reflexiva» y «seminarios y otras instituciones eclesíásticas» (p. 146); en una sociología que emerge de la praxis, no de la academia, con un enfoque de la disciplina estrechamen-

te ligado a la intervención social (p. 147); y alcanza su punto de inflexión en 1982. Su desarrollo tras la autonomía de la Universidad de Sevilla ha tenido tres etapas: una fundacional (1993-1998), una de expansión (1994-2004) y otra de los efectos de la crisis (2004-presente). Desde el punto de vista interno, cuenta con el grupo de investigación interdisciplinar Estudios Sociales e Intervención Social (ESEIS), el Centro de Investigación en Migraciones (CIM) y el grupo de epidemiología clínica, ambiental y transformación social. Cuenta también con varias líneas de investigación: la sociedad digital y las nuevas tecnologías, la movilidad y los grupos sociales, los ámbitos específicos de la vida social y las instituciones, la política, la participación, los movimientos sociales, el medio ambiente, el género y las generaciones (p. 160).

En la creación del IESA en 1989, y de su sede en Córdoba en 1991, desempeñaron un papel importante antiguos miembros de la UCO, como M. Pérez Yruela y E. Moyano, quienes también participaron en la creación de la Asociación Andaluza de Sociología (AAS). A una primera etapa de establecimiento (1991-1994) le siguió el centro mixto CSIC-Junta de Andalucía (1995-2018) como sede de investigación social aplicada de calidad, con una gran diversificación de líneas de trabajo, capacidad para desarrollar proyectos de investigación, colaborar con instituciones andaluzas y transferir conocimiento, señalan E. Moyano y R. Serrano del Rosal. Entre sus actividades se cuentan el relanzamiento de la Revista Internacional de Sociología, el I y el II Informe Social de Andalucía, el Foro IESA y la organización del V Congreso Andaluz de Sociología (2010). Desde 2018 es centro propio del CSIC y sus líneas de investigación se articulan en torno a cuatro grupos: 1) Gobernanza, acción colectiva y participación política; 2) Identidad social, bienestar subjetivo y comportamiento humano; 3) Investigación en sociología de la innovación; y 4) Territorio, ruralidad, agricultura, medio ambiente y sostenibilidad (p. 175). A medio camino entre lo laico y lo religioso, la sociología se fue abriendo camino mediante el estudio de la «cuestión social» en Jaén (I. Barroso *et al.*). Como en el caso de otros territorios andaluces, el Instituto de Reforma y Desarrollo Agrario (IRYDA) centró una parte importante de su actividad investigadora en los aspectos sociológicos del proceso de modernización agraria, al igual que la llegada de la democracia impulsó la acción social de la Diputación Provincial, destacando la creación de los Grupos de Desarrollo Social (GDR) y, con posterioridad, el impulso de la recién creada Junta de Andalucía. Vinculada inicialmente a la Facultad de Sociología de Granada, el Área de Sociología de la Universidad de Jaén (UJA) ha ido ganando autonomía a medida que ha crecido en diversas facultades. Sus tareas de investigación giran en torno al grupo «Retos sociales en las sociedades complejas». El grupo de sociología de Málaga ha sido un pilar de la sociología andaluza desde 1964, con la presencia de J. Jiménez Blanco, J. del Pino, L. González Seara y J. Díez Nicolás, quienes influyeron posteriormente en la institucionalización de la sociología española en la Universidad Complutense y en el Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS). Más allá de estos momentos fundacionales, este centro se ha convertido en un fructífero caladero para nuevas generaciones de sociólogos/as (véase el gráfico en p. 208). La creación de la Licenciatura de Sociología (2004) en la Universidad Pablo de Olavide (UPO), con la presencia de nueve grupos de investigación especializada (p. 222), supone una consolidación fuerte de la sociología, reforzando el papel que la Universidad de Sevilla (US) venía desarrollando con anterioridad a la década de

los años ochenta y que cuenta con una gran diversidad de líneas de investigación, la edición de la revista *Anduli* desde 2002 y la celebración del XII Congreso Andaluz de Sociología (2025).

Los retos futuros son comunes a los diferentes centros, aunque con distinto énfasis: 1) la consolidación definitiva de una sociología plural, interdisciplinar, aplicada y con impacto social; 2) un nuevo impulso a la internacionalización de la producción sociológica; y 3) la hibridación de una sociología de orientación pública con las necesidades de las instituciones públicas y de los sectores privados, que impulse la transferencia de conocimientos. Confío en que quien lea estas líneas se haga una idea de la importancia del desarrollo de la disciplina sociológica tanto en Andalucía como en el conjunto de España, con la esperanza de que este esfuerzo intelectual se repita próximamente para dar cuenta del papel de las nuevas generaciones.

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REVIEWS/RESEÑAS

J. Smith Maguire (ed.). *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Consumption*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2026

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En las sociedades actuales, el consumo se ha consolidado como un eje clave de la vida social, no solo por su función material, sino por su papel en la integración, la construcción de identidades y la configuración de desigualdades a través de diferentes distinciones simbólicas y estilos de vida. La expansión de las sociedades de mercado ha impulsado su reconocimiento como objeto central de análisis sociológico, lo que ha derivado en que, en los últimos años, no solamente hayamos sido testigos de la multiplicación de investigaciones centradas en las distintas dimensiones del fenómeno del consumo, sino también de la edición de grandes monografías colectivas que han tratado de compilar el estado del arte en este fértil terreno, tanto a nivel internacional como nacional. Así, en 2017, la editorial Routledge publicó *Routledge Handbook on Consumption*, mientras que, en 2020, la colección Academia del CIS publicó *Estudios sociales sobre el consumo*, con la participación de buena parte de los académicos que formaban parte, por aquel entonces, del correspondiente comité de investigación de la FES. En esta misma línea, hace apenas unas semanas la editorial Edward Elgar se ha sumado a estos esfuerzos, produciendo otro voluminoso trabajo titulado *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Consumption*. Este nuevo libro, al que se dedicará esta reseña, ha sido editado por la socióloga Jennifer Smith Maguire, catedrática de la Universidad de Sheffield, con una trayectoria muy destacada en el análisis del consumo (en materias que abarcan desde la cultura del *fitness* al consumo de vino, pasando por los intermediarios culturales) y que ya había coordinado otros trabajos recopilatorios de naturaleza similar.

Este libro colectivo es muy extenso (tiene más de quinientas páginas) y cuenta con muchos capítulos, nada menos que cuarenta y dos. En el primero de estos, firmado por la editora del volumen, se hace una introducción a la obra, cuyo objetivo es el de realizar una oda a la imaginación sociológica en el análisis del consumo, explorando cómo moldea las sociedades contemporáneas. Esta contribución presenta además interesantes reflexiones teóricas sobre la sociedad de consumo, la cultura consumista o la cuestión de la sostenibilidad, haciendo énfasis en la necesidad de formular preguntas de investigación que tengan en cuenta elementos estructurales e históricos. En este capítulo se justifica además el plan de la obra, cuyo objetivo es

fundamentalmente abrir la caja negra de las investigaciones incluidas en los capítulos, presentando a los lectores detalles relevantes sobre el diseño metodológico de las mismas. Y es que, como el título del volumen anticipa, la dimensión empírica es central en el proyecto que coordina Smith Maguire: tras su introducción, el libro cuenta con una primera parte de carácter teórico-conceptual compuesta por tres capítulos, mientras que los otros treinta y ocho van a estar dedicados a presentar los resultados de investigaciones variopintas, agrupadas por bloques temáticos. Estos capítulos van a contar con una estructura muy similar: una introducción al problema, marco teórico, diseño de la investigación (con énfasis en la descripción de los métodos), discusión de los resultados y un apartado final dedicado a reflexionar sobre las limitaciones del enfoque adoptado y las posibilidades de investigación futuras en ese tema concreto. Esta aproximación es de gran interés y difiere de forma significativa de otras colecciones en las que la teoría juega un papel, si no preponderante, sí ciertamente más importante en las contribuciones de los autores participantes.

En todo caso, la primera parte del libro tiene una orientación fundamentalmente teórica, en la que se presentan las bases conceptuales que subyacen en la sociología del consumo contemporánea y que se van a encontrar presentes en la mayoría de las investigaciones incluidas en el volumen. Esta sección consta de tres capítulos. El primero de ellos, firmado por Daniel Welch, es una potente contribución en la que se discuten los cambios de paradigma que se han sucedido en la investigación sociológica del consumo desde sus orígenes. Es de especial interés el énfasis que el autor hace en señalar que, en los últimos años, se ha dejado atrás el giro cultural propio de la posmodernidad para adentrarnos en una nueva época en la que estamos siendo testigos de lo que denomina un «giro práctico», donde las teorías de la práctica impulsadas por autores como Alan Warde han puesto el énfasis en las rutinas y flujos de las actividades cotidianas, con menos atención a cuestiones vinculadas a la expresividad e identidad de los consumidores. Además, las agendas emergentes de investigación no solo están estudiando temas como el consumo digital o sostenible, sino que están reivindicando la importancia de tener presente la dimensión de desigualdad social presente en el acto del consumo. Welch reivindica, en este sentido, la adopción de una perspectiva crítica en la sociología del consumo como imperativo moral. En el segundo capítulo, Terhi-Anna Wilska hace una revisión conceptual de la noción de cultura de consumo, con una mirada a su trayectoria histórica y a los temas y tópicos discutidos en torno a esta. En su sugerente contribución desfilan referencias que van desde los clásicos (Weber, Sombart o Veblen) y la escuela de Fráncfort hasta las referencias contemporáneas fundamentales como Bauman, Giddens, Ritzer o Appadurai, pasando por supuesto por los grandes nombres de la sociología francesa como Bourdieu o Baudrillard, y con énfasis en temas como los fenómenos de la globalización, la sostenibilidad o los nuevos consumidores digitales. Finalmente, la tercera contribución de esta sección, firmada por Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier, es una original aproximación al mundo de los mercados en la que trata de poner en diálogo la perspectiva de la sociología económica con la del consumo. En este capítulo, la autora explora cuestiones como las técnicas de *marketing*, el significado del mercado, el papel de las empresas y sus estrategias para desarrollar una estratificación social del consumo de masas, reivindicando ópticas de análisis de autores como Michel Callon.

Tras esta primera sección de corte teórico, la segunda parte del libro recoge, como habíamos comentado, las contribuciones empíricas, treinta y ocho capítulos organizados en diez apartados temáticos. El primero de estos se dedica al consumo en el terreno de las artes y la cultura y comprende cuatro contribuciones centradas en investigaciones sobre cuestiones tan diversas y fascinantes como los no participantes en actividades culturales y sus actitudes hacia la cultura (Heikkilä), el rol del capital cultural parental en la participación de los niños en actividades artísticas y culturales (Leguina *et al.*), la emergencia de nuevas formas de distinción entre las élites culturales (O'Brien) o la variación en las jerarquías culturales establecidas por los periódicos de referencia (Purhonen). En todos los capítulos, muy bien estructurados como se comentó anteriormente, se presenta con detalle la metodología aplicada, bien sea entrevistas en profundidad, análisis de encuestas o análisis de contenido sobre noticias de prensa. El segundo apartado presta atención a la moda y el estilo de vida, y los diferentes capítulos se centran en cuestiones que van desde el impacto de las redes sociales, bien desde su rol como intermediarios culturales (el capítulo de Colucci y Pedroni), bien desde la dimensión de su accesibilidad para consumidores afectados de discapacidad visual (el de Foster), hasta cuestiones más cercanas a los estudios culturales como la importancia del *Kawaii* en la sociedad japonesa (Lieber-Milo) o las elecciones de vestimenta en las bodas de parejas lesbianas en los Estados Unidos de América (Reddy-Best *et al.*). En todos los capítulos se presenta de forma detallada la metodología, tan diversa como los propios temas de investigación seleccionados (análisis de vídeos, cuestionarios *online* o análisis de fotografías).

La tercera sección se dedica a uno de los temas centrales en la sociología del consumo actual como es el de la alimentación, desde una gran diversidad de perspectivas teóricas (desde Bourdieu al actor-red, pasando por las nuevas teorías de la masculinidad). La combinación de contribuciones es de nuevo fascinante, con capítulos dedicados a la relación entre alimentación, clase social y distinción (Karademir), los nuevos profesionales artesanos en el negocio de la restauración (Ocejo), o las transformaciones del negocio de las cafeterías en Francia (Pomiès), haciendo un uso interesante de etnografías y entrevistas. Por su parte, el cuarto apartado temático se centra en el terreno del deporte y del ocio, abarcando investigaciones sobre el consumo de violencia en el deporte (Atkinson), el fenómeno de los fans adultos de LEGO (Botorić), el creciente negocio del *fitness* y los gimnasios y su cultura de la musculación (Gibbs) y la cuestión del patrocinio empresarial en los videojuegos competitivos (Polyakova *et al.*). De nuevo se despliegan metodologías mixtas, con uso tanto de encuestas como entrevistas, etnografías clásicas y digitales u observación participante. La quinta sección se dedica al espacio de la vivienda, tema más que relevante una vez que supone, para el ciudadano convencional, la mayor parte de su gasto. De nuevo los capítulos incluidos en esta sección nos proporcionan información muy sugerente sobre cuestiones como los procesos de búsqueda y selección de un hogar (Besbris), la evolución del consumo de la vivienda hasta convertirse en activo financiero destinado a la especulación (Choi *et al.*, que toma como ejemplo el caso de Hong Kong), el fenómeno de las Pequeñas Casas en los EE. UU. (Nowicky *et al.*) o, desde un ángulo distinto y fascinante, los objetos no usados dentro de los hogares como base para una reflexión sobre la cultura material y su moralidad (Woodward). Es de nuevo

enormemente interesante comprobar la variedad de diseños de investigación, que oscilan entre el análisis de anuncios en webs especializadas a etnografías o análisis de fotografías.

El giro mencionado hacia una sociología de las prácticas es evidente en los contenidos de la sexta sección, dedicada al análisis del consumo de lo ordinario y lo mundano. Las contribuciones tocan de nuevo cuestiones dispares como la conservación de los recursos en comunidades en Latinoamérica y su economía moral del ahorro (Aritzia), la evolución de los patrones de consumo cotidiano a lo largo del curso biográfico (Greene), el impacto de la deuda hipotecaria y su evolución en la Hungría post-socialista (Pellandi-Simányi y Vargha) o cambios en las prácticas de consumo inducidos por experimentos destinados a incitar respuestas emocionales (Sahakian y Godin), con técnicas de investigación variadas como diarios de prácticas, entrevistas y métodos experimentales. En el siguiente apartado, el séptimo, el tema que aglutina las propuestas son los lugares geográficos y espacios donde tiene lugar el acto de consumo. De esta manera, los capítulos de nuevo tocan materias tan diversas como las cafeterías especializadas en Corea del Sur (Ming Curran y Chestnut), los centros comerciales en Ghana como ejemplo de modernidad «glocal» (Kofi), los nuevos locales recreativos con juegos de mesa (Kviat) o los pubs tradicionales británicos (Thurnell-Read y Deakin), todos ellos espacios en los que el consumo y la socialización van de la mano, y que se exploran con diversos kits metodológicos, desde la etnografía urbana hasta los grupos de discusión. La octava sección, por su parte, se centra en las experiencias de compra, y sus tres capítulos tocan aspectos iluminadores como las motivaciones para comprar en tiendas *low-cost* en el Reino Unido (Hulme), los discursos y narrativas que promueven irse de compras para superar sinsabores emocionales (Buehler) o la emergencia de plataformas *online* que promueven la economía circular (Podkalicka). Las metodologías utilizadas por los autores de estas contribuciones van a ser en algunos casos muy sofisticadas, como el *shop-along* (en que el investigador acompaña al usuario en sus visitas a la tienda) o análisis de carácter sociosemiótico.

Las dos últimas secciones se van a ocupar de cuestiones de carácter valorativo que permean las decisiones de consumo. La primera de estas está centrada en consideraciones éticas y morales inherentes al acto de consumo, y abarca temas como el consumo ético frente a la alimentación y el despilfarro (Salonen), la narrativa de la sostenibilidad y sus prácticas en el contexto familiar hindú (Singh *et al.*), las representaciones sociales de los «nuevos ricos» en la prensa y la idea de civilidad (Smith Maguire) o las tensiones en la definición de etiqueta en la sociedad tailandesa (Tangsantikul), a partir de análisis de prensa, libros y entrevistas. Cabe destacar que algunas de estas contribuciones recuperan fuentes teóricas poco presentes en la sociología del consumo, como la obra de Norbert Elias o los trabajos de Lefebvre. Finalmente, la última sección (décima) recoge trabajos sobre formas de consumo que han contado con algún elemento estigmatizador, a las que se aproximan con herramientas metodológicas diversas como análisis de documentos legales, entrevistas y trabajo etnográfico. Los autores de los capítulos aquí recogidos se centran en investigar desde mercados emergentes como el del cannabis (estudiando el consumo ético de productos de cáñamo, como hace Bennett en su contribución, o la construcción de

la legalización del consumo de cannabis en Canadá, como analizan Cosgrave y Cormack), a los locales de bingo en comunidades de inmigrantes en Australia (Cox *et al.*) o los movimientos de abstinencia de alcohol vinculados a la denominada «sobriedad positiva» (Nicholls). La obra concluye con un útil y extenso índice temático, imprescindible en un trabajo de estas características.

Research Handbook on the Sociology of Consumption es, como se puede ver, un trabajo realmente enciclopédico, que presenta al lector, de forma a mi entender extraordinaria, un auténtico «estado del arte» de la investigación en sociología del consumo más reciente. Son varias las razones por las que podríamos valorar este trabajo de forma positiva. La primera y fundamental sería la idea de enfatizar en la obra el aspecto metodológico, lo que supone un elemento distintivo en relación con otros libros de similares características. Esta idea de «abrir la caja negra» es realmente de gran utilidad para los investigadores, una vez que puede servirnos no solo de inspiración para diseñar nuestra metodología de investigación, sino como ejercicio de reflexión crítica sobre cómo afrontar el análisis de experiencias de consumo concretas. Se agradece la eficiente organización del libro, cuyas contribuciones, bien estructuradas y redactadas con una gran economía de palabras, son muy informativas. Algunos de los capítulos nos permiten además acceder a experiencias de consumo en espacios geográficos lejanos y de difícil acceso. La notable diversidad temática nos recuerda no solo el rico repertorio teórico y metodológico que tenemos a nuestra disposición como investigadores sociales, sino que ejemplifican ese giro hacia una «sociología de las prácticas» en la que la influencia de autores como Bourdieu o Warde es más que evidente. Por supuesto, esta variedad y amplitud en el número de las contribuciones representa también una de las debilidades de la obra, una vez que, por supuesto, todo lector echará de menos temas por explorar. La calidad de los capítulos es, además, variable, como suele ser el caso de este tipo de compilaciones. No obstante, si se tienen los recursos (pues el libro no es barato), esta obra puede ser ciertamente una valiosa aportación para investigadores de ciencias sociales no solo interesados en el consumo, sino también en el diseño y uso de los métodos de investigación en general.

REVIEWS/RESEÑAS

L. M. Rondón. *La renta básica universal: fundamentos, debates y herramientas de lucha contra la exclusión social*. Madrid: Aranzadi, 2024

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El libro *La renta básica universal: fundamentos, debates y herramientas de lucha contra la exclusión social* constituye una obra integral que aborda uno de los temas más controvertidos y debatidos en las políticas sociales contemporáneas: la implementación de una renta básica universal (RBU en adelante). La obra ofrece una perspectiva multidimensional que combina análisis teórico, estudios empíricos y reflexiones éticas para explorar los fundamentos, los retos y las oportunidades asociadas a esta propuesta de política pública.

Dicho libro ofrece una perspectiva multidisciplinar, tan importante en la producción científica hoy en día. Aportes desde el trabajo social, la economía, la sociología y la antropología social ofrecen una perspectiva desde los enfoques meramente económicos hasta la complejidad del campo del género, los mayores y el mundo de las nuevas tecnologías en la Administración pública. La desigualdad y exclusión social son, por tanto, trabajadas desde un enfoque holístico en el que todos estos factores se encuentran interrelacionados a la hora de comprender la RBU. De ahí que el título de la obra logre captar plenamente lo que se ofrece a través de sus capítulos, desde la visión teórica hasta el aporte práctico basado en la evidencia científica.

La obra divide sus 230 páginas en dos grandes bloques. Si bien, como decimos, tienen enfoques distintos, se complementan para ofrecer una visión completa sobre la RBU y su papel en la lucha contra la exclusión social.

En la primera sección, que consta de cuatro capítulos, se analiza el impacto de la desigualdad social y la pobreza como elementos clave que explican la exclusión. En esta parte se profundiza en la naturaleza estructural de las desigualdades, exploran-

do cómo los procesos económicos, laborales y educativos crean diferentes niveles de vulnerabilidad social. Con un enfoque interdisciplinario, combinan datos empíricos y reflexiones teóricas para demostrar que la exclusión no es un fenómeno aislado, sino el resultado de una red de factores interconectados, entre los que se destacan la precariedad laboral, la segmentación del mercado de trabajo, la desigualdad de género y la brecha territorial. Este primer bloque no solo describe la pobreza, sino que también la cuestiona. Esto es un aspecto importante, pues se indaga por qué, en contextos de crecimiento económico, amplios sectores de la población siguen viviendo en condiciones de precariedad. Además, también se plantea la necesidad de dejar atrás las políticas sociales fragmentadas o asistencialistas para avanzar hacia un modelo más integral.

La segunda sección de la obra se centra en el análisis de las rentas activas de inserción y las perspectivas futuras de los sistemas de garantía de ingresos. Aquí se examina tanto las limitaciones de las políticas actuales como las posibilidades de evolución hacia una renta básica universal. Se abordan cuestiones más profundas, como la sostenibilidad financiera, los efectos en el mercado laboral y las implicaciones éticas de garantizar una renta incondicional. Este bloque trabaja sobre la transformación necesaria en las políticas sociales.

A continuación, se describen de forma más concreta los capítulos que configuran ambos bloques para así comprender mejor la dimensión que alcanza este libro.

El primer capítulo se centra en la exploración de la exclusión social, un tema clave para asegurar el bienestar de la población. A lo largo del mismo, se hace un recorrido conceptual e histórico sobre las diversas maneras en que se ha entendido la exclusión, destacando su naturaleza multidimensional. No se trata solo de la falta de ingresos; también abarca la dificultad de acceder a la educación, la salud, una vivienda digna, un empleo estable y la participación en la vida social y política. En este contexto, la renta mínima se presenta como una estrategia consensuada para combatir la exclusión, funcionando como un mecanismo redistributivo que busca garantizar un mínimo de derechos materiales sobre el cual las personas puedan construir sus proyectos de vida (Cuesta, López-Noval y Niño-Zarazúa, 2024).

Como bien apuntan Alonso, García y Alemán (2020), los recursos necesarios para llevar una vida digna necesitan la intervención del Estado. No se trata de un acto de caridad, sino de una responsabilidad social y política que busca cumplir con los principios de justicia e igualdad. El capítulo retoma esta idea y la conecta con la función del Estado de bienestar, enfatizando que la pobreza y la exclusión social no son fenómenos aislados o temporales, sino consecuencias estructurales de un sistema económico que perpetúa desigualdades. Desde esta perspectiva, la exclusión social se entiende como un proceso dinámico en el que ciertos grupos quedan fuera de los circuitos de bienestar y de los mecanismos de integración social, como el mercado laboral o las redes de apoyo institucional, debido a factores estructurales que obstaculizan su desarrollo y plena participación en la sociedad. Además, el capítulo invita a reflexionar sobre la necesidad de replantear las políticas sociales desde una visión

de derechos universales, superando enfoques asistencialistas o condicionados, para avanzar hacia una sociedad más inclusiva.

Al avanzar en el análisis, y adoptando un enfoque más económico del problema, los autores argumentan que, a pesar de que la renta media en España ha crecido en las últimas décadas, la distribución de la riqueza sigue siendo profundamente desigual. Este diagnóstico se basa en el análisis que permite identificar cómo ciertas variables socioeconómicas influyen en el riesgo de exclusión social, tales como el nivel educativo, el tipo de empleo, la situación familiar, el género, entre otras. Los resultados no solo revelan que el crecimiento económico no ha llevado automáticamente a una mejora equitativa del bienestar, sino que ha ampliado las brechas entre los grupos sociales con más y menos recursos. Por otro lado, en cuanto a los factores que vinculan una renta insuficiente con la exclusión social, el autor destaca la existencia de una cronicidad estructural de la pobreza. Esto significa que no solo existe un componente económico, sino también social y psicológico.

En este contexto, el libro advierte sobre el peligro de que las políticas sociales que se centran únicamente en transferencias condicionadas o temporales no sean suficientes para romper este ciclo de exclusión. Esta es una de las ideas con más fuerza y, por lo tanto, se subraya la importancia del Estado como garante del bienestar y promotor del empleo, enfatizando que la redistribución no debe verse solo como un tema fiscal, sino como un compromiso estructural con la cohesión social y la igualdad de oportunidades. A través de la intervención pública, y es una idea ya mencionada con anterioridad, el Estado se convierte en un actor clave para corregir las desigualdades del mercado y evitar que amplios sectores de la población queden en la marginación.

Desde una perspectiva complementaria, aunque sin desvincularse de la problemática de la pobreza, algunos de los factores que no pudieron ser abordados en el capítulo anterior se examinan en esta sección, en particular aquellos relacionados con las cuestiones de género. La reproducción estructural de la desigualdad de género y la mayor prevalencia de pobreza entre las mujeres confirman que este fenómeno demanda una atención prioritaria y urgente por parte de las instituciones encargadas de la formulación de políticas públicas. Esta realidad resalta la necesidad de adoptar un enfoque integral que considere las intersecciones entre el género y otros factores socioeconómicos, dado que las mujeres, especialmente aquellas en situaciones vulnerables, se ven desproporcionadamente afectadas por las condiciones de pobreza, lo que perpetúa su marginación y limita sus oportunidades de desarrollo.

Y es en relación con estas políticas y colectivos no tan explorados la cuestión central del siguiente capítulo, que se focaliza en la comunidad de etnia gitana. El empeoramiento de las condiciones sociales de este grupo pone de relevancia la precariedad y exclusión que sufren estos colectivos. Hay una falta de coordinación y articulación de programas políticos estatales al respecto, es evidente, pero también hay aspectos más subjetivos que es necesario explorar más a fondo para comprender por qué las ayudas no llegan a su objetivo, así como sería conveniente articular otros mecanismos, como pueden ser el empoderamiento y el cambio personal y social (Ayala, 2013).

Pasando al segundo bloque, comenzamos con una aproximación clara a lo que sería qué o cómo intervenir ante esa exclusión, es decir, dar respuestas a modo de herramientas de inclusión social, configurándose esta como la forma de combatir la pobreza. El autor defiende que el contexto actual es propicio para que las Administraciones nacionales e internacionales trabajen en reconstruir los sistemas de forma que sean más inclusivos y resilientes ante crisis futuras. La renta básica es, por tanto, el actor central que funciona como herramienta de inclusión para combatir esa exclusión social. El autor así lo defienden en el siguiente capítulo en el que de forma exhaustiva analiza el panorama europeo concluyendo que las rentas mínimas son un elemento sumamente importante para combatir la pobreza y la exclusión social en Europa. Es cierto que las políticas actuales están enfocadas hacia sistemas asistencialistas, pero se defiende que han de ir más allá, promoviendo la inclusión laboral, por ejemplo.

Dando un paso más, el libro continúa con un aspecto que también tiene un gran peso y es la dialéctica entre la renta básica universal y la renta mínima, es decir, aunque en un primer momento la atención a las necesidades básicas se centraba en aquellas personas que carecían de recursos, con el paso del tiempo se observa que hay propuestas que podrían beneficiar al conjunto de la población en general, como la renta universal. Esta cuestión se encuentra actualmente en un debate de gran complejidad, aunque las experiencias piloto podrían dar respuesta en este sentido (Van Parijs y Vanderborght, 2017). En el caso de España propiamente, el Impuesto Mínimo Vital ha emergido como respuesta a las dificultades en las gestiones de prestaciones y la dispersión normativa. Los autores entienden que el IMV es una medida enfocada a prevenir situaciones de riesgo de pobreza y es un avance importante en materia de derechos sociales. Pero no podemos quedarnos ahí, y en este sentido los autores dedican un capítulo a la implantación de herramientas de inteligencia artificial para medir los ingresos y facilitar el trabajo de la Administración en materia de gestión, tramitación y puesta a disposición de la ciudadanía de las prestaciones y servicios, sin olvidar que el factor humano es imprescindible cuando se trata de gestiones relacionadas con la sociedad.

A partir de todo lo que se ha mencionado, se puede concluir que el IMV juega un papel fundamental en el sistema de protección social. El libro presenta este recurso como clave en la lucha contra la exclusión y la pobreza. Su diseño, y así hemos podido comprobarlo a través del texto, responde a la necesidad de asegurar un nivel mínimo de ingresos que permita a las personas satisfacer sus necesidades básicas, promoviendo de esta manera la igualdad de oportunidades y la cohesión social. Es ese el principal motivo de su adopción, sin embargo, los autores advierten que la existencia del IMV no significa que el problema esté completamente resuelto ni que el camino hacia la inclusión social esté totalmente definido. De hecho, el texto enfatiza que, para que el IMV logre su máximo potencial transformador, es crucial fortalecer su conexión con otras políticas públicas, especialmente en áreas como empleo, educación, vivienda y servicios sociales. Aquí es donde se localiza uno de los principales problemas. En otras palabras, el IMV no debe verse como un objetivo en sí mismo, sino como una herramienta para una inclusión sostenible. Así, debe ser capaz de facilitar caminos de inserción que permitan a las personas salir de la pobreza de manera estable y digna.

Además, queda atestiguada la importancia de una mejor coordinación entre instituciones y la participación del tercer sector y las comunidades locales, para que las políticas económicas y sociales trabajen de manera complementaria. En este contexto, se argumenta también que el éxito del IMV no depende solo de su cobertura o de la cantidad de dinero que ofrece, sino también de su capacidad para transformar las condiciones estructurales que generan exclusión. Este es otro de los puntos más importantes del libro, la apuesta por una inclusión social sostenible. Esto requiere, por lo tanto, una visión integral que combine diferentes aspectos: redistribución, participación y acceso efectivo a los derechos sociales. El objetivo final, por ende, es el de mejorar significativamente la calidad de vida de las personas y reducir la desigualdad de manera duradera.

La perspectiva holística adoptada en este libro permite evidenciar la multifacética naturaleza del problema, subrayando no solo su complejidad intrínseca, sino también las deficiencias en los mecanismos administrativos que impactan negativamente en la percepción y efectividad del IMV. Este enfoque integral revela cómo la ineficiencia en la gestión y distribución de los recursos asociados al IMV no solo limita su alcance en términos de cobertura y eficacia, sino que además refuerza las críticas hacia su implementación. En este sentido, el análisis propone repensar las estructuras administrativas y los criterios operativos, destacando la necesidad de un diseño más eficiente y sensible a las realidades socioeconómicas de los beneficiarios, para garantizar que el IMV cumpla su función como herramienta de mitigación de la pobreza y promoción de la inclusión social (Ayala *et al.*, 2022).

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REVIEWS/RESEÑAS

N. Ripero-Muñiz. *Cosmopolitan Refugees: Somali Migrant Women in Nairobi and Johannesburg*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2026¹

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El libro de Nereida Ripero-Muñiz, *Cosmopolitan Refugees: Somali Migrant Women in Nairobi and Johannesburg* (Berghahn Books, 2026 [2023]), se inscribe en un campo de investigación donde convergen debates clave sobre migración, género y producción de conocimiento, y lo hace a partir de una intervención clara: cuestionar la persistencia de un imaginario que continúa representando a las mujeres refugiadas, especialmente musulmanas, como sujetos pasivos, homogéneos y carentes de agencia. Frente a esta representación, la autora propone una etnografía centrada en las voces y trayectorias de mujeres somalíes en Nairobi y Johannesburgo, dos espacios urbanos del Sur Global que, lejos de ser periféricos, funcionan como nodos complejos de movilidad, aspiración y producción social.

Este desplazamiento no es únicamente temático, sino profundamente epistemológico. El libro se sitúa en una tradición que entiende las narrativas como constitutivas de la identidad, en línea con los planteamientos de Somers (1994), quien sostiene que las identidades se configuran a través de redes narrativas que sitúan a los sujetos en el mundo social, y con Ochs y Capps (1996), que conciben la narración como una práctica situada, abierta e inacabada. En contextos de desplazamiento, esta perspectiva adquiere una relevancia particular: como ya apuntaba Said (1984), la experiencia migratoria puede vivirse como una «discontinuidad del ser», que solo puede recomponerse a través de relatos que conectan pasado, presente y futuro. En esta línea, la autora adopta una aproximación cercana a lo que Ricoeur (1970) denomina una «hermenéutica de la fe», priorizando una escucha que busca restaurar significado y dar voz a experiencias marginalizadas.

Esta apuesta se traduce en una etnografía donde las historias de vida no funcionan como ejemplos ilustrativos, sino como espacios de producción de conocimiento. Desde las primeras páginas, voces como la de Hibo, quien cuestiona abiertamente los estereotipos occidentales al afirmar que «la gente piensa que somos estúpidas», sitúan al lector en un registro que desborda la distancia analítica convencional. No se trata

únicamente de documentar experiencias, sino de mostrar cómo las propias mujeres interpretan, negocian y resignifican sus trayectorias, evidenciando una reflexividad que atraviesa todo el trabajo de campo y que se despliega tanto en conversaciones cotidianas como en espacios más estructurados, como los workshops organizados por la autora. En estos talleres, la dimensión narrativa adquiere un carácter colectivo: las historias individuales se entrelazan, se corrigen y se rearticulan en interacción con otras, generando no solo relatos compartidos, sino también marcos interpretativos comunes desde los que pensar la propia experiencia migratoria. A ello se suma el uso de las imágenes que acompañan el texto, que no cumplen una función meramente ilustrativa, sino que contribuyen a situar al lector en los espacios y escenas descritos, reforzando esa sensación de proximidad y de conversación que caracteriza el conjunto de la obra.

Desde una perspectiva investigadora centrada en la agencia de mujeres migrantes y en el papel de las narrativas en procesos de transformación social, este enfoque resulta especialmente valioso. El libro no habla sobre ellas, sino con ellas, y en ese gesto reside, desde mi punto de vista, una de sus principales contribuciones, tanto científicas como sociales, el hecho de desplazar la autoridad interpretativa hacia los propios sujetos de investigación. Este movimiento no es trivial, ya que cuestiona jerarquías tradicionales en la producción de conocimiento y se alinea con enfoques que abogan por una investigación más participativa y situada, donde la voz de las personas investigadas no se limita a ilustrar teorías, sino que contribuye activamente a su formulación.

Espacio, identidad y prácticas cotidianas en la diáspora

En este contexto, uno de los principales aciertos del libro es su capacidad para articular distintas dimensiones de la experiencia migratoria, desde la espacial, la económica o la identitaria, a partir de las narrativas de las mujeres. En este sentido, la comparación en el capítulo 1 entre Nairobi y Johannesburgo como «puerto» e «isla» permite comprender cómo diferentes configuraciones urbanas generan distintas condiciones de posibilidad para la acción. Nairobi aparece como un espacio con redes comunitarias más densas, donde la presencia somalí facilita formas de inserción y pertenencia, mientras que Johannesburgo se presenta como un entorno más fragmentado, atravesado por la xenofobia y la inseguridad.

Los relatos recogidos muestran trayectorias migratorias fragmentadas y no lineales, en las que los desplazamientos a través de varios países africanos forman parte de estrategias abiertas y revisables, más que de proyectos predefinidos. En este contexto, decisiones como contraer matrimonio antes de migrar, desplazarse en función de oportunidades cambiantes o reconfigurar los vínculos familiares en distintos puntos del trayecto ponen de manifiesto que la agencia se ejerce en condiciones de fuerte incertidumbre. No es casual que, en algunos relatos, la llegada a Johannesburgoarezca marcada por experiencias de inseguridad o aislamiento, mientras que Nairobi se percibe como un espacio donde la densidad de redes somalíes permite reconstruir formas de apoyo y pertenencia.

Esta dimensión situada se refuerza en el análisis del «placemaking» en barrios como Eastleigh o Mayfair. La autora muestra cómo estos «Little Mogadishu» no son enclaves pasivos, sino espacios activamente producidos por la comunidad somalí, en línea con planteamientos como los de Rios y Watkins (2015). Las narrativas de mujeres que abren pequeños negocios, tales como tiendas, restaurantes o salones de belleza, permiten observar cómo la actividad económica se convierte en una forma de estabilizar trayectorias marcadas por la movilidad, al tiempo que transforma el espacio urbano y lo inserta en redes transnacionales más amplias. Sin embargo, estas mismas voces subrayan también las dificultades que atraviesan estos procesos, desde la inseguridad hasta la discriminación, evitando cualquier lectura simplificada del emprendimiento migrante.

En paralelo, el libro aborda la construcción de la identidad somalí en diáspora como un proceso relacional y dinámico. Las narrativas recogidas muestran formas de identidad híbridas, donde lo local y lo global se entrelazan en la vida cotidiana. En espacios como salones de belleza o encuentros informales, las mujeres articulan prácticas culturales somalíes con consumos globales y uso de redes sociales, negociando constantemente su posición entre diferentes marcos de referencia. Este proceso no está exento de tensiones: la necesidad de mantener vínculos con la comunidad de origen convive con el deseo de movilidad y apertura hacia otros horizontes, generando identidades que no pueden entenderse en términos dicotómicos.

Este análisis dialoga con debates sobre cosmopolitismo (Appadurai, 1996; Werbner, 2006; Vertovec, 2009), proponiendo una lectura que lo entiende como práctica cotidiana, no como privilegio de élites. En este sentido, el cosmopolitismo no aparece como un ideal abstracto, sino como una forma de habitar el mundo en contextos de movilidad, donde las mujeres desarrollan competencias culturales, lingüísticas y sociales que les permiten moverse entre distintos registros. En este marco, la noción de «buufis», desarrollada por Horst (2006) y retomada por Abdi (2015), resulta particularmente esclarecedora: más que un simple deseo de emigrar, el «buufis», remite a una aspiración intensa y socialmente compartida hacia la movilidad, que funciona como horizonte colectivo y orienta decisiones vitales en contextos de incertidumbre. De este modo, el deseo de migrar no aparece como una motivación individual aislada, sino como una fuerza social que configura expectativas, estructura trayectorias y da sentido a las experiencias de desplazamiento.

Agencia, narrativas y relevancia contemporánea

El capítulo final del libro, centrado en la agencia de las mujeres, constituye su núcleo analítico y el lugar donde la apuesta narrativa alcanza su mayor intensidad. A través de trayectorias marcadas por matrimonio, ruptura, trabajo y migración, la autora muestra cómo la agencia se despliega en contextos donde las opciones están condicionadas, pero no completamente determinadas. Decisiones como solicitar el divorcio, asumir la responsabilidad económica del hogar o reorganizar la vida familiar entre distintos países no aparecen como gestos excepcionales, sino como prácticas

situadas que requieren negociación constante con estructuras familiares, económicas y culturales. En este sentido, las historias recogidas permiten comprender la agencia en términos cercanos a los planteamientos de Emirbayer y Mische (1998), como una capacidad temporalmente orientada que integra pasado, presente y futuro. Las aspiraciones hacia «una vida mejor», frecuentemente evocadas en los relatos, funcionan como motor que impulsa decisiones complejas, pero también como horizonte que permite dotar de sentido a trayectorias marcadas por la incertidumbre. Al mismo tiempo, el libro evita presentar estas aspiraciones de forma idealizada, mostrando cómo coexisten con experiencias de frustración, pérdida o desencanto, lo que contribuye a ofrecer una imagen más matizada de la experiencia migratoria.

En conjunto, el libro de Ripero-Muñiz constituye una aportación relevante a los estudios sobre migración y género, tanto por su enfoque teórico como por su aproximación metodológica. Su principal fortaleza reside en la capacidad de articular las narrativas de las mujeres con debates más amplios sobre identidad, agencia y cosmopolitismo, evitando tanto la victimización como la romantización. Al situar el análisis en contextos del Sur Global, la obra contribuye además a descentralizar el campo de los estudios migratorios, cuestionando la centralidad del Norte Global en la producción de conocimiento.

No obstante, como toda investigación, el libro también plantea interrogantes. La centralidad de las narrativas, si bien constituye una de sus principales fortalezas, puede dejar en un segundo plano el análisis sistemático de estructuras más amplias que condicionan las trayectorias. Asimismo, el énfasis en la agencia invita a seguir explorando cómo se articulan estas capacidades de acción con desigualdades estructurales persistentes, especialmente en contextos marcados por la precariedad jurídica, económica y social. En este sentido, cabría preguntarse hasta qué punto el caso de las mujeres somalíes, tal como se presenta en el libro, permite abrir una reflexión comparativa más amplia sobre otras experiencias de mujeres refugiadas en distintos contextos geográficos. La riqueza empírica y narrativa del estudio sugiere, de hecho, la posibilidad de haber incorporado un desarrollo adicional, quizá en forma de capítulo o de discusión final, que situara estas trayectorias en diálogo con otros casos, como los de mujeres refugiadas latinoamericanas o de otras diásporas del Sur Global, permitiendo así explorar tanto convergencias como especificidades en la articulación entre agencia, movilidad y estructuras de desigualdad.

Este tipo de apertura comparativa no implicaría diluir la especificidad del caso somalí, sino, por el contrario, reforzar su potencial analítico al inscribirlo en debates más amplios sobre género y migración. Del mismo modo, una mayor problematización de las condiciones estructurales, en particular, los marcos legales, los regímenes de movilidad y las jerarquías globales que configuran quién puede moverse y cómo, permitiría profundizar en las tensiones entre agencia y restricción que el propio libro pone de relieve. En este sentido, el trabajo de Ripero-Muñiz abre una línea de investigación especialmente fértil, pero también deja planteada la necesidad de seguir avanzando hacia marcos analíticos que integren de manera más explícita las escalas micro de la experiencia vivida con las macroestructuras que la condicionan.

Más allá de estas consideraciones, la relevancia del libro en el contexto actual resulta indiscutible. En un momento marcado por el endurecimiento de las políticas migratorias, la proliferación de discursos xenófobos y la persistencia de representaciones simplificadoras sobre las personas refugiadas, esta obra ofrece una perspectiva que permite complejizar el debate. Al mostrar a las mujeres somalíes como sujetos activos que construyen proyectos de vida, redes transnacionales e identidades múltiples, el libro contribuye a cuestionar narrativas hegemónicas que siguen informando tanto el discurso público como, en ocasiones, la propia investigación académica.

A nivel internacional, la obra se inserta en debates crecientes sobre la necesidad de repensar conceptos como agencia, pertenencia o cosmopolitismo desde enfoques más situados y sensibles a las experiencias del Sur Global. En este sentido, conecta con una agenda de investigación que busca integrar narrativas, agencia y transformación social, reconociendo a los propios sujetos como productores de conocimiento. Esta orientación resulta especialmente pertinente en campos como los estudios migratorios, donde la distancia entre producción académica y experiencia vivida ha sido objeto de críticas crecientes, y donde se hace cada vez más necesario desarrollar marcos analíticos capaces de captar la complejidad de trayectorias marcadas por la movilidad, la incertidumbre y la interdependencia.

En última instancia, el libro no solo aporta conocimiento sobre la diáspora somalí, sino que plantea una forma de hacer investigación con implicaciones más amplias. Al situar las narrativas en el centro y reconocer a las mujeres como agentes de interpretación, invita a repensar las relaciones entre investigación, representación y poder. En un contexto global donde las migraciones siguen siendo uno de los principales ejes de debate político y social, trabajos como este resultan fundamentales para construir marcos analíticos más complejos, capaces de dar cuenta de la diversidad de experiencias y de las múltiples formas de agencia que atraviesan las trayectorias migratorias.

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