Journalistic coverage of mental health in Spain before and after the COVID-19 pandemic: An analysis of digital newspapers (2018-2022)

Cobertura periodística de la salud mental en España antes y después de la pandemia: Análisis de los diarios digitales (2018-2022)

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Abstract:

Mental health has become a social priority in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. News consumed and shared by the public, together with the role played by the media, is therefore central to shaping social understanding and public debate around mental health. This study analysed articles on mental health published between 2018 and 2022 by the ten most widely read general-interest online newspapers in Spain. It used constructed week sampling and assessed aspects including news sources, attribution of responsibility, temporal perspective, news values, the presence of stigma and gender stereotypes, and the influence of the pandemic. The media most frequently relied on people affected by mental health problems as sources. The challenge frame was more prominent than the stigmatising frame. The most common news values were topicality, social relevance, and human interest. No pandemic-related effect was observed in the results. However, articles in which women were the focus showed notable differences, with a greater presence of stigma and stronger links to violence. Mental health coverage in online newspapers has improved and, overall, stigma has decreased, except where women are the focus of coverage.

Keywords:

Mental health; media; news values; COVID-19; gender stereotypes.

Resumen:

La salud mental ha pasado a ser una prioridad social tras la pandemia del Covid-19. La información que consumen y comparten los ciudadanos y el papel de los medios de comunicación son esenciales. Se analizaron los textos sobre salud mental publicados entre 2018 y 2022 por los diez diarios digitales de información general más leídos en España. Se empleó la metodología de la semana construida y se evaluaron aspectos como las fuentes, la atribución de responsabilidad, la perspectiva temporal, los valores noticiosos, la presencia de estigmas y estereotipos de género o la influencia de la pandemia. Las fuentes a las que más recurren los medios de comunicación son los afectados. El marco de desafío está más presente que el estigmatizante. Los valores noticiosos más presentes son la actualidad, la relevancia social y el interés humano. La pandemia no influyó en los resultados. Sin embargo, aquellos textos protagonizados por mujeres presentan diferencias relevantes, con mayor presencia de estigma y vinculación a la violencia. La evolución de la cobertura de la salud mental en los diarios digitales ha sido positiva y, en general, se ha reducido el estigma, salvo en aquellos casos en los que las protagonistas son mujeres.

Palabras clave:

Salud mental; medios de comunicación; valores noticiosos; covid-19; estereotipos de género.

1. Introduction

The right to mental health forms part of the fundamental human right to health, recognised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in subsequent United Nations resolutions, such as 32/18 and 36/25. Recognising and applying this right therefore helps to improve people's quality of life and wellbeing, and is an essential principle in any discussion of fair and equitable societies (Sugiura et al., 2020).

However, more than one billion people currently experience mental health problems (WHO 2025). It is also estimated that one in four people will experience a mental disorder at some point in their lives, and that such problems will become the leading cause of disability by 2030 (WHO, 2021; Salud Mental España, 2021). In Spain, more than one third of the population has a disorder of this kind (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2024). Mental health is therefore a growing concern and forms part of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, which focuses on health and wellbeing. More specifically, SDG 3.4 target calls for the promotion of mental health and wellbeing (UN, 2015).

For this reason, prevention and promotion programmes have been expanded in recent years, although they have been marked by a shortage of resources (McGinty et al., 2016; WHO, 2021). This problem is compounded by others, such as delayed help-seeking, the absence or inadequacy of treatment, and poor care resulting from prejudice and stigma (McGinty et al., 2016; Pavlova and Berkers, 2020).

Many of these prejudices are linked to gender (Quintero Johnson and Miller, 2016; Pavlova and Beckers, 2020; Gu and Ding, 2023). Women also show poorer mental health indicators in areas such as the prevalence of depression and anxiety, with rates twice those recorded for men (Bacigalupe, Cabezas, Bueno and Martín, 2020). Any mental health intervention must therefore incorporate a gender perspective (Ruiz et al., 2004; WHO, 2018; Cabezas-Rodríguez, Utzet and Bacigalupe, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also led to an increase in problems of this kind (Fuentes, 2021), while also making them more visible to governments and society (Lankan, 2024). Spain introduced the Mental Health Action Plan 2022–2024. The World Health Organization (WHO), meanwhile, had launched another plan in 2013, originally intended to run until 2020. However, failure to meet the main targets led to its extension to 2030 (WHO, 2021).

1.1. Journalism and mental health

Information on mental health consumed and shared by the public is fundamental to public awareness and public understanding of mental health and to wider social awareness of these issues (FECYT, 2022). In one of the core lines of action in the aforementioned plan, the WHO (2021) states that the media's role is crucial in increasing social awareness. News coverage of mental health operates on two levels: it provides audiences with a broader understanding of the issue and calls on different sectors to adopt a specific position in response to the problem (Briggs and Hallin, 2016). The media therefore play a major role in shaping how society understands and manages health as a public good (WHO, 2021; Pichihua Vegas, 2021).

This impact can be positive, by raising social awareness and sensitivity or by helping to secure greater resources (Smith, 2007; Fábregas et al., 2018). It can also be negative, by increasing stigma or perpetuating existing forms of stigma (McGinty et al., 2016; Holland, 2017; Burns et al., 2022). For this reason, many studies have analysed media coverage, especially in print and

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online newspapers, focusing on two aspects: how the media approach these issues and the influence they exert on public opinion (O´Brien, 2021).

The earliest studies date back to the 1950s (Gerbner, 1959; Taylor, 1957). Since then, media coverage of mental illness has been the subject of extensive research (Cabrera et al., 2018; McGinty et al., 2016). Most studies agree that the media emphasise negative aspects and rely on sensationalist practices (O´Brien, 2021; Goepfert et al., 2019).

Several studies conducted in the United States, for example, conclude that the media tend to associate mental illness with violence (Wahl, 1995; McGinty et al., 2016). Similar patterns have been identified in the United Kingdom (Philo et al., 1994) and Canada (Day and Page, 1986). Along the same lines, later studies find that coverage emphasises the dangerousness or unpredictability attributed to people with mental health problems and links them to violent or criminal events (Aragonés et al., 2014; Wahlbeck, 2015; O´ Brien, 2021). The media tend to prioritise controversy and conflict, which increases social stigma and makes it harder for people with mental health problems to seek professional help (Corrigan et al., 2013; Gutiérrez-Coba et al., 2017; Nawkova et al., 2012).

More recent studies conducted in six European countries, however, suggest that this view is simplistic and that the effects of media coverage are broader, rather than being merely stigmatising or empowering (Van Beveren et al., 2020).

Other studies go further, concluding that the media can help to reduce stigma (Goulden et al., 2011; Corrigan, 2013; Ma, 2017; Goepfert et al., 2019; Foriest et al., 2024). They indicate that positive framing is increasingly common (Cabrera, 2018; Cano-Orón, Vengut-Climent and Moreno-Castro, 2020), that attribution of responsibility is addressed in greater depth (Zhang, Jin and Tang, 2015; Van Beveren et al., 2020), that testimonies from people affected by mental health problems are included (Corrigan, 2013; Van Beveren et al., 2020), as well as those of experts (Catalán-Matamoros and Peñafiel-Saiz, 2019; López-García; Costa-Sánchez and Vizoso 2021; Tang and Pen 2015; Ugarte-Iturrizaga and Catalán-Matamoros, 2024) and that temporal perspective is incorporated (Aragonés et al., 2014; Pavelko and Myrick, 2019).

1.2. Journalism and mental health in Spain

In Spain, Aragonés et al. (2014) concluded that stigma is reinforced and that links tend to be drawn between mental illness and danger, violence or crime. They also found that the metaphorical and pejorative use of clinical and psychiatric terms was fairly common, in line with previous studies (Lima Serrano, Sáez Bueno and Lima Rodríguez; 2011; Muñoz, 2011 and Mateo Aguilar, 2013).

Revuelta et al. (2017) found that statements by public figures, acknowledging that they had a mental health problem, together with institutional or political data, were the most common triggers for media coverage of mental health. They also found that, although positive news items predominated, the language used included stereotypes. Along similar lines, Saavedra et al. (2019) noted that centres and institutions were the usual sources for Spanish health journalists, although these journalists acknowledged making very limited use of experts.

Cano-Orón and Moreno-Castro (2020) found that, although negative representations were in the minority, they outnumbered positive ones. They identified the main problem as trivialisation and the association of mental health with violent incidents, a pattern found in more than one third of the news items studied.

They also highlighted the limited impact of codes of ethics, despite the existence of numerous documents produced by associations and media outlets (among others, FEAFES, 2008; Mena et al., 2010; Pérez, 2011; FEDEAFES, 2012; Álvarez, 2013; Fábregas et al., 2018, Díaz-Campo and Olivar-Julián, 2024) In recent years, however, greater adherence has been reported (ANIS, 2024).

Finally, Carrasco, Saucier and Whitley (2023), in a study of COVID-19 coverage concerning young people and using a very similar sample, found that the proportion of stigmatising articles, or articles linking mental health to violence, was very low. Among the areas for improvement, they recommended citing patients as sources and showing how to seek help.

The main objective of this study is to analyse mental health coverage in Spanish online newspapers, with particular attention to the influence of the pandemic, the presence of stigmatising elements, the association of mental illness with conflict and violence and the gender perspective.

On this basis, the following specific objectives were defined:

SO1. To assess whether the pandemic influenced mental health coverage in Spanish online newspapers.

SO2. To determine whether there are significant differences between newspapers or whether the findings are broadly homogeneous across them.

SO3. To identify the news sources used most frequently in these articles.

SO4. To analyse how the articles address the topic and, in particular, the presence of stigmatising elements, through aspects such as attribution of responsibility, temporal focus and news values.

SO5. To examine the influence of the gender perspective on all the above aspects.

2. Method

This study analysed articles on mental health published between 2018 and 2022 by the ten most widely read general-interest online newspapers in Spain, according to Comscore at the time the research was conducted.

Online newspapers were selected because, as several studies have shown, their number has increased steadily, making them the most numerous type of media outlet in the 2020s, ahead of print newspapers, radio and television (Salaverría and Martínez-Costa, 2024). They are also the medium that attracts the greatest interest among both audiences and academic researchers (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey and López-García, 2023).

The study used the Mynewsonline database, which systematically compiles and organises articles published by Spanish online media outlets and is usually the most commonly used resource for this type of analysis (Codina, 2023).

First, searches were carried out in these newspapers for the period 2018–2022, inclusive. During November 2023, all articles containing the term “salud mental” (“mental health”) in the headline or body text were identified and extracted.

After duplicates had been removed –articles that had been published in two sections of the newspaper but were otherwise identical– the final sample was as shown in Table 1.

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Table 1. Distribution of the sample by online newspaper

Online newspaper	Number of items
20minutos.es	2,250
abc.es	1,308
elconfidencial.com	543
eldiario.es	1,352
elespanol.com	802
elmundo.es	465
elpais.es	256
larazon.es	669
lavanguardia.com	1,508
okdiario.com	310
Total	**9,463**

Source: Own elaboration

Because the dataset shown in Table 1 was too large for the scope of this study, constructed week sampling was used to obtain a more manageable corpus (Hester and Dougall, 2007). This method is widely used in communication research (Luke, Caburnay and Cohen, 2011; Olivar de Julián, Segado and Díaz-Campo, 2020; Rebolledo, González and Olza, 2021).

The constructed weeks were generated using the Random Integer Set Generator. For each year, seven sets were created, each containing ten unique random integers within the range of weeks 1 to 52.

The numbers obtained in each set were sorted in ascending order and assigned as follows: Monday (Set 1), Tuesday (Set 2), Wednesday (Set 3), Thursday (Set 4), Friday (Set 5), Saturday (Set 6) and Sunday (Set 7). In each set, the ten weeks generated by the random selection were selected from weeks 1 to 52. In total, 70 days were selected per year, making 350 days overall, to obtain a manageable and appropriate sample while preserving its representativeness. The coding scheme was developed on the basis of Table 2. For each article analysed, the presence or absence of the categories and variables was recorded.

Table 2. Categories and variables

Category	Variables	Source
News sources	Medical sources Non-medical expert sources People affected by mental health problems Family members Spanish law enforcement agencies	Catalán-Matamoros and Peñafiel-Saiz (2019) López-García; Costa-Sánchez and Vizoso (2021) Fábregas et al. (2014) FEAFES (2008) Saavedra-Llamas et al. (2019) Tang and Pen (2015)
Frames	Stigmatising frame (representation of people as a danger, association with violent acts, pejorative terms, etc.) Challenge frame (optimism, emphasis on recovery, inclusive language, etc.)	Álvarez (2013) Aragonés, et al. (2014) Cano-Orón and Moreno-Castro (2019) Cano-Orón, Vengut-Climent and Moreno-Castro (2020) FEAFES (2008) McGinty et al. (2016) Smith (2007)
Attribution of responsibility	Individual responsibility Social responsibility	Zhang, Jin and Tang (2015) McGinty et al. (2016) Van Beveren et al. (2020)
Temporal perspective	Thematic focus Episodic focus	Aragonés et al. (2014) Cano-Orón and Moreno-Castro (2019) Pavelko and Myrick (2019)
Gender perspective	Presence of gender stereotypes (sexist or denigrating gender-related language; assignment of specific or preconceived roles when a woman is the focus of the news item; unsupported or unjustified association of problems or disorders with gender)	Cano-Orón and Moreno-Castro (2019) Fábregas et al. (2018) Quintero Johnson and Miller (2016) Ruiz et al. (2004)
News values	Topicality Conflict Human interest Usefulness Surprise Social relevance	Al-Rawi (2019) García-Perdomo et al. (2018) Segado-Boj, Chaparro-Domínguez and Díaz-Campo, (2018)

Source: Own elaboration

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The authors had previously used this methodology in earlier studies. Intercoder reliability was assessed through a pretest of 170 randomly selected items, representing approximately 10% of each newspaper's sample. These items were coded by two of the study authors. Cohen's kappa coefficient ranged from 0.90 (almost perfect) to 1.00 (perfect) across all variables.

A total of 1,664 news items were analysed, distributed as follows: *20minutos.es*, 410; *abc.es*, 221; *elconfidencial.com*, 91; *eldiario.es,* 259; *elespañol.com*, 144; *elmundo.es*, 87; *elpais.es,* 53; *larazon.es,* 117; *lavanguardia.com,* 234; *okdiario.com*, 48.

Table 3. Number of news items analysed

Online newspaper	No. of items
20minutos.es	410
eldiario.es	259
lavanguardia.com	234
abc.es	221
elespanol.com	144
larazon.es	117
elconfidencial.com	91
elmundo.es	87
elpais.es	53
okdiario.com	48
Total	**1,664**

Source: Own elaboration

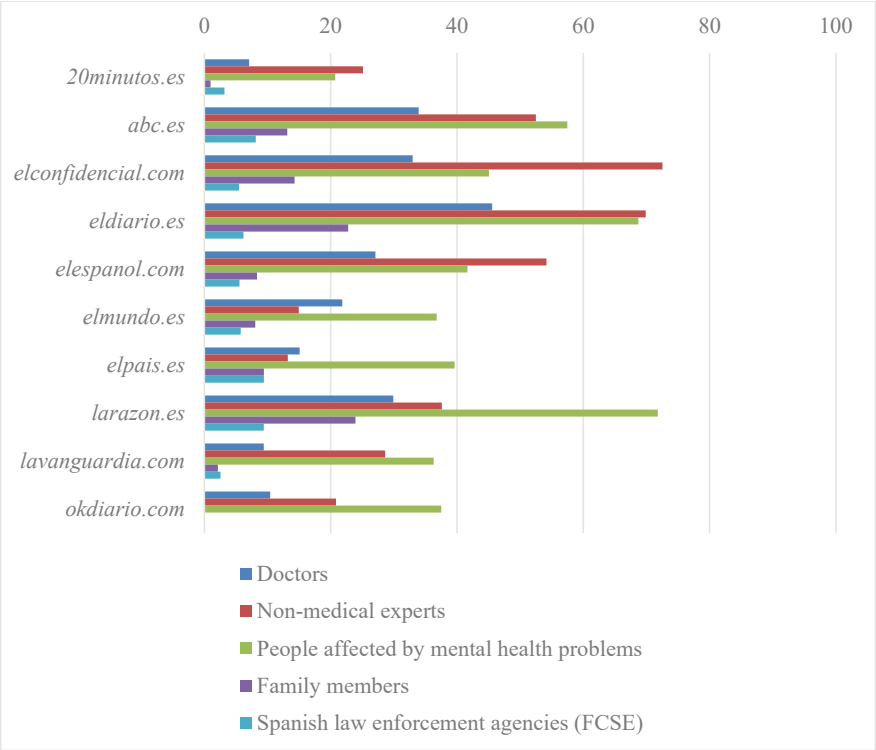
3. Results

The main findings are presented below in four sections: news sources; frames and temporal focus; news values; and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the gender perspective.

3.1. News sources

The most frequently cited news sources are people affected by mental health problems and non-medical experts. Doctors, family members and Spanish law enforcement agencies (FCSE) are cited less often. However, as shown in Figure 1, there are substantial differences between newspapers. It is also noteworthy that okdiario.com does not mention either family members or FCSE in any of its news items.

Figure 1. Presence of news sources (%)



Source: Own elaboration

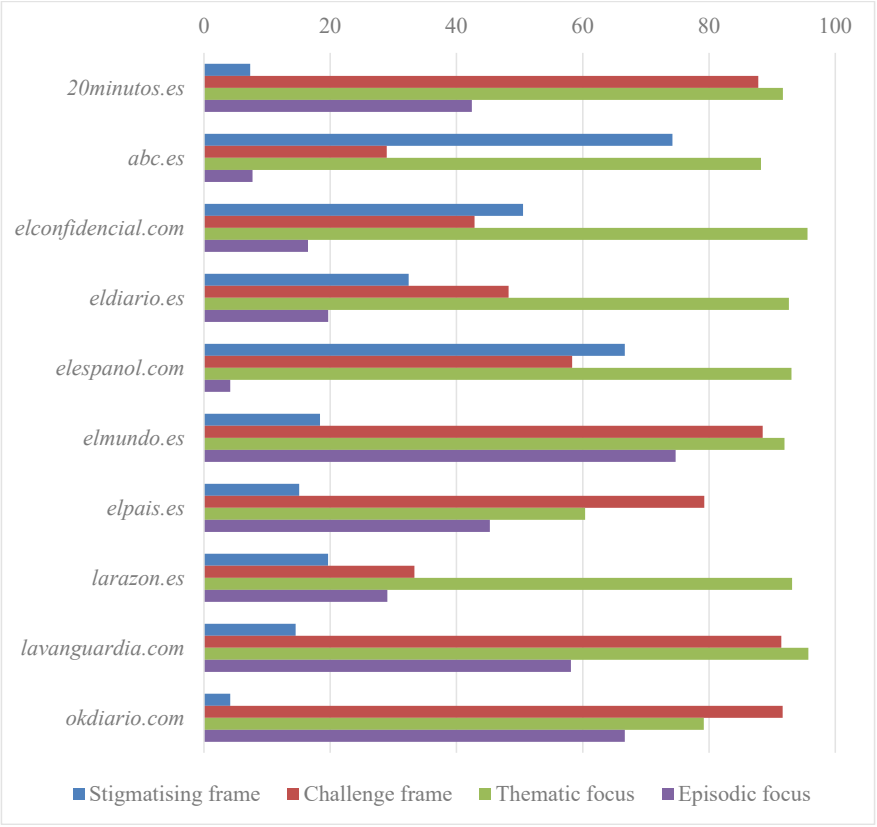
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3.2. Frames and temporal focus

The challenge frame is more prevalent than the stigmatising frame. The greatest differences between newspapers are found in the stigmatising frame and the challenge frame. Finally, the thematic focus clearly predominates over the episodic focus, although the latter is present to some extent in some of the newspapers analysed (Figure 2).

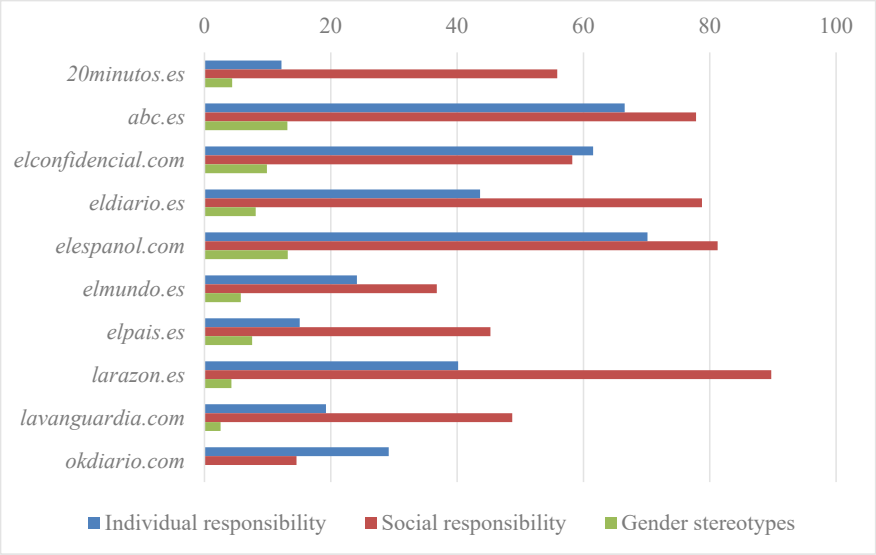
Figure 2. Frames and temporal perspective



Source: Own elaboration

In terms of the attribution of responsibility, social responsibility clearly predominates over individual responsibility. There are substantial differences between media outlets (Figure 3). The presence of stereotypes is limited overall, although they appear more frequently in newspapers such as *abc.es* and *elespanol.com*.

Figure 3. Responsibilities and stereotypes



Source: Own elaboration

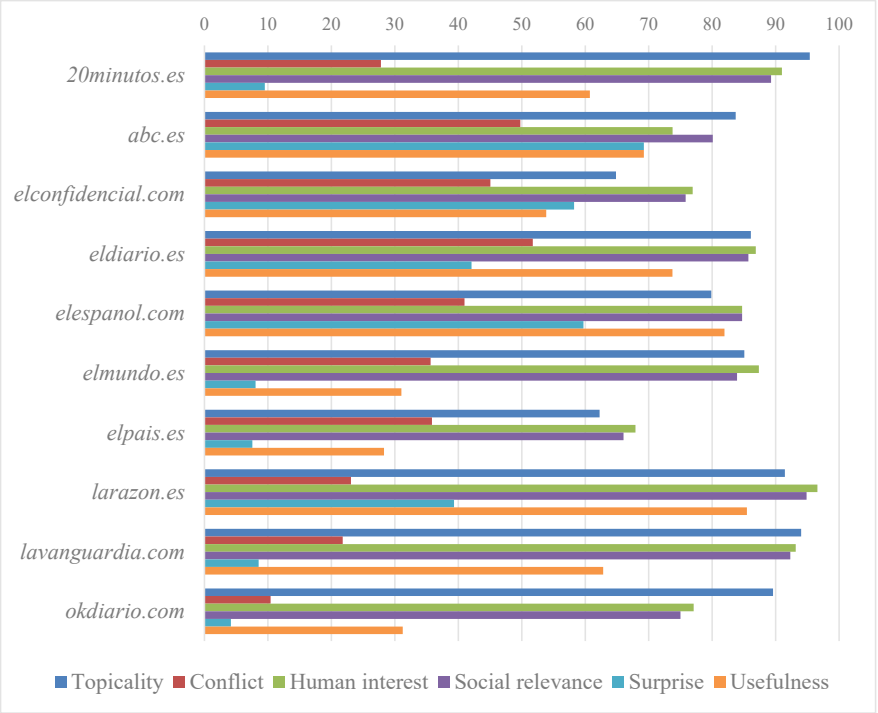
3.3. News values

The most frequent news values are "topicality", "social relevance" and "human interest". "Usefulness" also accounts for a high percentage. By contrast, "conflict" and "surprise" are less common. The values are broadly homogeneous across newspapers for most variables, with "surprise" showing the greatest variation (see Figure 4).

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Figure 4. Presence of news values (%)



Source: Own elaboration

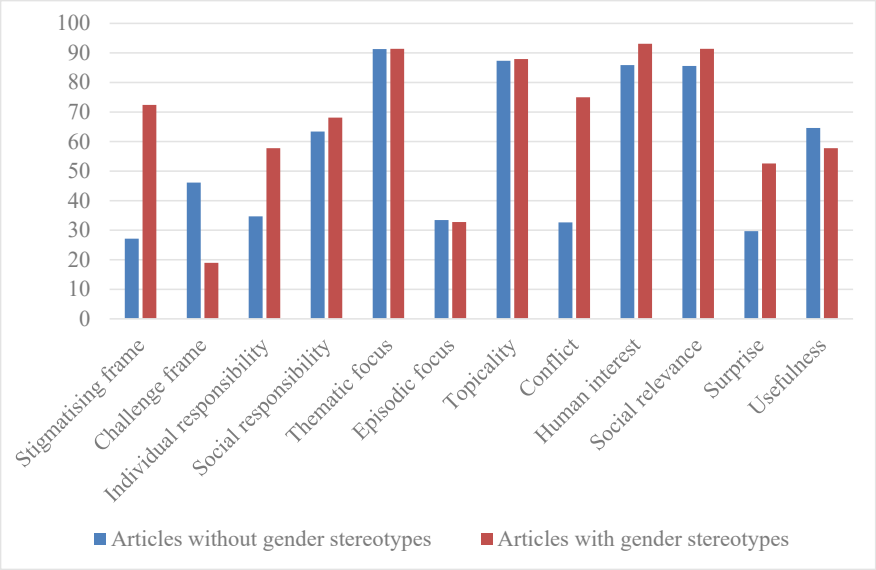
3.4. Influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the gender perspective

When the articles were analysed separately by period –pre-pandemic (2018–2019), pandemic (2020) and post-pandemic (2021–2022)– no significant differences were found in most variables.

A comparison between articles in which gender stereotypes linked to the presence of women were identified and those without such stereotypes revealed important differences in some variables. For example, the stigmatising frame is much more prevalent in articles where gender stereotypes are present. The opposite pattern is found for the challenge frame.

There are also significant differences in two of the news values. The news value "conflict" is more common in news items with gender stereotypes, and the same is true of "surprise". The remaining values show similar percentages in both sets of articles (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Influence of the "Gender stereotypes" variable



Source: Own elaboration

4. Discussion

The findings show, first, that mental health coverage in Spanish online newspapers generally evolved positively over the period around the COVID-19 pandemic. This coverage is also broadly homogeneous across the newspapers analysed and, apart from a few specific exceptions, there are no major differences between them. This finding corroborates the results of previous studies (Aragonés et al., 2014; Cano-Orón, Vengut-Climent and Moreno-Castro, 2020).

The predominant use of non-medical experts as news sources confirms the findings of previous studies conducted in Spain (Catalán-Matamoros and Peñafiel-Saiz, 2019; López-García; Costa-Sánchez and Vizoso, 2021) and internationally (Tang and Pen, 2015), but marks a departure from others, which pointed mainly to doctors and other healthcare professionals (Saavedra et al., 2019). The significant presence of people directly affected by mental health problems is also a positive finding, as several previous studies have noted (among others, Corrigan, 2013; Van Beveren et al., 2020). More generally, the diversity of news sources is one of the recommendations set out in several codes of ethics in the field (FEAFES, 2008; Fábregas et al., 2018) and has also been identified in other recent studies (Chaparro-Domínguez, Díaz-Campo and Olivar-Julián, 2026).

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The greater prevalence of the challenge frame over the stigmatising frame runs counter to the pattern found in most earlier studies conducted in Spain (Aragonés et al., 2014; Lima Serrano, Sáez Bueno and Lima Rodríguez, 2011; Muñoz, 2011; Mateo Aguilar, 2013). It reflects a positive development in this respect, a trend that had already begun to emerge in later studies in Spain (Cano-Orón, Vengut-Climent and Moreno-Castro, 2020) and in the international literature (Van Beveren et al., 2020; Ma, 2017; Cabrera, 2018; O´Brien, 2021; Lyons, 2025). It also indicates greater adherence to codes and style recommendations (FEAFES, 2008; Fábregas et al., 2018).

Similarly, the clear prevalence of thematic focus over episodic focus is consistent with some previous studies (Aragonés et al., 2014; Pavelko and Myrick, 2019) while differing from other research (Corrigan et al., 2013; Gutiérrez-Coba et al., 2017; Nawkova et al., 2012). In any case, this finding reinforces the more positive approach taken by Spanish newspapers compared with earlier studies.

Along the same lines, the predominance of social over individual attribution of responsibility, an aspect that has received less attention in the literature, confirms the findings of other studies that have addressed this issue. (Zhang, Jin and Tang, 2015; Van Beveren et al., 2020; Smith, 2007; Lyons, 2025).

With regard to news values, the greater prevalence of topicality, social relevance and human interest — and, above all, the lower prevalence of conflict — marks a departure from earlier findings, since conflict was the value that featured especially prominently in numerous previous studies, both in Spain and internationally (Wahl, 1995; McGinty et al., 2016; O´Brien, 2021; Goepfert et al., 2019; Corrigan et al., 2013; Gutiérrez-Coba et al., 2017; Nawkova et al., 2012; Cano-Orón and Moreno-Castro, 2020; Aragonés et al., 2014).

As for the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings of the present study show no significant changes. In line with other studies focusing more specifically on young people (Carrasco, Saucier and Whitley, 2023; Lankan, 2024), the findings appear to confirm a shift towards more appropriate mental health coverage in the Spanish media.

The gender perspective is the exception to this trend. The data analysed clearly show an association between stigma and gender stereotypes in this area. Many of the stigmatising elements are therefore associated with women, meaning that elements such as conflict are much more frequent in such articles. The same pattern can be seen in the attribution of responsibility, which tends to be individual in articles in which women are the focus and social in those that are not.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that have examined these issues (Ruiz et al., 2004; McGinty et al., 2016; Holland, 2017; Burns et al., 2022). They also confirm that, as studies specifically analysing this issue have argued, any intervention aimed at combating mental-health stigma must fully incorporate an agender perspective (WHO, 2018; Cabezas-Rodríguez, Utzet and Bacigalupe, 2021).

5. Conclusions

Overall, this study concludes that mental health coverage in Spanish online newspapers has improved. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive influence on this coverage, reflected in a gradual reduction in stigma and in reporting that increasingly contextualises this issue. It can therefore be concluded that the publication of numerous codes, recommendations and style

guides, by both journalists' associations and associations within the mental health sector itself (for example, FEAFES, 2008; Mena et al., 2010; Pérez, 2011; FEDEAFES, 2012; Álvarez., 2013; Fábregas et al., 2018), has provided guidance that, together with greater public awareness, have helped to improve journalistic coverage of this news of this kind.

However, this trend is reversed when women are the focus of the articles. In these cases, stigmatising elements are more marked and more frequent, and there is a stronger association with violence and elements linked to conflict.

For this reason, ethical recommendations on mental health coverage should pay particular attention to the gender perspective. Another option would be to develop ethical guidelines on mental health and the gender perspective that address this particular aspect of coverage in greater depth.

As argued at the start of this article, one of the keys to addressing the growing challenge posed by mental health problems, and to raising public awareness, lies in how the media cover this issue. This study has confirmed that the guidelines and recommendations produced to date have helped to improve that coverage. The next step would be to develop additional guidelines with complementary, more specific recommendations on how to address the gender perspective appropriately.

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8. Specific contributions of each author

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Methodology	Jesús Díaz-Campo
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9. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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