


Future expectations of undergraduate and graduate students after the COVID-19 pandemic

Expectativas de futuro de estudantes de graduação e pós-graduação após a pandemia de COVID-19

Expectativas de futuro de estudiantes de grado y posgrado después de la pandemia de COVID-19

Les attentes d'avenir des étudiants de graduation, de master et au doctorate après pandémie de COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought insecurities and uncertainties related to the future of university students, impacting their life projects, especially academic and professional projects. A descriptive, cross-sectional, exploratory study was carried out based on an epidemiological survey of the mental health conditions of a university community during the COVID-19 pandemic. This specific study focused on the perception of undergraduate and graduate students about the prospects for the post-pandemic future. A questionnaire

adapted from Fiocruz, already used in previous studies on this topic, was used and was self-administered using the Google Forms platform. 652 responses from undergraduate and graduate students were analyzed regarding the following open question: “If you wish, write about your expectations for the post-pandemic future”. Simple descriptive statistics were used for sociodemographic data, using JAMOVI software version 1.8. For qualitative data, the software Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (IRaMuTeQ) was used in two types of analysis: Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) and Similarity Analysis. The results obtained presented five classes, related to themes such as expectations regarding a) the future (pessimism and optimism); b) recovery of economic, personal, and social conditions; c) return to in-person teaching, aspects related to project execution and remote teaching; d) contingencies for overcoming the pandemic; e) uncertainties, feelings and attitudes regarding employment, career, income, and professional prospects. It can be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a scenario of uncertainty, lack of perspectives, and concern about the future among university students, increasing the conditions of psychosocial vulnerability for this category.

Keywords: future expectations, undergraduate students, postgraduate students, COVID-19, life project.

Resumo

A pandemia de Covid-19 trouxe inseguranças e incertezas relacionadas ao futuro de estudantes universitários, impactando seus projetos de vida, especialmente projetos acadêmicos e profissionais. Realizou-se um estudo exploratório descritivo, transversal, a partir de um levantamento epidemiológico sobre as condições de saúde mental de uma comunidade universitária durante a pandemia de Covid-19. Este estudo específico focou na percepção de estudantes de graduação e pós-graduação sobre as perspectivas de futuro pós-pandemia. Foi utilizado um questionário adaptado da Fiocruz, já usado em estudos prévios neste tema, tendo sido autoaplicado a partir da plataforma Google Forms. Foram analisadas 652 respostas de estudantes de graduação e pós-graduação referente à seguinte questão aberta: “Caso queira, escreva sobre como estão as suas expectativas de futuro pós-pandemia”. Foi utilizado estatística descritiva simples para os dados sociodemográficos, com a utilização do software JAMOVI versão 1.8. Para os dados qualitativos utilizou-se o software Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (IRaMuTeQ) em dois tipos de análise: classificação hierárquica descendente (CHD) e análise de similitude. Os resultados obtidos apresentaram cinco classes, relacionados a temas como as expectativas em relação: a) ao futuro (pessimismo e otimismo); b) recuperação de condições econômicas, pessoais e sociais; c) retorno ao ensino presencial, aspectos relacionados à execução de projetos e ao ensino remoto; d) contingências de superação da pandemia; e) incertezas, sentimentos e atitudes em relação a emprego, carreira, renda e perspectivas profissionais. Verificou-se que a pandemia de Covid-19 trouxe um cenário de incerteza, falta de perspectivas, preocupação com o futuro entre estudantes universitários, aumentando as condições de vulnerabilidade psicossocial e o sofrimento psíquico para essa categoria.

Palavras-chaves: expectativa de futuro, estudantes universitários, COVID-19, projeto de vida, saúde mental

Resumen

La pandemia de COVID-19 trajo inseguridades e incertidumbres relacionadas al futuro de estudiantes universitarios impactando sus proyectos de vida, especialmente proyectos académicos y profesionales. Fue realizado un estudio exploratorio descriptivo, transversal, a partir de una búsqueda epidemiológica sobre las condiciones de salud mental de una comunidad universitaria durante la pandemia de COVID-19. Este estudio específico centró en la percepción de estudiantes de grado y posgrado sobre las perspectivas de futuro post pandemia. Fue utilizado un cuestionario adaptado de la Fiocruz, ya usado en estudios previos en este tema, teniendo sido autoaplicado, a partir de la plataforma Google Forms. Fueron analizadas 652 respuestas de estudiantes de grado y posgrado referente a la siguiente cuestión abierta: “Si quiere, escribe sobre cómo están sus expectativas de futuro pospandemia”. Fue utilizada estadística descriptiva simple para los datos sociodemográficos, con la utilización del software JAMOVI versión 1.8. Para los datos cualitativos fue utilizado el software Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (IRaMuTeQ) en dos tipos de análisis: Clasificación Jerárquica Descendente (CHD) y Análisis de Similitud. Los resultados obtenidos presentaron cinco clases, relacionados a temas como las expectativas en relación: a) al futuro (pesimismo y optimismo); recuperación de condiciones económicas, personales y sociales; c) regreso a la enseñanza presencial, aspectos relacionados a la ejecución de proyectos y la enseñanza remota; d) contingencias de superación de la pandemia; e) incertidumbres, sentimientos y actitudes con relación a empleo, carrera, renta y perspectivas profesionales. Se puede notar que la pandemia de COVID-19 trajo un escenario de incertidumbre, falta de perspectivas, preocupación con el futuro entre estudiantes universitarios, aumentando las condiciones de vulnerabilidad psicossocial para esta categoría.

Palabras clave: expectativa futura, estudiantes de pregrado, COVID-19, estudiantes de posgrado, proyecto de vida.

Résumé

La pandémie de COVID-19 a apporté des insécurités et des incertitudes liées à l'avenir des étudiants universitaires, impactant leurs projets de vie, notamment les projets académiques et professionnels. Une étude descriptive, transversale et exploratoire a été menée à partir d'une enquête épidémiologique sur les conditions de santé mentale d'une communauté universitaire pendant la pandémie de COVID-19. Cette étude spécifique s'est concentrée sur la perception qu'ont les étudiants de premier cycle et de troisième cycle de leurs perspectives d'avenir après une pandémie. Un questionnaire adapté de Fiocruz, déjà utilisé dans des études précédentes sur ce sujet, a été utilisé et a été auto-administré, à partir de la plateforme Google Forms. Nous avons analysé 652 réponses d'étudiants de premier et deuxième cycles à la question ouverte suivante: «Si vous le souhaitez, écrivez sur vos attentes concernant l'avenir post-pandémique». Des statistiques descriptives simples ont été utilisées pour les données socio-démographiques, à l'aide du logiciel JAMOVI version 1.8. Pour les données qualitatives, le logiciel Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (IRaMuTeQ) a été utilisé dans deux types d'analyse: la Classification Hiérarchique Descendante (CHD) et l'Analyse de Similitude. Les résultats obtenus présentent cinq classes, liées à des thèmes tels que les attentes concernant: a) l'avenir (pessimisme et optimisme); b) la récupération des conditions économiques, personnelles et sociales; c) le retour à l'enseignement en face à face, les aspects liés à l'exécution de projets et l'enseignement à distance; d) les contingences pour surmonter la pandémie; e) les incertitudes, les sentiments et les attitudes concernant l'emploi, la carrière, les revenus et les perspectives professionnelles. On peut noter que la pandémie de COVID-19 a apporté un scénario d'incertitude, de manque de perspectives, d'inquiétude sur l'avenir parmi les étudiants universitaires, augmentant les conditions de vulnérabilité psychosociale et souffrance psychique pour cette catégorie.

Mots clés : *expectative d'avenir, étudiants universitaire, COVID-19, projet de vie, santé mentale*

Due to the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes Covid-19, in 2020, restrictive measures had to be adopted, with the suspension of face-to-face classes and their replacement by emergency remote teaching (World Health Organization, 2020). It was a recurring reality in education at all levels of education, including higher education institutions (HEI) (Gusso et al., 2020; Pereira, Oliveira et al., 2020), bringing many concerns and insecurities to students, both in relation to their academic and professional paths (Anjos et al., 2020; Coelho et al., 2020; Marin et al., 2021; Werneck & Carvalho, 2020), influencing the future prospects of students around the world (Cao et al., 2020; Dimenstein et al., 2020; Gundim et al., 2020; Maia & Dias, 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

This sudden and unusual situation therefore caused countless consequences in people's daily lives, including intense emotional suffering, and is discussed by some scholars as having a high psychosocial impact, due to the experiences of existential threat, vulnerability and insecurity about the future that the pandemic caused (Crepaldi et al., 2020; Lima, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021; Pereira, Oliveira et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2020). Thus, an increase in levels of psychological suffering was observed, expressed through feelings such as fear, anxiety, depression, sadness, loneliness, irritability, stress and insomnia (Almeida et al., 2021; Barros et al., 2020; Danzmann et al., 2020; Lima, 2020; Malta et al., 2020; Moretti et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021).

This situation has placed a responsibility on universities towards their community, since the pandemic has changed their academic routine and caused insecurities and uncertainties related to the future, especially among university students, by impacting life projects, especially regarding their academic and professional strategies (Coelho et al., 2020; Silva & Rosa, 2021; Werneck & Carvalho, 2020). Although the life project is not restricted to aspects of work and study, these factors contribute significantly to an expansion of the field of future possibilities, facilitating achievements that give the subject a sense of being (Hurtado, 2012). However, it is not an individual project, since the subject is inserted in a network of social relations and the project is socially mediated, as it is elaborated and implemented in and through sociocultural interactions (Velho, 1997).

Jean-Paul Sartre, an existentialist philosopher, uses the term "project of being" to delve deeper into important aspects of psychic temporalization and to help understand the dimension of the future as the foundation of existential meaning and the definition of perspectives for the being of subjects (Sartre, 1997). For the Frenchman, the project can only be understood by paying attention to the field of possibilities, that is, to a future that unfolds and that depends on social and historical reality, as well as physical and material aspects and facticity to occur (Sartre, 1979). The constitution of the project of being always occurs in a situation, depending dialectically on both singular choices and the circumstances in which they occur. The attempt to understand someone's project of life involves describing existential trajectories and the mediations that enable people's future perspectives, as protagonists of their choices and subjects of their historicity (Schneider, 2011).

As the Covid-19 pandemic has brought different threats and impacts regarding the future for the world population (Brooks et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2020), this study is based on the need to assimilate the effects of the pandemic period in relation to the field of future possibilities among university students, as these studies have an essential characteristic

of serving as a pillar of support for the professional careers that are unfolding and, therefore, changes in their course that directly impact professional and life projects.

Given the specificities that mark the academic training period (Assis & Oliveira, 2010; Costa & Nebel, 2018), research that seeks to understand the repercussions of the pandemic among the university public and its long-term effects has become essential, since from these studies it is possible to build perspectives to deal with the negative consequences arising from the pandemic, helping to plan prevention actions and promote mental health in the academic environment (Cao et al., 2020; Coelho et al., 2020; Gundim et al., 2021; Maia & Dias, 2020; Pereira, Selvati et al., 2020; Pinzón et al., 2020; Silva & Rosa, 2021; Veber et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Thus, this study aims to analyze the perspective of undergraduate and graduate students at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) on expectations for the future after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Method

Study Design

The research was carried out by the Permanent Committee for Monitoring University Psychological Health – Covid-19 at UFSC, aiming to support actions for care, prevention and promotion of mental health for its community related to the impacts of the pandemic. This is an exploratory and descriptive, cross-sectional study, through a survey on lifestyles and mental health of the University community in times of Covid-19. The research was submitted to the institution's Research Ethics Committee, obtaining its approval (CAEE 38168720.0.0000.0121).

Instrument

An online questionnaire developed by the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz, ICICT, 2020) was applied to the university community (professors, undergraduate and graduate students, administrative staff, and outsourced employees). It was adapted for this study with the addition of specific questions about the UFSC community. The adapted version consisted of the following sections: a) Sociodemographic profile (gender, marital status, color/race/ethnicity, age, undergraduate or graduate course, among others); b) Items about work/study, family income at the beginning of the new coronavirus pandemic, whether a scholarship holder (if a student, whether they received emergency aid from the federal government), whether they received emergency aid and equipment from UFSC during the COVID-19 pandemic, how the pandemic affected their occupation/work at UFSC; c) information about the household and data on residents and family members; d) questions about how the pandemic affected/changed living conditions; e) questions about general health and the problems that the participant faced during the novel coronavirus pandemic; f) daily difficulties during the novel coronavirus pandemic; g) information regarding living spaces and interpersonal relationships during the pandemic; h) questions about the mood and mental health of the participants before and during the novel coronavirus pandemic; i) lifestyle habits before and during the pandemic, with questions regarding the use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and psychotropic medications; j) the participant's eating habits and changes related to the pandemic; h) practice of physical activities and social and cultural activities. The questionnaire contained some questions with a scale answer option and others with yes/no/don't know/don't want to inform answers. It also contained some open-ended questions, aiming for answers that expressed the meanings of the experiences answered there. This article aims to analyze the qualitative responses of undergraduate and graduate students to the following open-ended question from the questionnaire: "If you wish, write about your expectations for the future post-pandemic".

Data collection procedure

The sample was chosen for convenience, since people from the university community were contacted through emails and social networks available at the university, and those who were interested in doing so responded to the questionnaire. The online questionnaire, *included in the Google Forms* platform, was self-administered and was available between February 4 and March 4, 2021.

Participants

The umbrella survey was conducted by 3,534 people linked to the University community in the following categories: undergraduate students (n=1,811), post-graduate, master's and doctoral students (n=875), teaching staff (n=598), administrative technicians (n=365) from all five *campuses* of the University. Among all the categories investigated, 930 subjects answered the open question mentioned.

For the cut proposed in this study, only the responses of undergraduate and graduate students were considered, which totaled 652 respondents, of which 63.7% were undergraduates (n=415) and 36.3% post-graduates (n=237). The average age was 28 years ($SD=9.07$), ranging from 17 to 65 years old. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1

Sociodemographic profile of students responding to the question about future expectations in the survey on lifestyles and mental health resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic among the UFSC community

Profile of survey respondents				
	Graduation	Post -Grad.	Total	%
Sex				
Feminine	230	153	383	58.7
Masculine	174	84	258	39.6
Did not respond	11	0	11	1.7
Total	415	237	652	100.0
Marital status				
Single	340	138	478	73.3
Married	62	90	152	23.3
Divorced	13	8	21	3.2
Widower	0	1	1	0.2
Total	415	237	652	100.0
Race				
White	300	179	479	73.5
Black and/or brown	91	43	134	20.6
Others	13	5	18	2.8
Did not respond	11	10	21	3.2
Total	415	237	652	100.0
Income				
No income - 1 SM	62	7	69	10.6
From 1 to 4 salaries	180	121	301	46.2
Above 4 SM	139	94	233	35.7
Did not respond	34	15	49	7.5
Total	415	237	652	100.0

Regarding the distribution of results among the categories of sociodemographic variables, there was a prevalence of females (58.7%), singles (73.3%), whites (73.5%), with incomes between one and four minimum wages/month (46.2%). It is worth noting, when analyzing these data, that the population of Santa Catarina in terms of distribution by sex, in the 2010 Census, corresponded to 49.6% males and 50.4% females. In the case of university respondents, there was a predominance of females slightly above the state statistics. Regarding the aspect of race and/or ethnicity, when comparing the data from the university's respondents with the data from the 2000 Census for Santa Catarina, where the vast majority are white (88.1%), with blacks and browns in second place (11.9%) and the minority of Asians or indigenous people (0.2%) (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics [IBGE], 2010), it is found that the predominance of white people among the university's student respondents corresponds to the demographic data of Santa Catarina, with the presence of blacks and browns and other races at rates slightly higher than the state's racial distribution, which may be an important indicator of the institution's quota policies.

Data analysis

To process the specific data of this research section, we chose to use simple descriptive statistics, using JAMOVI software version 1.8 for sociodemographic data. The qualitative data consisted of the answers to the open question described above and were analyzed with the help of the *R software Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires* (IRaMuTeQ). This software was chosen because it is easy to access, free and effective in analyzing textual data (Camargo & Justo, 2013).

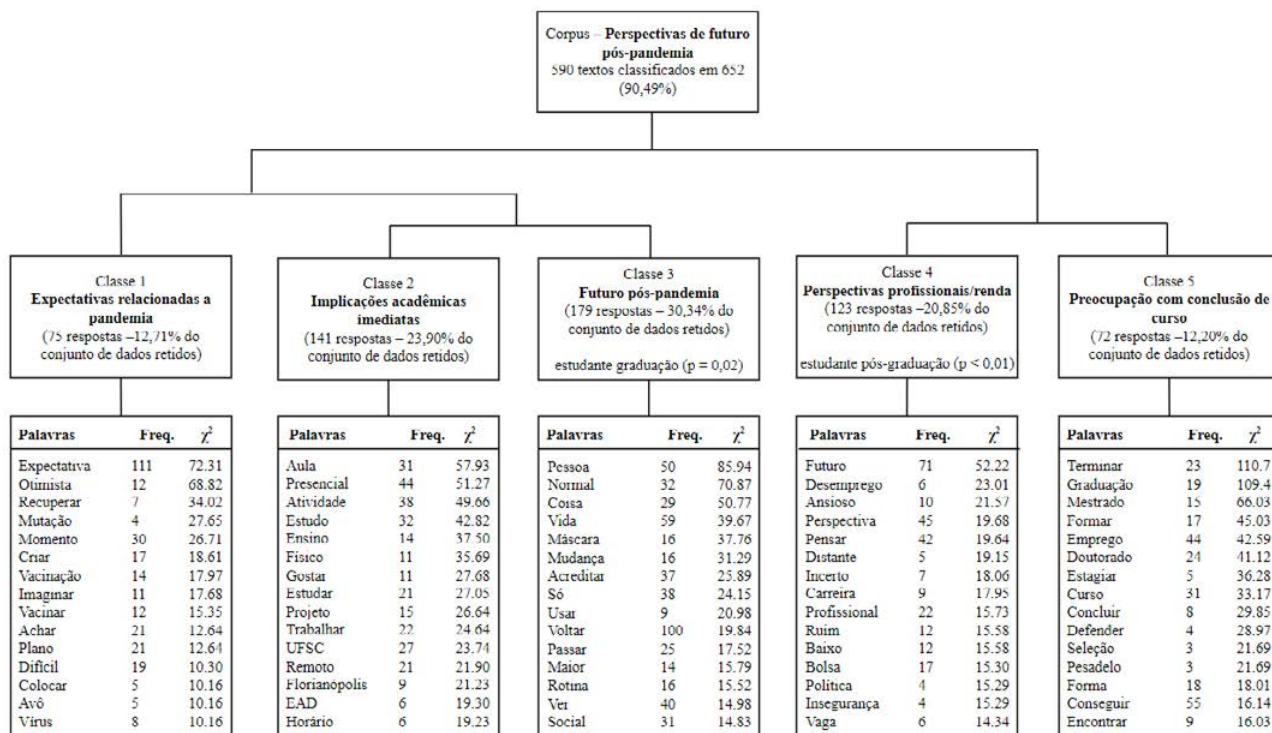
To meet the objectives of the study, we chose to use descending hierarchical classification analysis (DHC), or Reinert's method, and similarity analysis. DHC is a procedure used to organize participants' responses in relation to the most frequently associated vocabularies. The results are presented in classes of close vocabularies, estimated by association (chi-square). We chose to report the first 15 words of each class, or the smallest maximum number of words with a statistically significant chi-square association ($p < 0.05$). Similarity analysis allows the identification of word associations through their co-occurrence. The procedure was used as a way of globally synthesizing the data set.

Results

The dependent hierarchical classification (DHC) obtained 590 responses (90.49%), with the *corpus* of responses segmented into four classes (Figure 1). The classes obtained in the CHD analysis were named based on the associated words, which were interpreted within their context, as seen in Figure 1. Thus, class 1 was named *Expectations related to the pandemic*; class 2, *Immediate academic implications*; class 3, *Post-pandemic future*; class 4, *Professional/income prospects*; and class 5, *Concern about course completion*.

Figure 1

Dendrogram of the Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) analysis on expectations of the post-Covid-19 pandemic future by undergraduate and graduate students at UFSC (this object cannot be translated since is an image.)



Class 1, *expectations related to the pandemic*, consisting of 75 responses, represents 12.71% of the responses obtained in the CHD analysis. The words included in this class refer to expectations regarding the future (pessimism and optimism), recovery of economic conditions, resumption of personal life and social relations: “I don’t have good expectations, I think everything will get more difficult” (Participant 1373, female) and “I don’t have many expectations in the short to

medium term; I think this year is still going to be very difficult and it will take some time to recover from certain losses” (Participant 67, female).

Class 1 also included common words related to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as “vaccine”, “mutation” and “virus”, demonstrating the concerns related to the information war and uncertainties generated by the health, political and scientific scenario.

I’m trying not to get my hopes up, but it’s hard. I’m honestly expecting the worst, hoping that we’ll never get out of this, even with a vaccine. The virus is already generating mutations and science won’t have enough money or time to contain it all. I feel like we’ll have to live like this forever and that bothers me a lot. (Participant 2509, female)

Furthermore, several concerns and feelings related to the grandparents’ generation were observed, since elderly people were those at greatest risk of death: “Honestly, I have no hope, I just pray that my grandparents don’t catch Covid” (Participant 1612, male) and “Nothing will bring my grandmother back” (Participant 100, female).

In class 2, *immediate academic implications*, words related to studies during the pandemic were observed, such as “class”, “in-person”, “study”, “EAD” and “university”. In an expanded way, class 4 covered expectations of returning to in-person teaching, aspects related to the execution of academic projects and the experience of remote teaching:

I have no prospects for the future, I feel abandoned by my country’s policies. My course completion was delayed, we are starting an internship even though I didn’t complete the internship from the previous semester, because I was unable to go to the field for practical activities at the hospital and UBS. I feel sad when I think about everything that was supposed to happen in 2020, internship opportunities with a scholarship, constant physical activities that were being maintained at the gym, etc., and that didn’t happen. I feel like I’m stuck in 2020, waiting for it to start over without a pandemic so that I can live it to the fullest. I know that the lost time will not come back, and I am very distressed, I feel like I am mourning what was not experienced in 2020, I have lost hope in my future. (Participant 2730, female)

Issues related to routine were also observed because of the pandemic. Aspects such as “*home office*”, “flexible hours” and “workload” were present in the reports identified in the class.

I hope that home office becomes official. I was able to see how many tasks can be done from home, and the stress of dealing with crowds on the way to and from work is so stressful that it ruins my mental health. Since I study at night, I could never have dinner at the university. Now I eat well, sleep at healthy times, and can fit in physical activities. (Participant 2500, female)

Class 3, *post-pandemic future*, presented words related to contingencies for overcoming the pandemic. It is possible to observe attitudes and positions in relation to “wearing a mask”, “returning to normal living conditions” (without a pandemic) and “changes in routine”: “May we be able to live without masks and people have more empathy, patience and love for others” (Participant 1419, female) and “I want to be able to live without masks and touch people without it seeming like I am committing a crime” (Participant 1503, female).

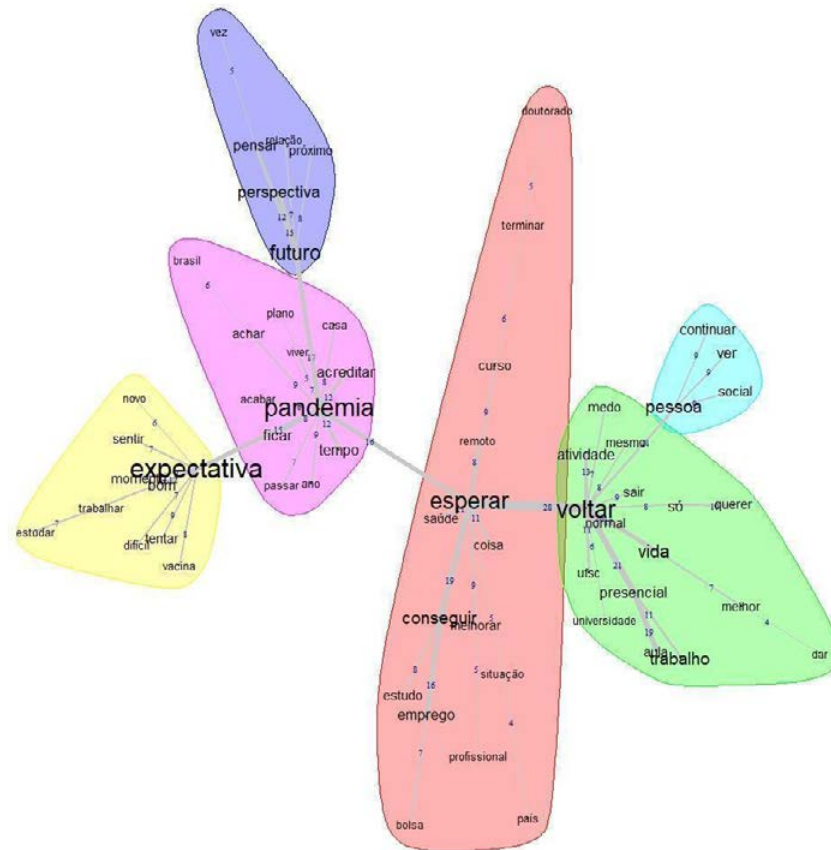
Class 4 was statistically associated with post-graduate students, at master’s and doctoral level, ($X^2 = 27.84$; $p < 0.001$) and was named as *professional/income prospects* and was related to “uncertainties”, “feelings and attitudes towards employment”, “career”, “income” (scholarship or salary) and “professional prospects”: “Not many prospects. Thinking about not pursuing a doctorate, due to the scarce research grants and worried about how to enter the job market” (Participant 1101, female) and “Terrible. The educational context is collapsing, unemployment is very high, and the economy is only getting worse. It is desperate to think about the future ” (Participant 1193, male).

Finally, class 5 was named as *concern about completing the course*, and was related to the implications after this pandemic event: “I intend to finish the course, but, at the moment, I have no expectations and I am discouraged” (Participant 305, male) and “I am anxious, I don’t know if I will defend my master’s degree, I haven’t been able to do analyses, I don’t know if I want to go for a doctorate anymore, I don’t know if I should look for a job” (Participant 3321, female).

Next, the similarity analysis reaffirmed some results, based on the organization of the responses into six *clusters*, with words associated in co-occurrences. The words are located at the vertices, and the font size is proportional to the frequency of occurrence of the words, that is, the larger the font, the greater the frequency. The value of the edges indicates the co-occurrence index between the words (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Similarity analysis of the responses to the open question about expectations for the future after the COVID-19 pandemic by undergraduate and graduate students at UFSC.



The similarity analysis allowed us to identify that the words “pandemic” (12) and “expectations” (11) had strong co-occurrence, as this was the request of the question itself. They were followed by “wait” (11) and “return” (9). The elements “future”, “work” and “normal” appear less frequently in co-occurrence. It is interesting to observe how the words are articulated and establish lines of meaning of the experiences of the pandemic and their relationship with future expectations. If we establish the connection of the occurrence of the words to the context of the complete sentences written by the students, we can look for lines of meaning that refer us to their existential experiences.

In the *cluster* where the word “pandemic” predominates, we see some words like “time”, “pass”, “year”, “end”, which relate to this peculiar experience of living a kind of temporal suspension caused by the *lockdown*. and the demands of social distancing, with the anxieties it provokes. The words “pandemic” and “living” also appear associated with each other, indicating the issue of life, one’s own, that of others or that of the human collective as the core of concerns, as well as the life that hung by a tenuous thread in this health emergency. The words “staying” and “home” also appeared, indicating the unique experience of being confined to one’s own home, with all the benefits and paradoxes that the unique reality of each person’s home may have brought to people.

The *cluster* of the word “expectation” was strongly related to the word “vaccine”, remembering that the survey was applied in February 2021, when vaccination was just beginning in Brazil and had not yet covered young people and young adults (the predominant age group of the students responding to this survey). Thus, it indicates the expectation placed on the vaccine as a way out of the health emergency, which was confirmed the following year, when vaccination reached most of the population, significantly reducing the number of deaths. There are also relationships with the words “new” (moment, “new normal”), “work” and “study”, showing how much expectations have changed regarding new ways of positioning oneself in the world, new learning from didactic and technological models, new virtual experiences, as well as the challenges imposed on the field of study and work. The word “difficult” also appeared, which contrasts with the words “good moment”, showing the paradoxical experiences related to the pandemic.

The smaller *cluster*, related to the word “future”, is related to the words “perspective”, “think” and “next”, indicating that temporality was questioned in the students’ reflection and impacted their perspectives related to their professional and existential future.

The largest *cluster* was related to the word “esperar,” which gives us an emblematic relationship with the noun “wait” or with the verb “stay” (*in Portuguese, “esperar” has multiple meanings, it can mean “to wait” and “to be in the same place”*) as reflected by Paulo Freire (1997). The correlated words indicate an ambiguity between these two perspectives: “study,” “job,” “professional,” “course,” “remote,” “doctorate,” and “scholarship” refer to an anguished wait that the pandemic has caused, altering the time to carry out previously planned activities and the real possibilities of completing studies and research. But, at the same time, there is hope for the resumption of the previously outlined paths. In this positive direction, the words “achieve,” “improve,” and “finish” are placed. There is also a strong correlation with the word “health,” in the wait for the end of the pandemic, in the hope of not becoming infected and not having loved ones infected by the virus.

The last *cluster* is strongly related to the one that has the verb “return” as its highlight. Returning to work, to normal, to activities, to face-to-face classes, to university, that is, returning to life as it was. Returning also implies overcoming the fear of possible consequences and taking back control of one’s life and leaving the cocoon. The word “person” also appears, which is related to the words “to continue” and “to see”, seeing others, resuming encounters, symbolizing the social dimension, so crucial to our constitution as subjects and which has been deprived of us by the pandemic condition, leading us to experience the limits of the absence of sociability, its impact on our daily lives, on the process of personalization and on the project of being. We live in depth the experience of the meaning of the social production of the subject.

Analysis and Discussion

Expectations related to the pandemic in the analysis with intersectionalities

The descending hierarchical classification (DHC) and similarity classifications addressed students’ expectations regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing some differences in the experience of this situation between undergraduate and graduate students, as well as differences related to gender and race. While a few participants expressed hope for a positive outcome, the majority viewed the post-pandemic future with great pessimism. In general, graduate students felt more affected by the pandemic, the majority of whom were women, as well as black and/or brown respondents, who gave responses with a greater degree of hopelessness and pessimism.

Other studies have been arguing that, in fact, the pandemic context has brought many uncertainties, concerns, frustrations and insecurities to the entire population regarding the future (Brooks et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2020), and that it has especially shaken the perspectives of university students, bringing impacts on the worsening of mental health conditions, especially when crossed by intersectional marks (gender, race, social class), hitting people with some previous social vulnerability harder. Changes in class routines, changes in internships, cuts in scholarships, changes in support actions for remaining at university, such as, for example, the closure of the university restaurant and library and other devices, have had a major impact on needier students (Cao et al., 2020; Coelho et al., 2020; Gundim et al., 2021; Gusso et al., 2020; Maia & Dias, 2020; Pereira, Selvati et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

University students have had significant repercussions in relation to their life project, specifically regarding their academic and professional expectations (Coelho et al., 2020; Hurtado, 2018). The impediment to the realization of the project of being, from the Sartrean perspective, is at the basis of much of the increase in psychological suffering and the constitution of various psychopathologies (Schneider, 2011). Therefore, to the extent that students’ responses about expectations for the post-pandemic future were marked by a tone of pessimism and hopelessness, one can understand the increase in levels of psychological suffering, expressed through experiences of fear, anxiety, depression, sadness, irritability, stress and insomnia, including suicidal ideation, as has been observed in several studies with university students (Cao et al., 2020; Gundim et al., 2021; Maia & Dias, 2020; Marin et al., 2021; Silva & Rosa, 2021; Wang et al., 2020).

Immediate and future academic implications arising from the Covid-19 pandemic

The challenges of the abrupt transformation of academic routines and the uncertainties generated by the impediments to carrying out activities during the pandemic, which hampered internships, scientific initiation research, master’s and doctoral programs, caused many uncertainties and insecurities for students. In order to enable the continuity of the academic training process, both public and private higher education institutions sought alternative forms of teaching and implemented remote emergency teaching strategies. While, on the one hand, this alternative enabled students to continue their studies, on the other hand, it brought many challenges for teachers and students (Gusso et al., 2020; Pereira, Selvati et al., 2020). Possible consequences of remote teaching include low academic performance, increased dropout and school failure, and

burnout and overload for teachers and students (Gusso et al., 2020). Researchers claim that this change in the teaching method, despite being essential, made it possible to trigger, or even worsen, psychological and psychiatric demands on students (Anjos et al., 2019; Anjos et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020; Gundim et al., 2021; Silva, & Rosa, 2021).

The study by Pereira, Selvati et al. (2020) identified that among the positive aspects of remote teaching introduced by the pandemic, greater time flexibility and greater autonomy stood out, while in relation to the negative aspects, excess activities, external interference and internet connection problems were highlighted.

It is important to highlight that the implementation of new forms of teaching mediated by technologies has revealed unequal access conditions related to the inequities present in Brazil, with differences in access to computing resources and the internet, which may have exacerbated inequalities and increased the gap in opportunities among Brazilian students, once again crossed by intersectionalities. Therefore, ensuring the maintenance of quality in the teaching-learning process in universities has become a major challenge, in order to, as far as possible, minimize the negative effects of remote teaching and the disruptions felt by social distancing during the pandemic.

Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on post-graduate students

The research demonstrated the psychosocial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on all members of the university community. However, those who demonstrated the greatest impact, with statistical significance, were post-graduate students, who were closest to their qualified insertion in the job market. They were the ones who had considerable difficulty in seeing future prospects post-pandemic in terms of employment and income.

Such uncertainty is also an expression of the contextual moment in which Brazil found itself, not only due to the pandemic and the resulting health instability, but also, according to several written responses, due to the instabilities of the concomitant political and economic scenario, which appeared in the dismantling of public policies, in the devaluation of universities, in the precariousness of the scenario for academic research, which impacted the scenario for academic and professional careers, destabilized the certainty of a promising future, promoting the lack of perspective for post-graduate students, data that converge with those found by Werneck and Carvalho (2020). In line with this, in the study by Pinzón et al. (2020), which aimed to identify the career barriers perceived by Brazilian post-graduate students, it was identified that the number of people with psychological distress in post-graduate studies has been increasing, as they have experienced difficulties in envisioning favorable income and career prospects, corroborating the data from the present research.

The university environment has been a context of psychological distress for students even before the pandemic (Assis & Oliveira, 2010), since graduate students have to face a series of demands and pressures for productivity in the academic environment, more intense when compared to the demands of undergraduate studies (Costa & Nebel, 2018; Pinzón et al., 2020). Impositions and demands for productivity and the race against time to complete the course, with many disciplines and research requirements, have been implemented as an internal policy by graduate programs. These conditions ended up being exacerbated by the negative effects of the pandemic on the health of these students (Maia & Dias, 2020).

For this reason, the pandemic brought moments of extreme social vulnerability, such as rising unemployment rates and difficulties in managing effective social policies to deal with the problems in this dramatic period, factors that triggered a high level of stress and psychological suffering (Crepaldi et al., 2020; Dimenstein et al., 2020; Werneck & Carvalho, 2020). In this sense, the postgraduate system needs to pay attention to the demands it has placed on its students and begin to build strategies to promote mental health and support the context of vulnerability that we are experiencing.

Future Perspectives after the pandemic and resumption of life projects

The responses of undergraduate and graduate students revealed a strong expectation for a return to “normal life,” which was the opposite of the experiences they had during the pandemic. The recovery of physical contact, empathy, and affection with other people are aspects that have begun to be valued and desired in the participants’ testimonies. The warm and human exchanges through social relationships, having been interrupted, led people to discover other ways of maintaining ties and redefining agreements for interaction and demonstration of affection (Dimenstein et al., 2020). Reflections on a threatened future and, at the same time, on how to overcome this threat through relationships with others, as well as the notion of collectiveness, have been one of the possible legacies left by the Covid-19 pandemic (Menezes et al., 2020). From the theoretical perspective of existentialism, the dimension of the future is considered to exist as a possibility of being what we are not yet and is positioned in the direction of filling some lack of the present moment, as well as revealing the existential trajectory in a becoming (Castro & Ehrlich, 2016). The future opens possibilities that lead us to a resignification of the past and a transcendence of the present towards what is not yet. In this way, seeing future perspectives, aiming at a field of possibilities on the horizon are fundamental aspects to give meaning to life and to the subject’s desire to be. For this very reason, the break with expectations of the future is at the basis of the increase in psychological suffering.

However, it is known that no matter how limited a person's field of possibilities may be, this field is always on their horizon and, even in the most extreme circumstances, the possibilities of envisioning a future prevail (Sartre, 1979), constituting an attitude of hope for some and of despair for others, depending on the life stories and psychic dynamics of each person. Therefore, universities have had to seek strategies to deal with the psychosocial impacts that this situation has brought to university students.

Some strategies have proven to have a positive effect on mental health for this group, such as proposals for technical support for listening, brief psychotherapy, virtual groups, and emergency psychological support (Antonio et al., 2021; Veber et al., 2020). Likewise, there are groups for training socioemotional skills (Antonio et al., 2021) and those for practicing "mindfulness" (Anjos et al., 2019), as well as groups for developing social skills, created to equip university students to better manage contextual demands, with a view to developing healthy coping strategies (Anjos et al., 2020). In this direction, the university developed a psychosocial support project for the university community, coordinated by the Permanent Committee for Monitoring University Psychological Health - Covid-19, entitled Acolhe UFSC, with volunteer psychologists who sought to provide support for the suffering generated at this time for people in the university community.

Final Considerations

This study aimed to analyze the perspective of undergraduate and graduate students on their expectations for the future after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to understand the consequences of the pandemic on their life projects, as they are inserted and living in a sociocultural context of uncertainty and restrictions on possibilities. The qualitative data from this study complement the quantitative analyses of the umbrella survey, which demonstrated a significant increase in psychological distress during the pandemic among the academic community, especially among undergraduate and graduate students (Schneider et al., 2022).

Likewise, they corroborate the results of other studies conducted in Brazil and around the world. The narratives collected show the impact that experiences related to social distancing, isolation from family and friends, and the imposition of virtual academic activities have had on many students, which have intensified psychological suffering, expressed through feelings such as fear, sadness, anxiety, among others. It was observed that students had difficulty envisioning possibilities for a post-pandemic future, given the impact of the pandemic on their university careers, the concern with the recovery of the country's social and economic conditions, as well as their personal situation, impacting students' life projects and increasing the psychosocial vulnerability of this category.

This study achieved its objective by analyzing the impacts of the pandemic on the future prospects of university students, providing the necessary elements for planning actions to mitigate these impacts and promote mental health. However, although the findings of this study present some indications, there are limitations that need to be considered. Among them, it is worth highlighting that the study used qualitative data from a cross-sectional survey and a non-probabilistic convenience sample of university students. Therefore, the results presented here cannot be generalized to other realities. It is therefore suggested that other studies be produced with diverse samples, as well as that the study be reapplied in a new post-pandemic period, aiming at longitudinal monitoring, to understand the consequences of the return of academic activities and the experiences lived at the end of the pandemic restrictions, the lessons learned from that period and the consequences left by those experiences.

The context of the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore, more vehemently, the inequalities present in the Brazilian reality, making it necessary to intensify student assistance policies, enabling support for university permanence and ensuring equity between university students' different social realities. Therefore, it is essential that universities plan the creation of psychosocial support and health promotion strategies for their students, with the aim of strengthening future prospects, both in the academic sphere and in their contribution to the maintenance and strengthening of inclusive public policies.

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