Article

Final Year Undergraduate Students' Representation of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Lockdown: Adaptability and Responsibility

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a new reality worldwide and reconfigured identities, behaviors and interests. It has called for heroic representations and highlighted the role of social media in efficient communication. All of the above considered, the current article focuses on the representation of the COVID-19 pandemic generated by the undergraduate students enrolled in the Social Work study program in Transilvania University of Brașov (Romania) by indicating the main connotations of the pandemic and drawing a comparison between students' representation and the early representations of the same pandemic produced by specialized literature on the topic. The thematic analysis of the essays produced by students highlights their frustration with the havoc brought about by the pandemic to their graduation plans and with the lack of interaction with colleagues and academic staff, as well as their gratitude for the efforts undertaken by their professors to make online education functional, their availability to adapt and support the restrictive measures imposed by authorities, and their optimism about the evolution of the pandemic. The content analysis of 60 bibliographic sources on the topic of COVID-19, indicated by the Anelis+ network as the most relevant in the spring of 2020, highlights a thematic convergence between the aforementioned sources and students' representation of COVID-19, and thus their responsible attitude toward meeting the challenges of the pandemic.

Keywords: representations; COVID-19 pandemic; undergraduate students; online education; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

1.1. The Challenge of Managing the COVID-19 Pandemic

On the 11 March 2020, the Director of the World Health Organization acknowledged that the COVID-19 virus originating from the Hubei province of China had led to a worldwide pandemic [1]. The virus spread swiftly in western Europe and the USA, particularly in cities hosting important international transportation hubs. The pandemic has affected different countries around the world, challenging them to find common means of facing it [2]. It has also put pressure on the medical system and jolted social structures [3]. COVID-19 and the related social isolation imposed worldwide as a result of measures aimed at assuring social distancing [4,5] have led to an increased number of regulations on traveling, working conditions and meeting contemporary people and also pushed social, work and entertainment activities into the virtual world, thus impacting the use of public and private spaces [4]. Its presence has led to the emergence of the neologism "coronaphobia" [6].

The concept of "social distancing", initially designating relationship among individuals and groups in society, has changed its meaning during the pandemic Nowadays, it is used to indicate simple physical distancing [7]. In any case, the use of the term "social distancing" is risky, and authorities should promote spatial distancing and social closeness, according to De Rosa and Mannarini [4].

Vokó and Pitter's [8] research on the evolution of the pandemic in every European country focused on identifying the moment when social distancing started to contribute to a decrease in the spread of COVID-19 cases. Indoor social distancing measures have been found disturbing [9]. Lockdowns and social distancing have damaged the economy and hence the living conditions of a great number of people [10]. Similarly to other pandemics, blaming others and employing stigmas have started to manifest outside people's regular groups of belonging [4], while scapegoating and discrimination have emerged [3]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the perceived severity of the disease has been associated with representations of the habits of the Chinese, the evil elite and the irresponsible "other" [11], and blaming models among colleagues have emerged [12].

The pandemic has led to a reconfiguration of individual identities in the context of the "new" economic, political and social "normalcy" [13], generated panic shopping [14] and cut off personal projects and pathways of migrants and refugees [15] who, structurally speaking, are vulnerable categories in the face of COVID-19 [16]. COVID-19 has also temporarily eased the restrictions for drug addicts in the USA [17] and led to the inclusion of alcohol and cannabis sales among essential services in Canada [18].

The times we live in are perceived as interesting [19]. Politicians and other decision-making agents need to balance values and divergent requirements [1], as well as short-term individual interests and long-term common benefits [20].

The lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has seriously impacted the education system. Didactic activities had to be migrated to online environment in many parts of the world and were supported by very different and various technological solutions. The actors involved in the didactic process had to manage a wide and challenging range of issues, consequences and forecasts. Online assessment instruments have their limitations and can be a source of errors, whereas the stovepipes in the assessment process impact the undergraduate process of accession into the labor market and hence drive costly consequences for both the undergraduates and for society in general [21]. Social distancing rules are difficult to follow when conducting research activities and, in this respect, the career plans of many undergraduates and researchers have been compromised by the halt of their projects [22]. The constraints imposed during lockdown periods have recalibrated the outlook on access to technology. In this context, video games, in addition to their negative impact, have also been identified as useful for stress reduction in adults and children, as well as for controlling depression, stimulating creativity, cognition and other abilities in the case of children [23]. The necessity to abruptly resort to digital resources as part of didactic activities has been both a source of motivation and additional stress for teachers [24]. Their initial optimism concerning the usefulness and efficiency of digital technology for all levels targeted by education programs has been replaced by the nostalgia for face-to-face interactions facilitated by the school environment [25]. The context of the pandemic has pushed for changes in the design of teaching activities [24] and highlighted different attitudes toward online education: resistance on behalf of teachers and openness on behalf of students [25]. In the absence of good practices and tested models, higher education institutions have been challenged to rethink their role and optimize their education decisions [22].

1.2. Students' Representations of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Research Objectives

The current article focuses on how future social workers studying in Brașov (Romania) related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is about logging impressions and approaches dating back to the early phase of the pandemic, and we consider those as important social documents. They are part of a future history of the COVID-19 period. The way students have adapted to the challenge of the pandemic, namely to an unusual and potentially dangerous situation, reveals some of their features as a generation.

Thus, what is the representation of COVID-19 of the students enrolled in their last year of undergraduate studies in the Social Work study program in Brașov? The question above prompted the following two research objectives:

- highlighting the main connotations attributed by those students to the overall pandemic context;
- underlining the relationship between students' representation of COVID-19 and the viewpoints identified in specialized literature on the topic.

In order to accomplish the aforementioned objectives, we employed thematic analysis to peruse the essays produced by students on the theme of the pandemic, as well as the most relevant and earliest academic papers on the same topic.

We use the term "representation" in accordance with the definition of social representations by Serge Moscovici [26,27], namely a set of values, ideas and practices allowing individuals to orient themselves, get a hold of their environment, communicate among themselves and integrate in the community. Social representations generate expectations and anticipations and are thus attributes of inter-human relations [28]. They are part of the social construct of reality and are built by communities in order to make their members' behavior and communication more efficient [29,30].

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unexpected and unwanted opportunity for supplementary professional development for the undergraduates in the Social Work program. Furthermore, it was their first informal exam testing their professional maturity. The essays they wrote show their capacity to correctly grasp the size of a social and medical crisis, the weaknesses of the social system, the potentially vulnerable persons and groups and, last but not the least, the most efficient methods to adapt and manage the social challenges raised by the newly emerged situation. The lockdown imposed at the beginning of the pandemic led to an interruption in the volunteering work conducted by the students in the Social Work program in retirement homes or orphanages and/or disabled children's homes. The halt of such activities and its direct consequences represent an additional starting point for students' further analysis and identification of alternative volunteering solutions adapted to the new constraints.

Before highlighting the effect of those constraints on students' representations of the COVID-19 pandemic, we will underline the latter's place in the history of pandemics and its geographical and demographic features.

1.3. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Place in a Long Line of Epidemics Impacting Humankind

Widespread diseases have affected humankind on numerous occasions in the past. They marked historic periods, leading to deaths of thousands of people.

The plague was one of the best-known diseases. Its best-known episode was in 1348, when it claimed thousands of victims in Italy, France, Germany, England, the Scandinavian Peninsula, Spain and Russia. In addition to the 1348 plague, De Rosa and Mannarini [4] mention several more epidemics: the plague of Athens dating back to 430 B.C., the bubonic plague of Justinian that killed 40% of the population in Constantinople between 541 and 542 A.D. and the bubonic plague of 1630.

Leprosy, feared for its highly infectious nature and for its effects on human extremities, has been known since the antiquity and has not been eradicated yet.

The typhoid fever, also known since the antiquity, was described as a "fatigue caused by all things, which was usually fatal" [31] (p. 85).

Cholera was a common disease during the middle ages and during the modern era. During the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, "the cholera epidemics spread rapidly among the fighting Romanian troops [...], it has already burst out in Bulgaria at the time the Romanian troops were advancing, and the source of contamination was the infected water" [32] (p. 112).

The Spanish flu has been by far the greatest pandemic at the end of the modern age. It came in several waves at the end of the First World War between 1918 and 1920. It caused more victims than the war. It started with minor symptoms, manifested in the soldiers going back home from war: fever, headache and fatigue [33]. The symptoms manifested mostly in the case of young people, and around 2.5% of world population died because of it. It has been considered the most violent epidemic ever known by humankind since then.

All those diseases led to a dramatic decrease in population in certain regions and globally. The diseases affected human communities much more than military confrontations. The discovery of penicillin and improvements in living conditions, hygiene and education led to considerable reduction in the incidence of such diseases. However, it has been almost two years already since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has generated victims and induced feelings of insecurity in people across the globe.

Unlike the state of affairs up to the end of modernity, contemporary communication facilities allow the configuration of overall global image of the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the different regional ways of tackling it during its development.

1.4. Regional Particularities in Approaching the COVID-19 Pandemic

There have been regional differences in approaching the reality imposed by the pandemic [34]. Mask wearing was more easily accepted in the east rather than in the west [35]. The measures taken by countries facing the COVID-19 pandemic were, at least right after its outbreak, very different, ranging from stopping untested persons at the border, as was the case in Montenegro, to maintaining a relaxed attitude while waiting for herd immunity to take hold, as in Great Britain [36]. The efficiency of Spanish local and regional public administration in managing the first phases of the pandemic was undermined by bureaucracy [10], and the experience of civil war still present in the memories of older Spaniards imposed the cautionary use of war-related metaphors when describing the current pandemic context [37]. Social assistance in Australia would stand to gain from correlating the debates on minimum income with the COVID-19 socio-economic crisis [38]. The pandemic has not generated any cultural traumas in Sweden, a country that maintained its national pride, nor in Greece, which regained its national pride [39].

In Brazil, the opinions on approaching the COVID-19 pandemic have been divergent. On the one hand, it was seen as a "health crisis", while on the other hand as an "economic crisis" [40]. This divergence points out the presence of two different philosophical positions: universalism, characterized by its concern for life and health, and utilitarianism, with a focus on the importance of diminishing the economic crisis [41]. Brazilians viewed health and safety as more valuable than the health of their economy or the stability of their own jobs [41], but consumption has led to a polarized society, thus contributing to increased social inequalities [13].

1.5. Demographic Differences in Relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 impacted various segments of the population differently. In the USA, the risk of experiencing severe COVID-19 symptoms was lower in the Hispanic population than in the non-Hispanic one. Mostly single unemployed Afro-American women, experiencing difficulties in transportation and payment for medication, were among the people most exposed to severe symptoms. The probability for married people to experience severe symptoms of the disease was 30% lower compared to the situation of single people. Health factors, such as asthma, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, chronic kidney disease and liver diseases, contribute to patients experiencing more severe COVID-19 symptoms in the case of ethnic and racial minorities compared to white populations [42].

In Chicago, the odds for sexual, gender, ethnic and racial minorities to be more affected than the rest of the population were higher, and some of their needs were not met. The Afro-American people and the Hispanics had difficulties in accessing food and healthcare services; members of the sexual minority accessed virtual services for mental health to a lesser extent, while members of the gender minority had less access to primary health care [43].

Mobility in American communities with high social capital dwindled, whereas the willingness to be informed about the COVID-19 pandemic and about mutual protection behaviors was visible long before the official lockdown. The norms related to reciprocity and social sanctioning were applied before legal actions were taken [44]. On the other hand, in Italy, people paid less attention to the risk of transmitting the disease among the

members of their own group and showed less regard for social distancing in the presence of outsiders and of those viewed as "different" from the dear ones or friends [4].

People in the United Kingdom and mostly young adults, women and those living in under-privileged areas had difficulties in mentally managing the challenges raised by the disease, perceived its associated risks at a higher level and hence felt more anxious about it. Nonetheless, the relationship between age, gender and mental health and its related mechanisms may not be specific only to the pandemic period [45].

Most people living in north London who participated in a study conducted by Hills and Eraso [46] did not observe social distancing rules, and almost half of them did not accept such rules. A negative correlation was established between breaking rules, reduced vulnerability to COVID-19 and control over social distancing and contact with others. The intention to disregard rules was positively correlated with the level of professional training (those holding doctoral degrees were the most willing to disregard rules), positive electoral options in relation to the government in power, the pressure felt on behalf of neighbors and friends' help.

People with low income were more exposed to the disease in Italy because they could not work from home and thus avoid crowded public transportation. People with high income had more freedom to adjust their working conditions [4].

Older people perceived higher costs in relation to the risk of getting the virus. This can be explained as a result of their higher awareness of the risk of getting infected compared to young people, while the costs of their everyday livelihood during the pandemic were lower as a result of being lonely and not having a stable job. In the initial stages of the pandemic, there was no positive correlation between age and pro-social cooperative behaviors. On one hand, the elderly stayed home less often, to the despair of their mature children. On the other hand, young people's parties on the beach generated outrage [20].

The evolutions in the area of social study-related resources (SSR) and social wellbeing (SWB) of Dutch graduate students were positively correlated before the onset of lockdown, while afterward, they were distinct and different from initial expectations. SSR was in decline before the lockdown and has spiraled afterward, whereas SWB has remained moderate and stable. The changes generated by the pandemic in the education system could hence be beneficial. In this respect, neither the SSR nor the SWB were negatively affected [47].

We are witnessing a unique event and have the opportunity for an education and social experiment whose live observation is a moral and professional duty of academics [36]. The aforementioned context also delineates research results presented by the current article, which focuses on the early impressions on the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Materials and Methods

We thematically analyzed the contents of essays on the topic of *How I felt during the lockdown and how the pandemic affected me?* produced by 28 students in their third year of undergraduate studies in the Social Work study program run by Transilvania University of Brașov. Essay writing was one of the options from which students could choose in order to be evaluated. As a result of students' freedom of choice in this respect, the 28 resulting texts (all that were sent by students) are not the output of a mandatory task.

The students were presented with the topic of the essay they were supposed to write, along with a number of editing rules. They were given the freedom to choose the subjects that, in their opinion, fell under the topic suggested. Students were encouraged to log what they viewed as important and significant in relation with how they had experienced the first months of the pandemic. There were no limitations regarding the length of essays to be submitted. The essays were written in May 2020 after two months of lockdown (March–April) when all didactic activities in the Transilvania University of Brașov, Romania, were conducted fully online via the e-learning platform of the university that was made available to students and academic staff. Essay writing was one way of evaluating students as part of the overall assessment and evaluation process. Consequently, they received feedback on

their essays from their instructor, and this was a previously and distinct approach from the thematic analysis of their work conducted as part of the current article. During the feedback discussion, students were introduced to the relevance of their opinions and impressions of understanding the context of COVID-19 and were informed about the authors' intention to process the essays as anonymous social documents in further research.

The essays were uploaded and archived on the e-learning platform of the university. The platform can be individually accessed by every student, an academic formulating a specific task, a supervisor assigned by the university and a platform administrator, based on individual accounts. When we introduced the essays into the NVivo software in order to analyze them, they were renamed and coded as S1 through to S28 in order to ensure author anonymity. We used the aforementioned codes when referencing the fragments in the essays.

We chose to employ thematic analysis as a result of the method's flexibility, its independence from a pre-established theoretical framework and its applicability in under-investigated fields [48]. We deem all aforementioned features as adequate for the topic approached by this paper.

We used NVivo10 to analyze the content of students' essays. We read the texts paragraph by paragraph, identified the different topics approached by every essay, grouped them in emerging sub-categories with the support of the software, and then we grouped these sub-categories in ten thematic categories: *COVID-19 Effects, Online Schooling, Pandemic as a Lesson, General Remarks, Adaptation, Positive Approaches, The Surprising Reality of COVID-19, Foreseen Solution, At Home, Role of the Media*. The software ordered the sub-categories and categories by their frequency (i.e., the number of essays in which they appeared). The analysis was conducted by using texts in the Romanian language. We translated the names of the categories and sub-categories identified after their analysis into English.

We combined the thematic analysis of the essays with a quantitative content analysis of the references on the pandemic. Unlike thematic analysis, a qualitative method focused on identifying the topics presented by the material under analysis [26] and with no previously formulated hypotheses as to what the topics might be, content analysis looks at counting the presence of pre-determined categories resulting from hypotheses in the material under analysis [49]. Our hypothesis is that, at the beginning of the pandemic, the viewpoints of students and authors of academic studies on the matter converged. In order to test it, we analyzed the content of the most relevant articles, chapters and studies on COVID-19 (amounting to 60 in number) from the databases made available by the Anelis + platform of the university, paragraph by paragraph, during the second half of March 2021. Anelis+ is a platform employed by universities in Romania in order to access the main scientific databases. It was established as part of the project "National Electronic Access to Scientific Literature for Supporting the Research and Education System in Romania—ANELIS PLUS 2020" [50]. We considered the papers identified on this platform as the most relevant social documents and as fresh reports on relevant aspects related to the ongoing pandemic. We analyzed these social documents, looking for the presence/absence of the thematic categories we identified in students' essays, thus comparing students' and references' approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic. We focused on identifying whether the COVID-19 pandemic raised questions and indicated problems of a similar nature, both for students and authors of relevant research in the academic field. Their resembling approaches indicated students' responsible attitude toward the pandemic. We will present the contents of the ten categories identified both in students' essays and in specialized literature under peruse in parallel.

3. Results

Based on our analysis of students' essays, we isolated ten main thematic categories. They are presented in decreasing order by the number of the essays (Sources) approaching them and the total number of times they were mentioned (References) in Table 1, as they emerge as a result of using NVivo 10 to analyze the data.

Table 1. Thematic categories.

Seq.	Categories	Sources	References
1	COVID-19 effects	25	130
2	Online schooling	24	160
3	Pandemic as a lesson	20	55
4	General remarks	20	49
5	Adaptation	17	37
6	Positive approaches	15	28
7	The surprising reality of COVID-19	14	25
8	Foreseen solution	12	23
9	At home	12	14
10	Role of the media	6	29

The content analysis of the papers highlighted as relevant by Anelis+ led to the identification of ten thematic categories whose frequency is indicated in Table 2. Additionally, the content analysis unveiled two more categories, namely *Conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic* and *Social representations of COVID-19*, which the thematic analysis of students' essays did not identify.

Table 2. Categories and sub-categories in the literature on the COVID-19 theme in March 2021.

Seq.	Categories and Sub-Categories	Sources
1	General remarks	46
	• The challenge of managing the pandemic	22
	• Regional particularities in approaching COVID-19	11
	• Demographic differences of the COVID-19 impact	10
	• Usefulness of social media during the pandemic	10
	• Post-pandemic	4
	• The COVID-19 mythology	3
2	• Foreseen solutions	39
	• Efficient communication	16
	• Making the measures more efficient	14
	• Using information technology	14
3	COVID-19 effects	24
4	Role of the media	17
5	Adaptation	12
6	Conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic	10
7	Social representations of COVID-19	9
8	Positive approaches	8
9	Online schooling	5
10	At home	5
11	Pandemic as a lesson	4
12	The surprising reality of COVID-19	3

The ordering of thematic categories identified in students' essays by the interest expressed toward them (namely by the number of times they were mentioned) is different compared to the ordering of isolated categories in the early literature on the pandemic. The differences are highlighted in Table 3.

Table 3. Ordering the categories from essays and bibliographical sources.

Seq.	Categories from Bibliographical Sources in Descending Order	Categories from Students' Essays in Descending Order	Interest in the Category in Students' Essays Compared to BIBLIOGRAPHICAL Sources
1	General remarks	COVID-19 effects	higher
2	Foreseen solutions	Online schooling	higher
3	COVID-19 effects	Pandemic as a lesson	higher
4	Role of the media	General remarks	lower
5	Adaptation	Adaptation	equal
6	Conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic	-	absent
7	Social representations of COVID-19	-	absent
8	Positive approaches	Positive approaches	equal
9	Online schooling	The surprising reality of COVID-19	higher
10	At home	Foreseen solution	lower
11	Pandemic as a lesson	At home	lower
12	The surprising reality of COVID-19	Role of the media	lower

The categories resulting from thematic analysis indicate the representation of students in the Social Work undergraduate study program on the COVID-19 pandemic. The following chapter presents the content of all identified categories.

3.1. The COVID-19 Effects

3.1.1. In Students' Representation

Most of the COVID-19 effects experienced during the lockdown period and mentioned by the undergraduates are under the shadow of frustration (17/37): the experiences of their last year in the faculty (S24: "It should have been a memorable year"); the festive course and beautiful months spent with colleagues (S2: "We no longer meet our colleagues and maybe we will never get to see one another again … "); S3: "I would do anything for another day in the dorm"); the teachers, even the school, things and people held dear, or the job in some cases, are mentioned as losses. Undergraduates indicate having reviewed their relationship with time (16/20), in relation with which they mention the rapid passage (S1: "It's like time flies by"), its flexibility (S11:"I did multi tasking"), as well the way they had managed it and how they had found time for themselves. They further show their rediscovery of nature (S27: "Nature was livelier than ever") in contrast with the COVID-19 threat. Other effects they mention are related to the psychological discomfort generated by the restrictions characteristic of the pandemic: fear, anger, concern (8/12), tiredness, stress (8/8), comparisons of the lockdown to being caught in a bird cage (6/9; S17: "House arrest", S1: "I would hardly wait to go and buy supplies and take out the garbage", S17: "Living in a block of flats is like living in a cage"), monotony (4/5), as well as the feeling of being on alert all the time (3/6; S2: "You were afraid to get on the elevator with your neighbors", S17: "The city was almost empty and you could feel the tension and fear"), exasperation (2/2), the pressure of uncertainty (2/2), the wish for the nightmare to be over (2/2), apathy (2/4), solitude, sadness and confusion (2/2).

3.1.2. In Specialized Studies

A number of effects are attributed to COVID-19. Social distancing, associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, is successively perceived as a threat to normal life, to social order and a new burdening reality similar to "house arrest" [7] in a house that, depending on the quality of family relations, could be a jail [4]. COVID-19 has changed the way in which people relate with themselves, with the others and with the world and has de-familiarized spatial closeness by counter-intuitive semantic antinomies, such as "spatial distancing—affective closeness", "the far away near" and "together but divided" [4]. The absence of interaction has sabotaged civic solidarity [51]. The pandemic has generated loneliness [19,45,47], the unmet need for social support, a negative impact upon mental health—especially in the case of women and young people [45]—and an increased need for para-socialization among the elderly [19]. It has also amplified the need for commendation and pleasant comments from others, even at the cost of online exposure while performing individual physical exercises [52].

COVID-19 has generated insecurity in the workplace [20], led to job losses [39,53] and other economic difficulties [54]. The manner in which the states managed the shock of the pandemic on the labor market depended on local public programs [55].

In the context of threats and fears, COVID-19 has activated the interest of searching for meaning [14] and made students (in the Netherlands) more aware of their social needs [47]. In some countries, there were solidarity and political unity manifestations [38,39]. The pandemic has also changed emotional manifestations dominating online platforms, making them mellower and orientating them toward admiration and hugs [56].

COVID-19 has significantly affected psycho-social welfare and people's everyday life [1,34,47,57,58]. It has generated anger, paralyzing distrust and emotional tiredness [12]. It has caused social disruption and negative emotions [59], sadness, confusion [6], depression, loss of hope [2], worries and distress [34], and mostly anxiety and fear [3,6,14,19,39,47,56], even paranoia, stigmatization and xenophobia [3]. The pandemic made people fearful of those in their close proximity on the grounds that they might be carriers of the disease [3]. The news on it has amplified psychotic symptoms, even hallucinations [60]. It has taken away people's peace, faith and convictions [57]. The COVID-19 time has been associated with mystery, guilt and redemption [51], and its perception turned days into weeks and then months [4].

For all these contents there are subcategories and/or corresponding codes resulting from the thematic analysis of student essays.

3.2. *School during the COVID-19 Pandemic*
3.2.1. In Students' Representation

A theme often mentioned, as it was all too natural for undergraduates in their third year of study, is online schooling. The authors of the essays complain about many things, but they also show their appreciation and highlight the advantages of online schooling. They underline the lack of interaction among academic staff and colleagues (14/18), the high volume of homework (11/14), problems with the internet (11/11), the difficulty in paying attention during online courses (10/17; S10: "Online schooling meant information flowing incessantly", S24: "I pay more attention to the dog than to the course"), teamwork-based projects that are hard to accomplish in the online environment (3/3) and the tiredness felt from sitting for so long in front of a computer(2/2). However, according to the same students, academic staff showed their support for the undergraduates (12/31; S28: "I discovered the human side of academic staff" and "We did not feel alone in the online environment", S12: "I startle when I hear my teachers' voices"), online courses save time (9/9), they are even a challenge (8/9; S9: "It takes understanding on both sides, teachers and students", S28: "We became the generation of an academic experiment "), they are among the best things throughout the pandemic (7/16; S14: "The interest in courses increased", S6: "People are more active when taking online courses") and can be an opportunity from a comfort perspective (6/6), students adapted (6/6) and team-based projects inspired them

with optimism. The courses were in line with the curricula (3/4), and online education was not a novelty for students (2/4) who managed to consolidate the relationship with their colleagues (2/2).

All the remarks concerning the way academic staff managed online courses are appreciative. Students believe they managed to cope with a situation posing challenges for everybody with their teachers' support. They view them as understanding, willing to take the suggestions of students into account and consider them friends and comrades.

3.2.2. In Specialized Studies

According to Jandrić [36], the COVID-19 pandemic should be seen as a challenge for teachers and students all over the world. The challenge presents itself in various forms: some academic staff were ready to conduct online teaching, whereas others had to work extra hours to prepare themselves or, when that was possible, they chose simpler topics to teach, based on available resources. Some staff did not have adequate work space at home, others had their own school children to monitor. Regardless of their situation, and similarly to their students, the teaching staff mentioned the quality of internet connection and equipment among the most common problems they faced when teaching. All of the above considered, previous research on online training technologies should be reconsidered. What it indicates as good practice for online teaching is not all encompassing in terms of the emotional and physical isolation imposed by the pandemic. In this respect, attending virtual courses represented the center of some students' social universe [5].

The pandemic affected the necessary conditions for conducting the didactic process. However, the changes were not perceived as generating negative impact. The pandemic also influenced relations among colleagues in school, but Italian teenagers coped surprisingly well with the challenges [34]. Kalani et al. [61] present the advantages of the Net.Create network for students 'group work in history classes, when they would try to understand a complex historical text on the pandemic while experiencing a forced lockdown. Van Zyl [47] highlights the changes generated within master's programs in the Netherlands. At the beginning of the pandemic, all education activities were interrupted for nine days in order to allow for the transition of education programs to an online format. The students perceived the days as a holiday, and this helped them mobilize afterward to catch up with the activities that had been stalled. Additionally, the academic staff provided information in real time and showed understanding when addressing their students' problems and flexibility when establishing tasks and deadlines. This paints a friendly image of academic education during the pandemic.

Similar contents were also identified in the sub-categories and/or codes resulting from the thematic analysis of students' essays.

3.3. The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Lesson

3.3.1. In Students' Representation

There are numerous remarks concerning the pandemic as a lesson. The pandemic has taught undergraduates to cherish the time spent with their dear ones (8/14) and what they have (7/7; S6: "I am grateful for what I have", S9: "I have come to realize that simple things give meaning to life") and has made them more self-conscious and patient (6/6). Undergraduates have understood the importance of freedom (4/5), noticed the beauty of human relations (4/5) and learnt how to live within the imposed boundaries (3/3). The pandemic is something bad from which good things have been learnt (3/4); it has shown that life is unpredictable (3/3), narrowed down activities to the minimum necessary (2/2) and made students more powerful and responsible (2/2).

3.3.2. In Specialized Studies

Natural disasters, wars and diseases, fear, death, but also hope, have always been part of human history. The COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge for everything that humankind has learnt from its own history [5]. Any threat to health tends to acquire significance and is

associated with other themes that incur negative representations [3]. On the other hand, in crisis situations, the feeling of common identity is activated, and that generates empathy, solidarity, mutual support and assuming considerable risks for the sake of others [14]. This feeling underpins social capacity to face unpredictable threats and is the lesson taught by the COVID-19 pandemic [4].

All the above contents have corresponding sub-categories and/or codes in students' essays.

3.4. General Remarks on COVID-19

3.4.1. In Students' Representation

The content in the category of general remarks is very diverse. The category contains general observations on the pandemic and lockdown. These are remarks on the surprising evolution of the pandemic (5/9; S4: "We thought the virus was far away", S20: "In February, it seemed a joke"), its profound impact (5/7; S9: "A return to normal is impossible"), the importance of the internet as a communication means in the overall context (5/5; S4: "Dozens of years ago, it would have been more difficult", S25: "Socio-cultural life did not stop, it just moved to the online environment"), the fact that Romania was not prepared for the pandemic (3/4), the difficulty of the situation (2/2), the rapid emptying of the shelves in shops (2/3) and people's behavior as social animals (2/2). There are also many individual opinions on the fact that the planet surrendered to the virus, jokes about how people who stayed home got fat and remarks concerning unjustified price increases.

3.4.2. In Specialized Studies

This is the richest category in terms of sub-categories and codes resulting from content analysis. We have chosen to present the contents in a detailed manner from the *Introduction* part of this paper onward because we view them as early reports (i.e., at the beginning and immediately after the first wave of the pandemic in 2020) on the pandemic by people living through it in unmediated manner. Most likely, the evolution of events will change the perspective and theoretical approaches. Therefore, we consider the underlining of first representations of the pandemic to be a useful endeavor, giving testimony as to the process underpinning the development of the future narrative on COVID-19. In addition to the challenges of the pandemic, its regional features and demographic differences highlighted in the introductory part of this paper, we also identified the following sub-categories pertaining to the *General Remarks* category.

- Post-epidemic reality. Páez and Pérez [14] highlight four stages in the development of pandemic-related representations, namely: awareness, divergence, consolidation of the divergence between perceptions of pandemic as a health crisis on one hand and as an economic crisis on the other hand, and normalcy. Normalcy (a future stage at the moment this article was written) means integrating the experience generated by the pandemic into common knowledge, stripping off its emotional side, treating it as a common event and consolidating a unitary representation of it.

The post-pandemic reality will still be characterized by a tendency to avoid air transportation and the crowded places associated with transportation in general, as well as by the preference for individual transportation in urban area and for bikes and scooters to travel small distances [4]. Shoppers' preferences may also shift from the standard offers of the big chains in malls to the rediscovery of hand-made products. As for tourism, people may change their choices from attending tours in large cities to rediscovering villages and forgotten itineraries [4].

Collective memory has very few recollections of the Spanish flu [14,39]. The COVID-19 pandemic might as well be forgotten and its memories preserved only by bereaved families [4].

- The usefulness of social media during the pandemic. Technology has supported the development of significant relationships in the new context and facilitated new

connections and means of interaction [5]. Social distancing has led to mass use of social networks during the pandemic [62], the latter playing in important role in relaying information [63], as well as in modelling perceptions of risks associated with the disease and the usefulness of employing restrictions [55].

- The COVID-19 mythology. The COVID-19 pandemic has validated Moscovici's theory on cognitive polyphasia. Contemporary people have met the challenges of the pandemic by resorting to both scientific and magical/religious, logical and metaphorical thinking at the same time [4,57]. The pandemic has reactivated the mythological dimension of social knowledge. The actors involved in campaigns targeting the reduction of COVID-19 spread have acquired heroic, shaman-like and even God-like features, their authority being almost sacred and their actions resembling magical acts of cleansing and divination [51]. The social distancing measures have found ground in collective memory that associates the avoidance of contagion and of the contagious, hand washing, maintaining the hygiene of personal items and wearing masks with rituals intended to manage the disease [4].

With the exception of the contents in the last sub-category (the COVID-19 mythology) and the contents in the sub-categories on regional features and demographic differences, all other contents included in the *General Remarks* categories have counterparts in the subcategories and/or codes identified in the thematic analysis of student essays.

3.5. Adapting to COVID-19 Challenges

3.5.1. In Students' Representation

The remarks in the category of adaptation mainly indicate the occupations of undergraduates during the pandemic (12/21), namely watching movies, reading books (S10: "I read a lot"), zapping through the internet, searching for new cooking recipes or just lying idle. There are also specific highlights of the fact that they (i.e., the undergraduates) have adapted (7/7; S12: "We learn to adapt", S18: "We have adapted to the new living conditions", S21: "You need to adapt", S6: "We resisted, we're just social workers").

3.5.2. In Specialized Studies

The pandemic forced the population to adapt to the new reality. Fasanelli, Piscitelli and Galli [6] show the good tolerance of contemporary people of isolation measures. Dwellers in most countries have adapted their behaviors gradually [55]. During the lockdown period, the pandemic led to community involvement and participation at unprecedented levels, as Hills and Eraso [29] show when referring to the residents in north London. The first American cities affected by the COVID-19 virus were also the first to react by taking social distancing measures [59]. Buzzi et al. [44] highlight the ability of the new generations to manage the uncertainty and discomfort of the pandemic by finding innovative ways to meet their social and psychological needs. Emiliani et al. [64] indicate women's capacity to manage their day-to-day personal and social life through new rituals and collective meetings in response to the COVID-19 challenges.

With the exception of the latter, the contents highlighted above have their counterparts in students' essays. The contents in the category *Adapting to COVID-19 Challenges* presented below are present only in specialized literature.

Solidarity has been part of the adaptation response. It allowed for widespread lockdown, mutual support [7] and a civilized approach to challenges [51]. In Spain, non-profit organizations have become even more involved in supporting national response to disasters [10]. The willingness to show solidarity determined the community of Chinese migrants in Prato to successfully adopt isolation measures before national lockdown was enacted [16]. It is solidarity, creativity, adaptability and resilience that should be mentioned in the documents that history will choose to keep in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, as Kirk and Rifkin hope [65].

3.6. Positive Approaches to the COVID-19 Pandemic

3.6.1. In Students' Representation

The sub-categories in the *Positive Approaches* category are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Sub-categories in the *Positive Approaches* category.

Seq.	Sub-Categories	Sources	References
1	This unpleasant period wil go by	6	7
2	We need to look at the bright side of the situation	6	6
3	Change is a new chance	4	4
4	We always need to keep up our hope	3	3
5	It is a prolonged holiday	2	3
6	So far so good	2	2
7	We will enjoy the festive course in autumn	1	1
8	Combining the useful with the pleasant	1	1
9	Thank God for keeping me healthy	1	1

Students write: S17: "Eventually we shall overcome it", S13: "There is an end to every beginning, and we will get back to our lives", S12: "I saw the rainbow—it is going to be just fine" and also S16: "In autumn, I will be proud of what I have accomplished so far", or S24: "No pain, no gain".

3.6.2. In Specialized Studies

The COVID-19 pandemic has also generated positive, optimistic approaches. Hardship, difficulties in generating opportunities and people's feeling of having a common destiny, is a gain for globalization [66]. The fear of contagion can stimulate solidarity and the feeling of belonging to the community of the entire mankind [4]. Crisis is an opportunity to see others in the same manner we see ourselves, namely as human beings holding the same rights and freedoms [37] and able to express our creativity [65]. The fear caused by the pandemic amplifies humor and makes people overly cautious [3]. Distanced collective rituals, such as the synchronized applauses for professionals working in the health system, create cohesion [14].

The COVID-19 pandemic encourages transdisciplinary collaboration aimed at transforming urban spaces that used to be employed for mere survival into places of co-existence and joy [4]. The pandemic could also be an opportunity for academic staff. COVID-19 challenge creates new possibilities in the online environment, and hence it could reconfigure the academic world by opening spaces for learning in an equitable manner [5].

All of the above contents can be subsumed to the sub-categories identified through thematic analysis and is presented in Table 4.

3.7. The Surprising Reality of COVID-19

3.7.1. In Students' Representation

The thematic category of the surprising reality of COVID-19 contains remarks highlighting the astonishment of undergraduates. These are young people, and their lives would have continued smoothly and rather nicely until 2020 when they were actually confronted with the restrictions characteristic of the pandemic. They had never thought that something like that would happen (6/7) or that what had begun as a small holiday (5/5) would change everything (4/4; S4: "The epidemic reached us and changed our lives entirely") and that life stood still (3/3) instead of returning to normal conditions in two or three weeks' time (3/3). They had not been trained to go through such experiences (2/2).

3.7.2. In Specialized Studies

The outburst of the COVID-19 disease was an exogenous shock, a strange, dangerous and disruptive novelty [51]. Social distancing changed the stakes: what used to be a regular attitude toward deviation and stigma became a recommendation for everyone, whereas non-compliance with the recommendation was labeled as social deviation [7].

The aforementioned contents can be associated with the last thematic category mentioned before, which refers to the fact that people have not been trained to go through such experiences.

3.8. Possible Solutions to the COVID-19 Issue

3.8.1. In Students' Representation

The sub-categories in the category *Foreseen Solutions* indicate the undergraduates' representations of managing the situation. They are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Sub-categories in the *Foreseen Solutions* category.

Seq.	Sub-Categories	Sources	References
1	Rules protect	5	6
2	Far away to protect the dear ones	4	4
3	It is time that we become better	2	2
4	Prayers	2	2
5	Our desire to grow should prevail	1	1
6	We should focus on what we want to achieve in life	1	3
7	We need to stay healthy	1	1
8	We should get more involved in school activities	1	1
9	Self-displine is needed	1	1
10	Calm and optimism are needed	1	1

According to students, "By respecting rules, activities can unfold normally" (S14) and "We stay away from our dear ones to protect them" (S12). "We need to do less evil" (S10) and "We need to rediscover ourselves" (S6), they also wrote.

3.8.2. In Specialized Studies

For this category, we identified the following subcategories:

- Efficiency of restrictions. Recommending simple behaviors ensures the success of the message [67]. Nonetheless, the impact of restrictive norms needs to be analyzed in relation with local cultural features and social inequalities [4]. Individuals perceiving higher personal cost in relation to the pandemic are more willing to get involved in pro-social behaviors. Therefore, it would be efficient if they were the first category of people targeted by the policies aiming at behavioral change [20]. Furthermore, access restrictions and fines are also solutions to support the implementation of recommendations [68].

The services providing greater control over social distancing, such as the delivery of food, essential goods and medicine, should be extended to reach out to the people living in high-risk environments [46]. Generally, increased attention should be paid to high-risk communities, such as the elderly and those suffering from chronic diseases and in need of health support [8]. As always, the pandemic also provides opportunities for scams and for some people to become rich at the expense of others' trustworthy attitude. Governments should take preventive measures and discourage fake claims in relation to COVID-19 prevention, treatment and cure [3].

- Highlighting commonalities. When confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, various authors of various specializations started searching and formulating different solutions. Thus, in times of crisis, it is of utmost importance to understand risks in a unitary manner [7], to communicate efficiently, to use common language when it comes to social parties and social agents, to push back criticism, to strengthen both right-wing authoritarian measures and left-wing solidarity in order to have a common response to a global threat [14]. The tensions among groups and the perception of the threat posed by the pandemic can be prevented by emphasizing commonalties, closing contracts with minorities and showing openness toward other cultures, as well as by focusing on an "Us" type of communication and on an identity superseding local or national identity [69]. During the pandemic, democratic states have had the chance to develop social solidarity and overcome differences, according to Alexander and Smith [51]. The consolidation of social support increases public resilience [58]. It is important to consolidate social capital at a community level [44]. Leaders need to learn how to be crisis heroes so that they can ask for sacrifice and self-discipline [51]. Public policies based on information and motivation could be efficient, even in the countries where relations with the rest of the world are poor [55].

Knowledge of people's media preferences may make the messages of crisis managers more efficient [67]. Public health messages should underline common responsibility and appeal to public consciousness in order to consolidate social trust and a sense of belonging [46]. More credit should be given to tools and mechanisms contributing to smooth development of trust and cooperation [10]. Clear recommendations concerning courses of action and involvement should be formulated, and social distancing measures should not be threatening because of fear's limited efficiency [35]. The narratives on COVID-19 pandemic should support the human and community dimension of history [37]. Last but not the least, people enjoy humor, and its use by the social media creates joy and re-establishes relationships altered by social distancing [2].

Martínez García [37] indicates some students' initiative to archive the experience of the pandemic as a number of human stories and as an alternative to neutral news. Additionally, global lockdown can be considered an opportunity to obtain answers concerning any future social restrictions [20].

- Using information technology. Social media accessibility provides instruments for the investigation of the evolution of the pandemic. Maheshwari and Albert [53] show, with the help of a network-based modeling of human interactions, the importance of tracking the spread of the COVID-19 virus in hospitals. Rashid and Wang [70] highlight the possibility and efficiency of detecting information on COVID-19 in a dynamic manner and in real time with the help of intelligent devices employed by the omnipresent users of the internet.

Social media platforms offer many means of influencing and control their users' behavior. Twitter can serve as an instrument to monitor infectious diseases, indicating hot spots and their evolution, imposing the narrative on social distancing and facilitating the understanding of people's practices and reactions to social distancing measures [59]. Monitoring emotions expressed online allows for the detection of content-spreading fear and other negative emotions and also contributes to increasing the efficiency of emergency interventions in the context created by the pandemic [56]. Groups featuring high exposure to solitude could be supported through online targeted interventions [47]. Schillinger, Chittamuru and Ramírez [71] propose the SFERA continuum as a framework to be used in the evaluation and capitalization on the effects of social media on health. Rashid and Wang [70] introduce CovidSens, a risk-alert alternative detecting and spontaneously analyzing social systems in order to deduce the spread of COVID-19, inform people and model future spread. Bettencourt-Silva et al. [72] suggest using Google Trends in order to determine people's health status based on the SDoH (Social Determinants of Health) trend.

Wani et al. [63] search for automated techniques to detect fake news. Ayoub, Yang and Zhou [73] propose a model automatically analyzing natural language and detecting disinformation on COVID-19 and hence contributing to the improvement of public trust. Shahsavari et al. [74] present their own methods to identify, monitor and counter conspiracy narratives.

The employment of information technology to approach the pandemic is promising. Barsocchi et al. [9] propose an information system that would provide information on people's indoor location and the distance between them, thus revealing people's contacts as well. Maheshwari and Albert [53] suggest a model of man-to-man interaction and hence the spread of infectious diseases that has in-built monitoring and forecast functions. Shorten, Khoshgoftaar and Furht [75] show the potential of seep learning to provide applications for doing research and controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. Khanday, Khan and Rabani [62] suggest using automatic learning algorithms to control propaganda.

Only the first sub-category, referring to the *Efficiency of Restrictions*, finds its counterpart in the sub-categories resulting from the thematic analysis of students' essays.

3.9. Staying at Home during the COVID-19 Pandemic
3.9.1. In Students' Representation

The category *At Home* includes students' observations on the positive role of their families and of the return to their parents' homes during the lockdown. Communicating with parents was beneficial (4/5; S17: "Without my parents, I would not have gone through the isolation period"); living in the countryside and in households owning a yard and a garden was an advantage (3/3; S13: "I'm in my own house, so I cannot complain"), while being asked to become involved in household chores was also an advantage (2/2; S2: "At home, everyone would see you available", S11: "It is hard for me to work on the computer while my mom is working outside"). Being at home meant spending more time with the family (2/2; S3: "I just open the door and have dinner with my parents") and feeling safe (2/2; S24: "At home, I began to feel well").

3.9.2. In Specialized Studies

In the case of teenagers and young people, the period spent at home influenced their relationship with their parents [34] and did not necessarily have any negative social or psychological impact. In the case of Dutch students, the period they spent at home gave them the possibility to spend more time outdoors and with their dear ones while conducting pleasant and relaxing activities [47]. In the case of Turkish people living in urban areas, the time they spent at home rendered both positive and negative connotations [76].

COVID-19 has assigned new meanings and symbols to the term "home". This led to a symbolic, cultural and discursive approach to the term as a negotiated and continuously re-imagined space [76]. "Home", an emotionally loaded term, is the most important place in an individual's life, and the pandemic contributed to conducting activities normally held in other spaces in this personal area [4]. The changes occurring while being at home during the lockdown led to a privatization of the public sphere and its opening to the public. These changes were perceived differently in what Edward Hall (1966, apud [4]) calls "contact cultures" (i.e., the Mediterranean ones) or "non-contact" cultures (i.e., north American and northern European cultures).

In addition to those differences, being forced to stay at home had different connotations depending on a number of other parameters. Domestic space was shared with other family members in some cases and became the area for multi-tasking. The size and structure of households turned such arrangements into experiments concerning how to live in a crowded place. The eyes of the public could grasp details of the private space during school, work or social activities conducted online. Available or desired open spaces (e.g., balconies, terraces) essentially influenced the level of comfort experienced during lockdown, as well as the connection with nature and neighbors [4].

Forced to remain in their houses [36], individuals tried to reconfigure their dwellings by converting forced adaptation into a pleasant experience [76].

The above contents have their counterpart in the sub-categories resulting from the thematic analysis of students' essays.

3.10. The Role of the Media in Managing the COVID-19 Pandemic

3.10.1. In Students' Representation

The sub-categories in the category of *The Role of the Media* outline the role played by the media in managing the pandemic, according to students. The media sources caused panic (6/9; S26: "The media exploit our fears"), and there were many fake news stories from the beginning (3/7; S26: "The information on smokers was contradictory", S23: "The wrong information spreads fast"). At the same time, the media contributed to imposing the restrictions (3/4; S8: "I was thinking that we washed because that was what they would say on the TV"), whereas relay of uniform information calmed the population (2/5). Either way, in dangerous times, reliable sources of information are needed (2/4; S23: "I have learnt where to look for real information").

3.10.2. In Specialized Studies

The media is in the middle of sharing opinions on the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic spreads swiftly, and there is a lot of information on it disseminated at global level by social media networks [57]. As a result of their ability to process information and analyze available data on their own, people communicated about the health issues generated by the COVID-19 virus faster compared to the speed at which formal cautionary information was disseminated [70]. Social media has been viewed in many ways: as a generator of an "infodemics" or as a valuable tool for public health [71]. The perception of the Americans on COVID-19 risks is anchored in the type of sources to which they have access [72]. On the other hand, all forms of media work together in generating omnipresent and accessible information.

This type of openness comes together with all sorts of dangers. In this respect, the information meant to put people on their toes is omnipresent and accessible, inducing stress [3]. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for racism and focused attention on the unknown stranger and dangerous groups as traditional targets of fear and hatred [4]. Social media platforms favored fake news, hijacking behaviors and endangering human lives [63], delaying the search for treatment and a cure [3]. Chang et al. [77] indicate the role of social robots in manipulating social media in relation to the narrative on the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential elections in the USA, as well as a transition to emerging domestic sources of distortion. The COVID-19 pandemic has its own disinformation and propaganda. In this respect, an analysis of the data on Twitter shows the heavy weight of propaganda texts [62]. Democratic media also means that what may seem realistic information when presented from a given perspective can be viewed as distortion and serve irrational ideologies in polarized societies [51].

The contents presented above correspond to the sub-categories resulting from the thematic analysis of students' essays. The content analysis of relevant papers on COVID-19 unveils supplementary references to the topics presented below.

Social media has hosted discussions on how to have stamina and stay healthy and avoid sickness and death. It also granted the right to control communication both to itself and to governance, regulatory agencies, corporations and other sponsors [71]. Social media can counter anxiety and bring comfort, as the study of Hussein and Aljamili [2] on memes and caricatures in Jordanian media indicates. Media para-socialization has consolidated the feelings of community, belonging, self-image and -esteem [19]. Public messages on empathy, altruism and safety of the vulnerable can support the observance of recommendations to self-isolate [46]. The British Prime Minister avoided any references to social distancing in his press conferences, and this was an unproductive approach from the

perspective of a person tasked with controlling the pandemic and imposing constraining rules on his citizens [7].

The media can also be upsettingly non-incisive. The Canadian press has descriptively and uncritically reported on health assistance services considered essential during the pandemic, access to alcohol and cannabis being a case in point, an approach that is tributary to the power of media unions [18].

3.11. Social Representations of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As previously highlighted, the content analysis of specialized papers on the topic of COVID-19 unveils two supplementary categories in comparison with those identified in students' essays. The first category concerns *Social Representations of COVID-19.*

Moscovici's theory of social representations is considered an adequate theoretical framework for approaching the COVID-19 pandemic by many authors. In this respect, it allows for the representation of emerging realities related to the lockdown [64], which result from the interaction between science and common sense [40] and from cognitive polyphasia [14].

The COVID-19 pandemic has been worryingly anchored in the HIV epidemic [35] or (intentionally) soothingly likened to the cold or common flu, despite the Spanish flu that claimed the lives of around 50 million people globally [14]. The objectification of COVID-19 has been accomplished by visuals and, mostly, metaphors of war and hardship, even though the social representations disseminated by scientists are easier to accept than those distributed by politicians [35].

Joia and Michelotto [41] show that the core of the social representations of the COVID-19 pandemic is based on the association of the terms fear–distancing–social–health and prevention–diseases. Nerlich and Jaspal [7] describe the evolution of representations on social distancing as a threat to normal life evolving into a threat to social order and ultimately becoming a burden to be removed. De Rosa and Mannarini [4] present the way in which, starting from the symbolic representation of the other as a source of fear for the vulnerable self, social distancing became the main measure meant to protect one's own health, as well as the health of others.

The development of representations is dependent upon various contextual features. Fasanelli, Piscitelli and Galli [6] show different representations of the pandemic, as developed by undergraduates in socio-humanities and medicine, and which are built around different central cores. According to the authors, the differences originate in different sources of information (i.e., media v. specialized sources). Pizarro et al. [11] show the preference of authoritarian people for social representations justifying social control measures and the sanctioning of deviants.

3.12. Conspiracy Theories during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The second category is conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conspiracy theories are attempts at explaining some aspects, significant events or political circumstances viewed as plots organized by powerful actors, based on information that cannot be verified but cannot be faked very easily either, as well as on loop, such as reasoning, biases or loose evidence, according to Chang et al. [77]. Fake rumors are less stable, spread more easily, and they have more chances to perpetuate than true information [77].

A considerable part of world population acknowledges its openness toward various conspiracy theories [77]. Explanations favoring conspiracies are used to justify the system and protect existing social and political structures. They share a number of common features: they assign meaning to events; they are developed based on the feeling that there is limited control over the situation; they are supported by fear, anxiety and vulnerability; they give credit to right-wing traditional values and catalogue minority groups as deviant [14]. Chang et al. [77] also mention the prevalent right-wing orientation of the supporters of conspiracy theories and highlight the visible configuration during the USA presidential elections of a new form of "conspiracy theory" that perpetuates itself through

the mere repetition of ideas and in the absence of any attempts at finding evidence or developing explanations.

Fear, anxiety, paranoia, along with various cultural influences, cause emotional responses and make the population vulnerable to conspiracy-based explanations on the causes of the pandemic and governmental approaches to it, as Freckelton shows [3]. Conspiracy theories thrive when trust in authorities is low, according to Shahsavari et al. [74]. The pandemic has led to the dissemination of conspiracy theories by regular people but also by political people [4]. The theories on COVID-19 spread in China and the USA and promoted by high-ranking officials show a cultural and nationalistic radicalization of opinions to the detriment of scientific evidence [66]. Páez and Pérez [14] underline quite a large spread of the opinion, according to which COVID-19 is a biological weapon of an evil political elite. Pizarro et al. [11] show a correlation between the perception COVID-19 as a severe risk and the social representations supporting conspiracies and the evil intentions of elites. Fasanelli, Piscitelli and Galli [6] show that, in direct relation to their sources of information, undergraduates in socio-humanities are more predisposed to conspiracy theories compared to medical school undergraduates.

As a result of their research on people's religious opinions on the origin and significance of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pieterse and Landman [57] identify three themes: COVID-19 is an act of God; God has the control in the middle of the pandemic; and COVID-19 is in no way related to God. The authors correlate conspiracy theories with the last theme. Shahsavari et al. [74] highlight the main four theories of conspiracy disseminated via social media networks in the USA as follows: there is a link between COVID-19, the 5G network and Bill Gates 'project to keep population growth under control; there are attempts to cover up the role of Chinese culinary practices in generating the mutation of the virus from animals to humans; the virus was conceived as a biological weapon and accidentally released; the exaggerated danger posed by the virus is a hoax. As discussions on the topic continue, these theories tend to connect with each other and form one coherent conspiracy theory, as authors show. The attacks on 5G networks and the ample demonstrations against the implementation of COVID-19 measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus show the social force of conspiracy-based approaches, as Shahsavari et al. indicate [74].

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The content of the thematic categories resulting from the analysis of the essays outlines students' representation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, in relation with the main connotations attributed to the pandemic, the undergraduate students from Brasov did not think that the scenario of isolation would come true, nor that there could be a disease to generate it. The period was initially perceived as an unexpected and mostly welcome holiday, which then became a nightmare forcing students to change their habits. They will certainly remember the pandemic and, what is more, going back to how things used to be is not only impossible but also far away from becoming true. Their biter remark was that living in a block of flats is like living in a cage for days, doing the same monotonous things, while those retreating to their parents in the countryside, where they had a garden and a yard, were luckier.

During the lockdown, communication through social networks helped them see one another and their parents. Students concluded that both their social and cultural life had moved to the online environment.

Students responded rather swiftly to the security measures imposed by the authorities and viewed those as necessary for the pandemic period. They complied with them, they observed the distancing and hygiene rules and wore masks to protect themselves and the dear ones. They took up different hobbies during the pandemic, so as to adapt better; they adopted pets, read, cooked, took photos, did sports and even wrote their final undergraduate papers, which required spending a lot of time in front of the computer.

Students tried to develop their survival skills by adopting positive thinking and showing optimism. The idea that the period would pass helped them, and they considered

that everything would turn out right. They saw this period as their chance to discover themselves and evolve. Last but not least, they understood the relationship between constraints and freedom.

Students witnessed how the media reported on the virus and, while they digested the information, they noticed the panic generated by the media and the neutral and non-empathic messages of authorities. Having been shocked by the discovery, they understood that the media was also broadcasting fake news and chasing sensational situations and not the truth. They thus learnt how to digest and, more importantly, to search for information in reliable and credible sources.

The didactic activities in the Transilvania University of Brașov were conducted online. Students missed their interaction with colleagues and teaching staff, and that is the most dramatic part in their confessions. They had to manage an overwhelming amount of information and homework. They feared the novelty of online exams, but they showed appreciation for their teachers' prompt support, professionalism and empathy. They also perceived the opportunities of online education and its positive potential.

Concerning the relationship between students' representations of COVID-19 and the viewpoints identified in the specialized literature on the topic, the hierarchy in students' preoccupations with COVID-19 is highlighted in Table 1 above. Some of the differences between that hierarchy and that of those authoring studies on the pandemic (as in Table 3) result from the various types of texts where the categories were identified: essays v. academic articles. The former encourage free emotional expression of personal thoughts and/or correspond to the status and specific interests of students. The latter meet the requirements of scientific methodology.

Thus, the effects of the pandemic are seen by the students as most important. The challenges of online schooling come second in their remarks. Students who were invited to write about how they felt were in their final year of study before their last exams and delivering their undergraduate paper. In such a context, the tendency to refer to the effects of COVID-19 in relation with their frustrations over not experiencing a special moment in their lives when the pandemic started, as well as their comments on how school ended in a manner nobody could have predicted, can be better understood. Viewing the pandemic as a lesson has high spiritual connotations and it rather belongs to an essay. Similarly, showing the surprising nature of reality during the pandemic better fits an essay topic rather than an academic article. As a result, there are good arguments for the presence of a higher number of related categories in students' essays.

Students' increased interest in some of the categories identified through thematic analysis corresponds to their lower interest in others. However, behind such differences there is thematic convergence between students' and academic's approaches to the pandemic at its beginning. All the categories emerging from the thematic analysis of the essays are also identified in the content analysis of the relevant references on the topic. Apart from the categories identified in the essays, content analysis highlights two new ones.

The first of those, *Conspiracy Theories during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, includes information on what these theories are, how they emerge, what characterizes them and what the main conspiracy theories are during the current pandemic. There are no remarks on the topic on behalf of the students, and that seems to contradict the conclusions of Fasanelli, Piscitelli and Galli [6] who claim that students in socio-humanities are predisposed to crediting conspiracies. However, we believe that students' lack of interest in the topic is rather caused by other factors, such as the avoidance of conspiracy-related content and its programmatic undermining by the social media accessed by young people and also students' reluctance to mention a topic considered non-academic and inappropriate to be approached in school.

The second category, *Social Representations of COVID-19*, could be viewed as a meta-category. It contains references to the theory of social representations of Serge Moscovici, which is considered the adequate theoretical framework to approach the emerging social representation of COVID-19. The theory is well known to authors of specialized articles,

but it was not viewed as a necessary reference by the students, whose texts are rather personal confessions.

The categories *General Remarks* and *Foreseen Solutions* are different in their content. They are more analytical and pragmatic in the case of specialized works and more philosophical and/or spiritual in the case of students' essays. The solutions offered by authors of the articles refer to commonalities, making the restrictive measures more efficient and using information technology. On the other hand, between solutions, students indicate the transformation of people into better ones and prayer, as in Table 5.

These content differentiations are doubled by convergent viewpoints of students and specialized studies on the matter. The latter span from some sub-categories in the *General Remarks* category to specific findings or observations. Thus, students underline the importance of the internet in managing the pandemic. That is a justified observation, coming from a generation familiarized with this information source that offers rapid and generous access [78–81]. The observation is also in agreement with ones made by many of the analyzed sources [5,47,55,59,62,63]. Students underline their teachers' availability and support in the context of conducting education activities in the online environment. This results from their direct experience, but it confirms what L.E. van Zyl [47] notices in the case of Dutch education during the pandemic. Students believe that the new conditions are a challenge both for them and for their teachers, an aspect also underlined by Jandrić [36]. Students perceive the importance of owning a garden and a yard during lockdown, and that correlates with the writings of De Rosa and Mannarini [4] or Yalçın and Düzen [76]; the examples could continue. The titles students chose for their essays show an emotional approach: *The Chrystal Globe, Graduating during the Pandemic, Pandemic on TV, Lockdown Diary, Lockdown, a Nursery for Autumn Seeds, Today's Normalcy is not Guaranteed Tomorrow.* However, the emotional load is but a facet of students' reaction to the challenges of the pandemic. The overlapping representations of the COVID-19 pandemic of students and authors focusing on the topic suggest that students did pay attention to the issue under discussion, and they also took the challenge of discussing it. The convergence of categories and viewpoints shows not only that both students and authors of relevant academic studies identify the same dimensions of the pandemic, but they also indicate students' responsible attitude when reflecting on COVID-19 and seeking answers.

The categories *Adaptation* and *Positive Approaches* are in the middle of both hierarchies (as in Table 3). Students insist on the idea of adaptation and on the necessity to adapt. The sub-categories in the *Positive Approaches* category express students' optimism and their focus on overcoming the pandemic in good conditions (as in Table 4). Adapted and optimistic, the undergraduate students from Brasov corroborate the hypothesis of Buzzi et al. [34], according to which young generations show an unexpected balance when confronted with unpredictable, threatening and unforeseen challenges. They understand the seriousness of the phenomenon, willingly adapt to restrictions and find new ways to meet their social and psychological needs, thus proving better prepared than their parents to manage the pandemic, according to the aforementioned authors.

In conclusion, undergraduate students enrolled in the Social Work study program in Transilvania University of Brașov suffered from a lack of interaction with their peers and teachers, as well as from missing the festive moments normally accompanying their graduation. However, their analyses show a responsible and mature attitude in the context of the pandemic and their capacity to accurately capture its main features. They underline the importance of adapting to the new conditions and to the measures aimed at controlling the spread of the virus. They also show optimism about the situation. All of the above considered, we can conclude that students are an important part of the population on which authorities can count when trying to limit the effects of the pandemic.

Such a conclusion could be gratifying and reassuring. However, it is bewildering. Students claim they have complied with all the measures taken by the authorities and adopted them without challenging them. That, according to Jürgen Habermas [82], is an atypical attitude. According to the German philosopher, students are, by their very nature,

challenging individuals. Students from Brașov critically notice that the media generates panic and disseminates fake news. They also make the observation that Romania had not been prepared for the pandemic. However, they show their full support for the measures and policies of authorities employed to manage the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Their attitude could reflect a tendency to respond in accordance with their teachers' expectations. Their attitude could also be the result of subtle and programmatic manipulation on behalf of social media. They are not aware of it because it is conducted through channels of communication they choose to use. Both hypotheses formulated in relation to their atypical uncomplaining attitude raise concerns. They suggest a disagreement between the rebellious profile of the young people in the 1960s defending their freedom, depicted by Habermas and the profile of contemporary youth who serenely comply with constraining measures.

These hypotheses do not rule out the simpler hypothesis, according to which students show maturity in their decision making in dramatic conditions of health crisis. Such a hypothesis matches the initial conclusion underlining students' responsibility, cooperative behavior and optimism. Therefore, to test all hypotheses, students' conformism is worth another distinct and detailed investigation. As Jandrić [36] notes, observing all the aspects of the unfolding pandemic is a moral duty of academic staff. Students' papers on COVID-19 are fine and sensitive radiographs of their experiences during this period [83] and, for this reason, they are valuable research resources.

The way students think and their representations of the education process are important components, securing the sustainable functioning of the university. The confessions in their essays signal both the imminence of discussions on new education methods and the great availability of students to provide feedback. We consider this availability a gain of the pandemic, which must be maintained and cultivated.

The disruption brought about by the pandemic in the functioning of higher education has opened new avenues for change. The sudden migration of the education process to the online environment pushed for the active use/update of technological resources owned by education institutions and made teachers employ their digital skills. Teachers had to swiftly adapt their didactic content and its design to the new requirements. This incurred considerable consumption of energy and time, the results not always measuring up to the efforts [24]. The need to reinvent teaching approaches in higher education has placed considerable strain on academics as main actors, according to Toto and Limone [24]. It generated fears as to their ability to manage unforeseen situations. Meanwhile, it also made them grasp the didactic potential of the technology they were forced to use [24], increasing their chance to efficiently interact with the new generations of students already accustomed to the continuous challenge of technological innovation [25].

Academic research had to mobilize its resources precisely in order to provide innovative didactic instruments and, just as importantly, solutions to constructively manage academics' motivation, stress and resistance to change [24,25]. These are areas of academic interest where there is much to be said in the near future. Students' manner of approaching the COVID-19 pandemic is just one facet of the impact the pandemic has had on higher education.

Students' appreciation of teachers' efforts to efficiently migrate didactic activities into the online environment signals openness in the education process, and it could be one of the side effects caused by the pandemic. Therefore, an inclusive approach to all the facets of the issue could increase the chances to identify viable solutions.

The pandemic has been a litmus test for validating universities' value. Universities were already under pressure to balance financial costs, public health requirements, accomplishment of education and research goals, and provision of services to the society, and they still need to make decisions impacting their students' future [22]. However, who other than universities themselves could better meet such challenges?

While depicting the representation on COVID-19 of undergraduate students in Brasov and highlighting the researchers' perspective on the beginning of the pandemic, our paper

also highlights the usefulness of a wider, multi-fold approach to the transformations imposed by the pandemic context on education.

Limitations of the research: The current article investigates students' perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic during its early stage, based on 28 essays written by undergraduate students enrolled in the Social Work study program conducted by Transilvania University of Brașov. The extrapolation of research results for all students enrolled in the aforementioned study program is justified by the theoretical saturation achieved when analyzing the essays. For a possible extrapolation at the level of Romanian students or students in general, we consider that a theoretical saturation-anchored justification is insufficient. Nonetheless, students' representation of the COVID-19 context is a topic worth resuming in future research by using a representative sample.

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