







## Reports on nursing professionals coping with the Covid-19 pandemic

*Reportagens sobre os profissionais de enfermagem no enfrentamento à pandemia da Covid-19*

*Reportajes sobre los profesionales de enfermería en el enfrentamiento de la pandemia de Covid-19*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to identify newspaper reports on the situation of nursing professionals coping with the Covid-19 pandemic. **Method:** a documentary study carried out on 11 digital newspapers, consulted from March to June 2022, with initial reading of titles, headlines, leads and images. Once the material was available, the information was captured and organized and submitted to content analysis. **Results:** most of the reports were from international newspapers, published between February and May 2020 and presented content in the form of testimonies and photographs. Four categories were created: meanings attributed by the population to nursing professionals in coping with the new coronavirus; nursing professionals' role in health care; nursing professionals' situation in health services; and nursing professionals' perspectives on the pandemic. **Final considerations:** both nationally and internationally, nursing professionals have been recognized as essential in dealing with the pandemic.

**Descriptors:** Pandemics; COVID-19; Nursing; Work; Mass Media.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** identificar em reportagens de jornais sobre a situação dos profissionais de enfermagem no enfrentamento à pandemia da Covid-19. **Método:** estudo documental desenvolvido em 11 jornais de circulação digital, consultados de março a junho de 2022, com leitura inicial de títulos, manchetes, *leads* e imagens. De posse do material, realizaram-se a captação e a organização das informações, que foram submetidas à análise de conteúdo. **Resultados:** a maioria das reportagens eram de jornais internacionais, publicadas entre fevereiro e maio de 2020 e apresentavam conteúdos em forma de depoimentos e fotografias. Elaboraram-se quatro categorias: significados atribuídos pela população no enfrentamento ao novo coronavírus; atuação dos profissionais de enfermagem na assistência à saúde; situação dos profissionais de enfermagem nos serviços de saúde; e perspectivas dos profissionais de enfermagem na pandemia. **Considerações finais:** nacional e internacionalmente, os profissionais de enfermagem foram reconhecidos como essenciais no enfrentamento da pandemia.

**Descritores:** Pandemias; COVID-19; Enfermagem; Trabalho; Meios de Comunicação de Massa.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** identificar en reportajes periodísticos informes sobre la situación de los profesionales de enfermería frente a la pandemia de Covid-19. **Método:** estudio documental desarrollado en 11 periódicos digitales, consultados de marzo a junio de 2022, con lectura inicial de títulos, titulares, *leads* e imágenes. Con material en mano se capturó y organizó la información, la cual fue sometida a análisis de contenido. **Resultados:** la mayoría de los reportajes procedían de periódicos internacionales, publicados entre febrero y mayo de 2020 y presentaban contenidos en forma de testimonios y fotografías. Se crearon cuatro categorías: significados atribuidos por la población a los profesionales de enfermería en el enfrentamiento al nuevo coronavirus; rol de los profesionales de enfermería en la atención sanitaria; situación de los profesionales de enfermería en los servicios de salud; y perspectivas de los profesionales de enfermería durante la pandemia. **Consideraciones finales:** a nivel nacional e internacional los profesionales de enfermería fueron reconocidos como esenciales para enfrentar la pandemia.

**Descriptores:** Pandemias; COVID-19; Enfermería; Trabajo; Medios de Comunicación de Masas.

## INTRODUCTION

The world has faced major challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic, declared in 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>1</sup>. In December 2019, the infection appeared in China when the virus<sup>1</sup>, called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome caused by coronavirus type 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was detected, at a time when information was still incipient when the first cases appeared, and the power of transmission was realized with the high number of deaths<sup>2</sup>.

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The infection has evolved rapidly, becoming a major and serious public health problem worldwide<sup>2</sup>. Among the workers in the health sector, nurses, technicians and nursing assistants stand out in the fight against the disease<sup>1,3</sup>, with estimates of two million in Brazil<sup>4</sup> and 28 million worldwide<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the health crisis required them to develop surveillance actions, manage decision-making and implement new care processes<sup>5</sup>.

However, it can be seen that the professionals have experienced major challenges<sup>1-3,6</sup> in this scenario, such as wear and tear<sup>1,2,6</sup>, suffering and illness<sup>1,2,6,7</sup>. These problems have been further aggravated by precarious working conditions<sup>6</sup>, leading to an increase in cases of death<sup>1,2</sup>. In this sense, it has never seemed more urgent to recognize the quality of care and the importance of preserving the lives of these professionals.

From this angle, in today's world, which is strongly influenced by simultaneous communication<sup>8</sup>, social media has become a vehicle for expression. It can be seen that these resources have been used in a very promising way, by presenting the importance of the work of these professionals in health promotion. They have also been used to disseminate information to the population<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, given that the journalistic press can raise news in real time and disseminate different issues of public interest, this study started with the following question: what was published in online newspaper reports about nursing professionals coping with the Covid-19 pandemic?

From this perspective, this study aimed to identify the situation of nursing professionals in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic in online newspaper reports.

## METHOD

This is a documentary study, with a qualitative approach, part of the research '*Enfermagem em tempos de pandemia da Covid-19 nas reportagens de jornais online*', developed by consulting 11 digital newspapers, four of which are national (*O Globo*, *Folha de São Paulo*, *O Estado de São Paulo* and *Super Notícia*) and seven international (*The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *China Daily*, *The Times of India*, *El País*, *Dawn* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*). These newspapers were chosen because they are among the most widely read, have a large circulation and worldwide repercussions, and publish articles about nursing in the pandemic.

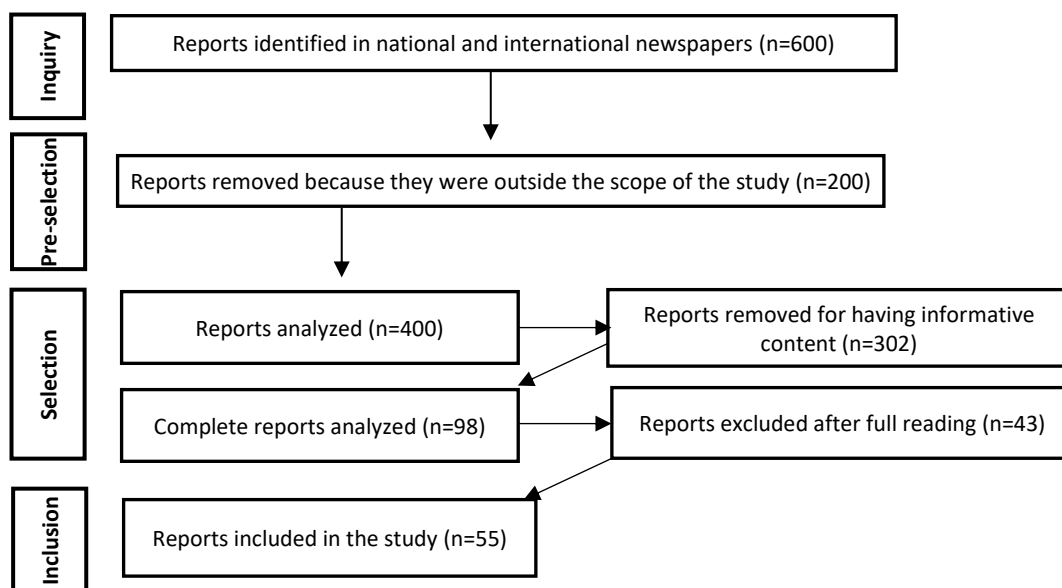
The journals were consulted in their online version between the beginning of March and the end of June 2022, through an advanced search with the term 'nursing' and with no time limit on publications about Covid-19, by two trained postgraduate students, and independently. In some cases, when there were disagreements between the selected materials, the authors entered into a dialog for judgment, so that the situation could be resolved, using as a criterion the approach to the subject in question based on evidence, such as testimonies and/or images.

Initially, they read the headlines, auxiliary titles and leads (the first part of the news story that provides the reader with basic information about the content), selecting 20 reports from national newspapers and 78 from international newspapers. They then examined the publications to identify those that were in some way related to the study. From these, they excluded publications of a purely informative nature, which dealt only with epidemiological data or results about the pandemic, obtaining 55 reports. In relation to the photographs in the reports chosen, 13 were taken from national newspapers and 58 from international newspapers. However, those that did not portray nursing were excluded, resulting in 51 photographs. Figure 1 shows the document selection procedures.

Once the material had been selected, the information was organized using a tool drawn up by the authors. This identified the sequence, article author, title of the piece, number of lines, date of publication, presence or absence of photographs and the speeches contained in the reports.

The testimonies and photographs were submitted by the main author to content analysis<sup>12</sup>, consisting of three operational stages. In pre-analysis, all the material was read; in the exploration of the material, systematization was carried out by classifying themes; and in the treatment of the results, inference and interpretation were developed, interrelating them with the other materials analyzed.

Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action<sup>8</sup> was used as a basis for understanding language as an essential communication tool in human actions, based on the search for mutual understanding and consensus of ideas.



**Figure 1:** Flowchart of the reports included in the study according to the consultation of national and international newspapers. Sobral, Ceará, Brazil, 2022.

According to Habermas, communication is fundamental to establishing rational communication and achieving understanding between individuals. In the context of the news about the pandemic, the reports reveal how nursing professionals are presented as protagonists in dealing with Covid-19, in a process of interaction that involves both challenges and social recognition. The theory allows us to understand these representations as a reflection of the need for cooperation and mutual understanding in extreme situations, such as the pandemic, in order to build collective and ethical responses<sup>8</sup>.

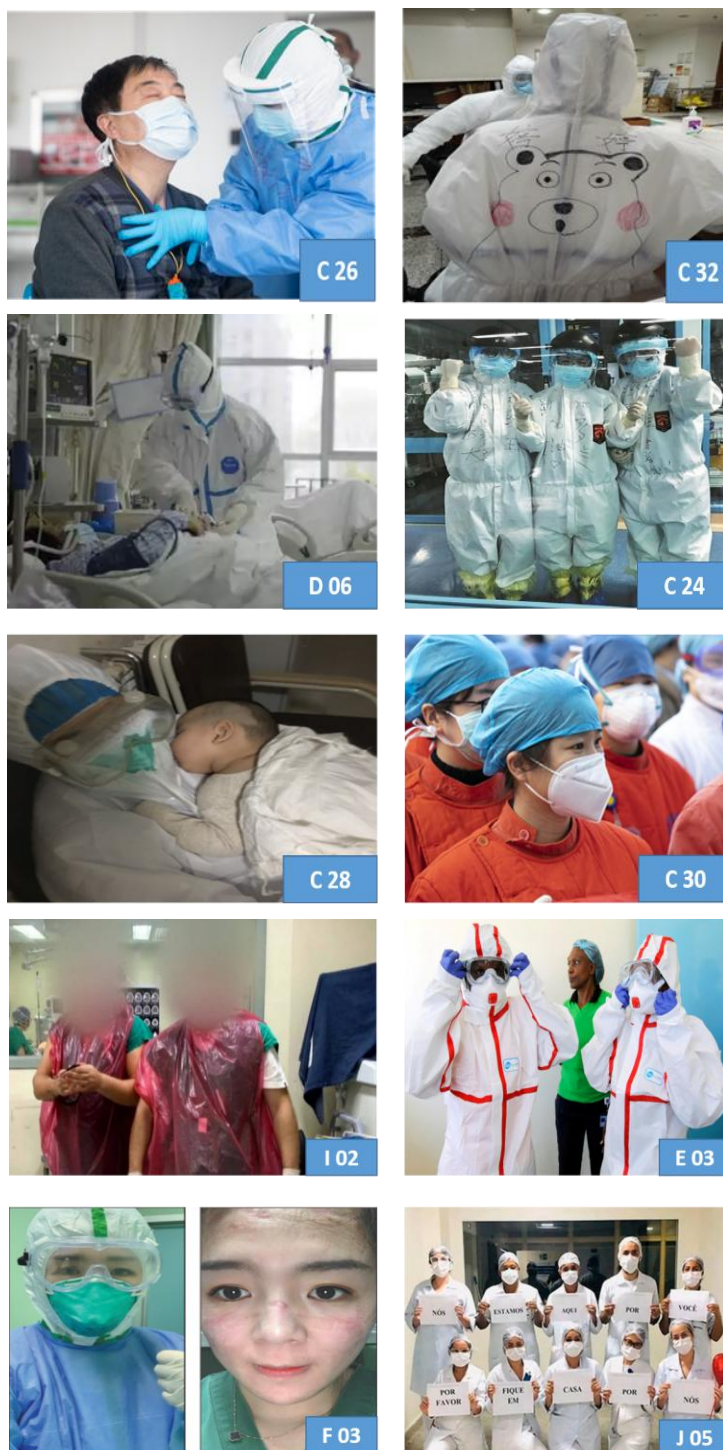
The excerpts and images reproduced have been identified with alphabetical letters as a way of representing the material, with Arabic numerals to indicate their sequence, followed by the newspaper of publication (E.g.: A01 The Guardian (...)) K01 *Super Notícia*).

The study did not need to be assessed by the Research Ethics Committee, since the content used was publicly available in its entirety. However, the anonymity of the workers identified in the news articles was maintained in order to comply with Resolution 510/2016 of the National Health Council<sup>13</sup>.

## RESULTS

Most of the reports analyzed (n=45) came from international newspapers. The national and international articles ranged from 27 to 176 lines and from five to 129 lines, respectively, and were published between February 2020 and May 2022, featuring testimonies and photographs (Figure 2) about nursing professionals' role in dealing with the pandemic.

The content analysis resulted in four main categories: Meanings attributed to nursing professionals, Nursing professionals' role in health care, Nursing professionals' situation in health services and Nursing professionals' perspectives on the pandemic. Adopting Habermas' theory of communication as a theoretical lens made it possible to understand the elements, based on the different rationalities that guided the arguments, antagonisms and positions taken.



Sources: The Times of India, 2021; China Daily, 2021; China Daily, 2022; *O Globo*, 2022; The Sydney Morning Herald, 2022; *El País*, 2022; *O Estado de São Paulo*, 2022).

**Figure 2:** Photographs of the meanings attributed to nursing professionals. Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil, 2022.

### Meanings attributed to nursing professionals

The reports reflect nursing professionals' symbolic recognition, highlighting their importance in the fight against Covid-19. According to the Theory of Communicative Action, the representations in the articles and images show a collective effort to legitimize the role of these professionals, creating a social consensus on their relevance during the health crisis. This process of constructing meanings is reinforced by the way nursing professionals are portrayed in the

reports as “heroes” and “soldiers”, images that illustrate the social effort to reach a common understanding of their contribution to society. It can be seen that people, through the reports, perceive nursing professionals as essential in the fight against Covid-19.

*Our world needs people like you who work hard (...) (C13 China Daily).*

In the articles analyzed, the work of professionals is highlighted as essential in tackling the pandemic. For example, photograph D06, published by The Times of India, forcefully illustrates the active presence of nurses in caring for hospitalized patients, reflecting the importance of their work in the hospital context.

In addition, photograph C24, from China Daily, highlights professionals' leading role in the hospital environment, showing them as protagonists in the care process. These images accompany the reports that highlight the nurses' courage and dedication, as evidenced by the comment of a patient who considers them “heroes” (G01, Dawn), an image widely reflected in the reports. However, in seeking to recover the patient's health, they put him at risk of infection:

*They [nurses and nursing technicians] put themselves at risk for the rest of us (B05 The New York Times).*

### The nursing professionals' role in health care

Nursing professionals were highlighted for the variety of their roles in patient care, including practices such as acupressure and psychological support. The Theory of Communicative Action is fundamental to understanding how the interaction between nurses and patients establishes communication that goes beyond technical knowledge, also involving emotional and psychological aspects that are crucial for comprehensive care.

It can be seen that professionals are in charge of caring for patients during the quarantine period, when any kind of contact is restricted.

*They are responsible for looking after all the patients in the wards, where their relatives are forbidden to enter (C04 China Daily).*

Photograph C26 (China Daily), for example, documents the use of acupressure as an alternative approach to treating patients, highlighting the nurses' ability to combine conventional and alternative care practices. Another example is photograph C32 (China Daily), which records nurses drawing pictures to lift patients' moods, highlighting how psychological care is incorporated into care during the pandemic.

Such practices not only reflect professionals' efforts to care for patients' physical and emotional well-being, but also demonstrate how communication, through actions, is an essential aspect of nursing practice. The development of care that involves other components, such as the psychological ones that accompany any illness, to a greater or lesser degree, is also identified:

*(...) In addition to normal nursing work, we need to pay more attention to patients' psychology. (C03 China Daily)*

### The nursing professionals' situation in health services

The reports also address the difficult and stressful working conditions faced by nursing professionals, especially in relation to the scarcity of personal protective equipment (PPE) and work overload. According to the Theory of Communicative Action, adverse working conditions reveal the need for a broader social understanding of the professionals' situation, with the aim of promoting a change in social practices and guaranteeing more adequate and fair working conditions.

They are immersed in an atmosphere of negative feelings due to apprehension and the overload of shifts, which leads to fatigue to the point of saturation:

*Our working environment is tense because we're having conflicts. The doctors are scared and demand more from us (J02 O Estado de São Paulo).*

*I've just completed four 12-hour shifts in five days (A03 The Guardian)*

*She said she felt her spirit was slowly crumbling (B04 The New York Times)*

*They [nursing professionals] were fed up, they couldn't take it anymore (B05 The New York Times).*

Photograph I02 (*O Globo*) documents the improvised use of plastic bags as a protection strategy by nursing professionals due to the lack of suitable PPE, which illustrates the scarcity of resources and the precarious conditions in which the professionals found themselves, reflecting the constant struggle for safety at work. In addition, the discomfort caused by the use of protective equipment, such as masks and overalls, is evident in the images, such as photograph F03 (*El País*), which shows the marks left on the nurses' faces after hours of intensive work.



In addition, the demand for the acquisition of materials from their own resources was identified, so that they could offer their services:

*I've already had to buy an N95 mask out of my own pocket (F02 El País)*

*They can only do their job effectively when they can do their job safely (E01 The Sydney Morning Herald).*

There is also emotional suffering as a result of the loss of patients and colleagues:

*(...) a young nurse cried after leaving because of the death of a patient she was caring for (C04 China Daily)*

*She [the nursing professional] was a great loss (I02 O Globo).*

### Nursing professionals' perspectives on the pandemic

Reports also present nursing professionals' perspectives on the pandemic, including their reflections on the failings in the health system and their expectations for the future. The Theory of Communicative Action, in this context, allows us to understand how professionals seek, through their speeches and actions, to generate a consensus on the changes needed to improve working conditions and health practices in the future. They believe that the situation is opportune to highlight problems in the health services and the successful closure of activities in the midst of working hours to combat the virus:

*The pandemic will serve to shed light on some problems that already exist (...) (H01 Folha de São Paulo).*

*I hope we can complete the task successfully (...) (C03 China Daily).*

In some reports, professionals express their desire to hug their families after the pandemic is over, as highlighted in a statement in China Daily (C 04), which reflects their longing for a collective resolution to the crisis. Despite this, it was not possible to identify specific photographs that portrayed these perspectives visually, which indicates a gap in the representation of these views in the reports analyzed.

### DISCUSSION

In the health situation caused by Covid-19, it is evident that nursing professionals were highlighted as essential in the reports, due to the services offered in health systems, as presented in the category *Meanings attributed to nursing professionals*.

This recognition gained greater relevance in 2020, the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth, when nursing professionals were once again put in the spotlight due to their decisive contribution to tackling the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>2,9</sup>. The value of his work was formally recognized by the WHO, which emphasized its importance in the fight against the virus<sup>3</sup>. For Habermas, this appreciation reflects communicative rationality, in which mutual understanding between individuals is essential for building consensus, allowing the needs and efforts of others to be recognized in a shared context of struggle and care<sup>8</sup>.

Although working conditions during the pandemic have created challenges for healthcare workers<sup>1,2</sup>, their willingness to face adversity is remarkable. Since the beginning of the mobilization to combat the virus, health professionals have been on the front line, working intensively in health services around the world<sup>2</sup>. In particular, nursing professionals stood out, tackling the population's health problems in health units<sup>9,14,15</sup>. In this context, according to Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action<sup>8</sup>, these interactions between professionals and society reflect a process of mutual understanding and cooperation, in which the actions of individuals are guided by the search for consensus and ethical and collective behavior in dealing with the crisis.

The second category, *The nursing professionals' role in health care*, shows that the presence of nursing professionals in this scenario has contributed to a new appreciation of their role in society<sup>14</sup>. The care they provide has highlighted the importance and dedication of these professionals. This reflects their relationship with society, which is shaped by values and concepts that give their work new meanings<sup>8</sup>. They are recognized as part of the care science, attentive to the subjective dimension, in which love for others is emphasized<sup>16</sup>.

According to the documents, the professionals also stood out as heroes for being at the forefront, being qualified as such and becoming protagonists in the struggle<sup>9,14</sup>. In May 2020, when the International Day of Nursing and Nurses was celebrated, this vision became more evident in tributes<sup>17</sup> as part of the communicative practice combined by valuations<sup>8</sup>.

There are recognition of the infection risks they have been subjected to as a result of their work. While all sectors of the world remained stagnant, the health sector, through nursing workers, continued to fight to save lives. By caring for patients, they were more susceptible to infection and sometimes death<sup>1,2</sup>. It is known that, by 2020, a total of 2,262

professionals had died from Covid-19 in 59 countries, with the Americas accounting for more than 60%<sup>18</sup>. The number has continued to rise, and fatalities have remained unknown in the absence of a global surveillance system<sup>18</sup>. However, estimates are for more than 20,000 deaths worldwide<sup>19</sup>.

Among the professionals working at the front, the nursing staff were operating in an exemplary manner. The most serious cases included bedside care, which sometimes required their presence and direct contact<sup>1</sup>. There is also the use of Chinese methods, such as acupressure, in which stimuli are made through the hands to relieve pain. This alternative has been expanding in the health sector and is now part of nursing training<sup>20</sup>. Thus, in its care essence, it is used to strengthen interventions to deal with problems arising from Covid-19.

There was also evidence that professionals were incorporating a holistic approach in order to mitigate the impacts of the disease. As a result of the cases and deaths from the infection, negative emotions spread, threatening mental health<sup>7</sup>. Hospitalized individuals suffered because of their condition and, in relation to these outcomes, nursing care sought to restore integral health<sup>15</sup>. In addition, due to the patient's entry into the hospital environment, permeated by uncertainty and doubt, the professionals inserted illustrations into the protective clothing. In healthcare, which is colonized by scientific reasoning, it is recognized that art makes it possible to escape from technicality<sup>21</sup>. A study shows that action must be taken, as it helps to lose focus of negative emotions<sup>15</sup>, verifying that relationships extrapolate the subjective nature of the world of life<sup>8</sup>.

However, carrying out such practices has become a challenge to be overcome by professionals due to the current situation, as evidenced in the third thematic category: *Nursing professionals' situation in health services*.

It can be seen that they have been working in an environment with tensions generated by medical concerns. In fact, working in the midst of the pandemic has required a lot of effort to control decisions<sup>1</sup> and, because they are more representative, nursing and medicine have had the potential for conflict. Although horizontal relationships are still present<sup>8</sup>, it is known that these have lost their meaning to make room for interprofessional collaboration.

It is clear that there are multiple contracts with consecutive shifts to meet the need for manpower. From their first combat jobs, the professionals described their work as inhuman and exhausting<sup>22</sup>. However, even before this crisis hit, workers had been suffering the effects of the economic model<sup>8</sup>, the government's lack of commitment and the reduction in policies<sup>23</sup>. This situation has become more aggravating with the legislation that provides for longer working hours during the pandemic<sup>24</sup>, exposing patients to events and causing professionals to fall ill.

A study carried out in Canada corroborates these findings, indicating that 47% reported the need for psychological support, in the People's Republic of China 50% highlighted depression and in Pakistan moderate suffering (42%)<sup>25</sup>.

There is also a shortage of materials to protect workers. In the United States, Occupational Safety has received more than 4,000 complaints about a lack of PPE<sup>26</sup>. However, the organizations recommend minimizing the exposure of professionals by offering these materials<sup>27</sup>. Despite this, the reality is controversial, highlighting the precarious conditions<sup>6</sup> and non-compliance with the rules<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, it is imperative to make them available for protection, including goggles, a mask, an apron and gloves<sup>27</sup>. Another point involving PPE refers to the manifestations on the professionals' skin, which have suffered from changes related to prolonged use<sup>28</sup>, making it necessary to apply sealant, use dressings and remove the mask for prevention<sup>29</sup>.

Added to this is the emotional distress caused by the death of patients and colleagues as a result of Covid-19. The dilemma of living and dying has always been part of these workers' work<sup>6</sup>. In relation to this scenario, fear is accentuated by the annihilating potential of the virus and by the fact that this situation damages emotional health<sup>30</sup>. The expression of the events experienced, which belong to the universe of the individual's life, is a crucial aspect for renewing the world<sup>8</sup>.

On social media, there were recurrent images of these professionals making people aware of the need to remain in isolation. Thus, in addition to practices aimed at treatment<sup>17</sup>, took action to control infection<sup>14,17</sup>. From this perspective, they use Instagram® to support communication in the search for prevention.

These are known to be the most accessed tools, offering a platform for sharing information<sup>31</sup>. It also emancipates communication and offers messages to multipliers<sup>8</sup>. No In the case of the pandemic, it shares useful content to produce responses.

Furthermore, the pandemic context is seen by professionals as an opportune moment to remedy distortions that are still underestimated. In reality, many problems persist in the health sector<sup>5,6</sup>, such as a shortage of supplies, extensive workloads, exhausting working hours and low salaries<sup>6,23</sup>. However, it should be stressed that

rather than waiting for visibility and consequent resolution, it seems essential that workers organize themselves in search of improvements. This is an alternative form of rationality, in which the speakers meet the listeners, imbued with intentions to build consensus<sup>8</sup>.

In the last category, *Nursing professionals' perspectives on the pandemic*, it can be seen that they were eager to complete their activities successfully. In fact, it is recognized that they are the greatest reducers of the effects caused by the calamity<sup>14,17</sup>, being on the front line against the virus<sup>2</sup> and achieving health promotion and infection mitigation<sup>17</sup>. They also hope to be reunited with their families once the pandemic is over. In fact, these professionals have been absent from their homes to work and from their families for fear of infecting them<sup>2</sup>. In view of this, it is important to develop strategies to minimize the harmful impacts of work, for example, the provision of accommodation for rest, as has been implemented in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei<sup>32</sup>.

In this context, Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action<sup>8</sup> is essential for understanding the dynamics of interaction and collaboration between nursing professionals, society and health systems. By emphasizing the search for mutual understanding and consensus through communication, it offers a solid basis for analyzing how these professionals not only resolve health issues, but also build the legitimacy of their actions in such a complex context.

Thus, the theory is not limited to being an explanation of communicative practices, but also reveals itself as an instrument of social transformation. By engaging nursing workers in a public discourse, it contributes to changing perceptions about the profession, their working conditions and, consequently, to valuing the care they provide. In summary, Communicative Action provides a deeper understanding of the role of nursing during the pandemic and the need to guarantee decent conditions so that these professionals can continue to perform their role effectively and with respect.

### Study limitations

The study's limitations are limited to the choice of online newspapers and the collection period, but it is innovative in that it uses photographs in the corpus of analysis. Considering the research trend, it could be extended to other types of media.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The reports analyzed reveal that, both nationally and internationally, nursing professionals have been recognized as essential in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic. Being on the front line of the fight against the virus, they have gained new meanings, often being portrayed as heroes and soldiers, receiving tributes for their dedication and courage. This public recognition reflects a process of appreciation which, in addition to highlighting their technical and scientific skills, also recognizes their role in comprehensive care, which goes beyond the physical aspects, encompassing the psychological and emotional care of patients.

However, the work of nursing professionals during the pandemic has been marked by profound challenges. The stress caused by exhausting shifts, work overload and the constant concern about the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) generated a reality of tension and wear and tear, both physical and emotional. Despite these obstacles, the nurses remained on the front line, showing remarkable resilience and making a decisive contribution to controlling the pandemic, as well as helping to mitigate the suffering of their patients.

In this context, Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action is crucial to understanding the dynamics of the relationships between nursing professionals, society and health systems. Habermas' theory, which emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding, communication and the search for consensus, can be applied to understand how nurses were able to engage in collaborative practices, both within health teams and with the population. Communication, in this sense, was not only a means of exchanging information, but also a powerful instrument of social transformation, which contributed to the recognition of the value of this profession and to changing perceptions about their working conditions. It is essential that the challenges faced by nursing professionals are recognized not only in terms of their direct implications for the care process, but also in terms of working conditions, which urgently need to be improved.

It is hoped that this study will help to raise awareness of the importance and conditions of nursing work, highlighting the importance of drawing up and implementing policies aimed at valuing the category and the need for advances in working conditions, so that these professionals can continue to provide the quality care that the population so desperately needs.



Based on Habermas' theory, it can be concluded that communication and collaboration between health professionals, and between them and society, are essential components for transforming working conditions and building a consensus that prioritizes improving working conditions in the health sector.

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