SELECTING AND SHARING NEWS IN AN “INFODEMIC”:
THE INFLUENCE OF IDEOLOGICAL, TRUST- AND
SCIENCE-RELATED BELIEFS ON (FAKE) NEWS USAGE
IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Lea-Johanna Klebba M.A.

Department of Media Psychology, Landau University

lea-johanna.klebba@uni-landau.de Landau, Germany

Prof. Dr. Stephan Winter

Department of Media Psychology, Landau University

stephan.winter@uni-landau.de Landau, Germany

This manuscript is a pre-print (the authors' original version) that has not yet received peer review.

Abstract

Societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic are characterized by a high degree of threat and uncertainty, and people are confronted with partly conflicting information in the media, including a substantial share of fake news. Given that individuals often base their news choice on pre-existing attitudes, the present study aims to identify ideological, trust-, and science-related beliefs that might influence citizens' information selection and sharing in response to a threat. A representative survey of German Internet users ($N = 1101$) identified right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and mistrust in politics as significant predictors of selection of fake news, while the influence of social dominance orientation (SDO), mistrust in politics, and perceived certainty of knowledge were significant for sharing news. The present findings extend previous knowledge on people's information behavior in response to a threat and provide insights into groups that are particularly susceptible to misinformation.

Keywords: selective exposure, information sharing, misinformation, crisis, confirmation bias

Threat Alert: (Fake) News Selection and Sharing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the rise of contemporary social media sites as an additional news channel, people face a highly diverse information landscape with abundant choices. The online environment offers nearly unlimited content on websites, blogs, and social networking sites (SNS) and makes it easy to share news and opinions with a large number of people. Even though new technologies can facilitate access to relevant content, the unprecedented amount of information provided on SNS also amplifies the amount of inaccurate and questionable information and presents individuals with the challenge of selecting and sharing verified news.

Selecting accurate news is even more difficult in threatening crisis situations when information spreads to an uncontrollable extent. Such a situation was given after the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus, where people were confronted with a flood of (mis)information from scientists, politicians, self-proclaimed experts, and conspiracy theorists. While people's conversation about the virus grew substantially, social media was rife with fake health-related news which undermined medical intelligence and countermeasures by framing narratives and shaping social perceptions of the public debate. The different reactions to the pandemic (e.g., higher belief in conspiracy theories and stronger passive party support; Jutzi et al., 2020) revealed that people's information behavior might significantly differ in response to a threat.

According to the current body of research, people tend to rely on information consistent with their worldviews when it comes to selecting and sharing news, especially when the news is controversial. Past research shows that attitude-consistent content is chosen over attitude-inconsistent content, and like-minded news is more often shared with personal networks based on pre-existing attitudes (Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016; Buchanan, 2020). Usually, these findings refer to news usage under normal conditions. The occurrence of COVID-19, which constituted a high threat of physical danger to everybody's lives, was

accompanied by an ‘infodemic’ of true and fake news, resulting in questions about individuals’ news usage in threatening crisis situations. Following the threat-activation hypothesis, a threat can activate psychological predispositions, which, in times of non-crisis, usually remain inactive (Feldman, 2003). Accordingly, prior beliefs may influence a person’s information behavior in response to a threat; for instance, an individual may select and share news with a strong confirmation bias. However, if a person does not perceive a threat, and, correspondingly, certain psychological predispositions and beliefs are not activated, he or she can choose information in a more unbiased manner.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, threat can be considered as a prevalent state in the population. Thus, it can be expected that people avoid conflicting information on COVID-19 and, instead, turn to like-minded (fake) news, depending on the underlying belief systems that are activated. Other research recently confirmed the activation of psychological predispositions and beliefs, followed by behavioral consequences such as political attitudes toward the nation and outgroups (Hartman et al., 2020). Against this background, the present preregistered study aims to investigate three types of attitudinal belief systems which could function as crucial antecedents of decisions on how to look for information under threat. First, because ideological beliefs are generally linked to people’s susceptibility to fake news (Sindermann et al., 2020) and, more specifically, related to news selection under threat (Lavine et al., 2005), we will include *right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)* and *social dominance orientation (SDO)* as two ideological belief systems for selecting and sharing (fake) news. Second, given that trust-related beliefs play an essential role in people’s belief in fake news (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020), we will focus on the influence of *trust in politics, media, and science* to explain how people respond when selecting COVID-19 news. And third, because people are confronted with complex scientific news on COVID-19, we will also account for the notion of science-related *epistemic beliefs* (individuals’ beliefs about

the nature of knowledge and knowing), which might influence how people deal with new science-related information provided, for instance, by epidemiologists and virologists.

By applying a news selection procedure, we aim to examine people's selection and sharing of real and fake news on COVID-19, which is possibly influenced by ideological, trust-, and science-related belief systems. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a more general understanding of individuals' information behavior under threat while identifying groups that exhibit underlying beliefs that make them particularly vulnerable to misinformation.

Selecting and sharing (fake) news under threat

In recent years, several crises worldwide have confronted societies with unprecedented challenges. Whereas the number of wars has decreased significantly, societies are increasingly exposed to immediate threats from global crises (e.g., terrorist attacks, climate change, the refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic) which do not necessarily occur in close vicinity. In the social sciences, crises are characterized as unexpected events which can trigger threat, uncertainty, disorientation, and fear. Because people's central emotional response to threat and uncertainty is fear, they often react defensively, especially when they feel helpless. One possible option for rapidly regaining control over such a state of helplessness is to intensively seek information that is consistent with prior attitudes and beliefs. Such a confirmatory information search is located in the classic paradigm of selective exposure research (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), suggesting that people generally tend to prefer information consistent with their pre-existing attitudes to avoid mental discomfort. Accordingly, research has demonstrated that individuals are more likely to select attitude-consistent news articles over attitude-inconsistent options (Hart et al., 2009). Nevertheless, other results indicate that the effects of specific usage situations can either override or bolster a person's selective exposure to news (Zillmann, 2000). While information utility tends to motivate people to evaluate news in a balanced way (Knobloch-

Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012), time pressure has been shown to amplify confirmation bias (Smith et al., 2008).

As these findings suggest that selective exposure is sensitive to situational variables, threat can be considered as another influencing factor. Related research has shown that information seeking after the perception of a threat fosters a more pronounced tendency to prefer attitude-consistent information (Fischer et al., 2011). Empirical findings on societal crises corroborate the assumption that individuals seek threat-related information during such crises, reporting a rapid increase in media usage during threats (e.g., September 11 attacks: Carey, 2002). Additionally, recent studies on the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed groups of people who discredit information contradicting their prior attitudes, turning mainly to alternative facts and fake news (Van Bavel et al., 2020). The tendency of people to selectively turn to conforming news and to believe in what they want to believe in, including misinformation, first emerged as a problem during the US presidential elections in 2016, where fake news as “untruthful and empirically false news pretending to be true” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213) was disseminated in order to shape the recipients’ vote choice. The same problem has arisen in the current COVID-19 pandemic, which seems to strengthen the selection and distribution of fake news and conspiracy thinking (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020). Thus, to actively select and believe in congenial news, even if they are fake, can be considered as a tool to manage feelings of uncertainty triggered by a health-related threat for instance. It provides people with the option of selecting information that does not necessarily need to be accurate, but primarily creates coherence in response to a threat.

Social media’s interactive nature offers users opportunities to distribute content, once selected, to others. However, research on sharing news in times of crisis is limited. One study by Chen and Sakamoto (2013) showed that people’s likelihood of sharing news increases if they feel personally affected by a crisis. Additionally, people tend to share good news instead

of bad news unless they are emotionally aroused, angry, or anxious. Recent research on COVID-19 fake news revealed altruism, socialization, and information seeking as strong predictors for people's news sharing intention (Apuke & Omar, 2020). Another study reported self-promotion and entertainment as motives for sharing unverified news (Islam et al., 2020). However, in the present study, extending the aforementioned state of selective exposure research, we interpret people's tendency to select and share attitude-consistent as another emotional response to overcome uncertainty in response to a threat. Consequently, the prevalence of the COVID-19 threat could increase the likelihood that people not only select, but also share, attitude-consistent rather than attitude-inconsistent information. Thus, because empirical evidence has supported only selective exposure assumptions in threat situations so far, we preregistered the following hypothesis regarding people's selection of COVID-19 news:

H1: People select attitude-consistent content more frequently than attitude-inconsistent content.

To examine people's attitude-consistent news sharing exploratively, we additionally address the following research question:

RQ1: Do people share attitude-consistent content more frequently than attitude-inconsistent content?¹

The influence of ideological beliefs

A large body of research in social psychology has closely investigated the influence of prior beliefs on people's information behavior and found that they play an essential role in people's perceptions of a threat. Research on political conservatism as motivated social cognition stresses both *right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)* and *social dominance orientation*

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¹ This research question was not preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) repository and thus only allows for an exploratory analysis.

(*SDO*) as ideological belief systems that are most likely to satisfy psychological needs and motives (such as needs to avoid uncertainty or threat) (Jost et al., 2003). According to Duckitt (2001), although RWA and SDO are both related to right-leaning political attitudes, they are rooted in two distinct worldviews which underlie independent intergroup attitudes.

Originating from punitive socialization experiences which foster dangerous worldviews, right-wing authoritarian personalities tend to submit to authoritarian leaders and politics, social norms, and tradition (Altemeyer, 1998). High SDO is rooted in unaffectionate child-rearing practices which elicit dominance-related goals according to a competitive worldview. Thus, people high in SDO hold a preference for group-based hierarchy (or hierarchy-legitimizing myths) to justify economic and racial inequality, and strive to gain control and power over others (Sidanius & Pratto, 2004). Because RWA and SDO arise from distinct worldviews, both belief systems predict different behavioral outcomes when interacting with social environmental factors. Whereas RWA is, for instance, positively related to hostile behavior against outgroups that specifically threaten society's social order, values, and traditions, SDO positively correlates with the stigmatization of lower-status groups (Asbrock et al., 2010; Duckitt & Sibley, 2007). Therefore, in a state of non-crisis, RWA and SDO can be described as latent attitudinal beliefs, generating distinct motivational goals (e.g., threat control or group power) which are consistently salient in a person's belief system. However, external circumstances such as the perception of a threat or uncertainty can activate both dispositions, resulting in reactive behavioral consequences. Thus, the interaction between a perceived threat and one's belief system could lead, for instance, to the support of anti-democratic policies (Cohrs et al., 2007). This has been predominately observed for RWA, and not SDO, to date.

In addition to socio-attitudinal consequences, ideological beliefs, if activated by a perceived threat, could also influence human behavior in other situational contexts.

Following the logic that RWA is activated in the presence of a threat, Lavine and colleagues (2005) tested potential changes in the cognitive strategies of people high in RWA in a news selection scenario. Supporting the hypothesis that RWA is activated by a threat, their laboratory experiment revealed that perceived threat significantly moderates the positive relation between RWA and attitude-consistent information selection. In other words, in an experimental setting in which an existential threat was made salient, people high in RWA were more prone to select attitude-consistent information than people low in RWA.

Against this background, an existential threat such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has cost over a million deaths so far, constitutes a rare field scenario for investigation of the relationship between ideological beliefs and reactive behavioral consequences in various environments with different research interests. Accordingly, a study by Hartman et al. (2020) revealed that the interaction term of COVID-19 threat perception and RWA has a significant influence on nationalism and anti-immigrant attitudes. Another study conducted by Wnuk et al. (2020) showed the same interaction effect on the acceptance of surveillance technologies. Furthermore, in the light of conspiracy thinking and belief in fake news, Imhoff & Lamberty (2020) highlighted RWA as a positive predictor for non-recommended pandemic behavior, which correlates highly with belief in fake news on COVID-19 (e.g., the coronavirus is either a hoax or human-made, purposely manufactured as a bioweapon). Therefore, investigating key beliefs that could influence how people select and share news during the COVID-19 pandemic, we assumed that RWA is triggered by people's perception of COVID-19 as a threat. However, as people have been confronted with both accurate and fake news on COVID-19, we assume that RWA fosters people's selection of attitude-consistent news and their susceptibility to fake news. Therefore, we propose the following two hypotheses:

H2: Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) increases preference for attitude-consistent over attitude-inconsistent content.

H3: Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) positively predicts the selection of fake news and attribution of credibility to fake news.

In the light of recent events, such as the election of US President Donald Trump or Great Britain's exit of the European Union, studies also emphasize the role of ideological beliefs as relevant predictors for sharing real and fake news online. Although general findings demonstrate that sharing news in social media is relatively rare, strong partisanship and ideology affect individuals' sharing activities (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). In the US context, Guess and colleagues (2019) showed that conservatives are more likely to share articles from fake news domains than liberals or moderates. Additionally, Osmundsen and colleagues (2020) identified partisan polarization as the primary psychological motivation behind (fake) news sharing on Twitter. Data on Twitter news sharing activities were linked to individual-level survey data from more than 2,300 American citizens, revealing that partisans primarily share congenial political news content because of their hostile feelings towards outgroups or political opponents. Therefore, partisans' sharing of fake news appears to be in line with their sharing behavior of real news, following the same logic they use to select and process information. Based on empirical evidence in a state of non-crisis, it seems plausible that an activation of ideological beliefs as a result of perceiving the COVID-19 threat could not only influence people's selection but also their sharing of news, regardless of whether the news is true or not. In addition to the influence of RWA, we assumed that SDO is related to people's online sharing behavior. As people high in SDO always tend to take the lead in order to reach a place at the top of the social hierarchy, sharing information about COVID-19 could be seen as an expression of their desire to inform other people about relevant news and, at the same time, as an effort to influence others' opinions in their own interest. Thus, high levels of SDO could strongly predict sharing of (fake) news on COVID-19. Consequently, we assume the following hypotheses:

H4: Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) positively predict the sharing of crisis news.

H5: Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) positively predict the sharing of fake news.²

The influence of trust- and science-related beliefs

Besides ideological beliefs, people's levels of trust in relevant institutions and societal systems may further affect how they select information in times of crisis. Investigating the influence of trust- and science-related beliefs on human behavior in the presence of health risks seems to be particularly fruitful as such risks pose a high threat and give rise to uncertainty in society. According to our literature review, responses to risks are partly shaped by available information, while the degree of certainty attributed to the information or its source is essential for subsequent threat assessments. High levels of uncertainty could act as a stressor, inducing anxiety and, therefore, undermine processing of new information and its believability.

As it is not possible for laypersons to grasp the complexity of the virus's magnitude, there is much scope for them to contest scientific news on the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in an incoherent information environment including fake news. In such a chaotic news scenario, trust in the source of information or in an actor can be a helpful guide for people selecting news. In this vein, institutional trust can be considered as a social mechanism that initially helps people to reduce uncertainty by delegating responsibility for a particular action to an actor or societal system (e.g., politics, medicine, or science) (Simmel, 2004). Mistrust, depicting an active state of uncertainty about whether a source or its assertions can be trusted, can, on the contrary, undermine people's risk assessments and make them vulnerable to

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² To structure the manuscript, we broke down the preregistered hypothesis six (H6) on the prediction of sharing behavior of fake news by RWA, SDO, and certainty of knowledge into hypothesis five (H5) and seven (H7) separately by belief system in the corresponding paper parts. For the original preregistered hypotheses on OSF, see https://osf.io/f9uah/?view_only=af5552cf82ba4678a45665118eb52330.

alternative crisis representations offered by fake news or conspiracy theories (Breakwell, 2020). Supporting that assumption, Zimmermann and Kohring (2020) regard institutional mistrust as "an origin of believing disinforming news" (p. 3). Their study, conducted during the 2017 German parliamentary election, showed that people's level of institutional mistrust in politics and the media is positively related to their belief in fake news. In other words, people low in institutional trust in politics and media were more prone to believe in fake news on the election. During the COVID-19 pandemic, three institutions highly depend on people's trust regarding their information dissemination: politics, traditional media, and science. Accordingly, against the background of the latter study result, three trust-related beliefs might hold the predictive power to explain the selection and believability of fake news on COVID-19.

In its broadest sense, institutional *trust in politics* refers to the extent to which people assess the core political institutions and actors as credible, fair, competent, transparent, and open to competing views (Zmerli & Newton, 2017). Thereby, political trust can be evaluated as a key component of a functioning democratic system. In contrast, mistrust in politics could potentially disrupt and destabilize democratic institutions and processes, particularly when it leads to an increase in the likelihood of fake news exposure and belief.

In addition to trust in politics, Kohring (2004) sees journalists (of the established media) as the leading information intermediaries which play a crucial role in generating, maintaining, and monitoring trust, mainly in politics. Hence, *trust in traditional media* is based on journalists' unbiased selection of news and their function as gatekeepers of information for society. Therefore, a media system that functions in this way can benefit a well-functioning democratic system. In contrast, mistrust can support the perception of media as not being a trustworthy and transparent source of information, providing fertile ground for fake news belief and conspiracy thinking.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, people have been exposed to science-related information provided, for instance, by epidemiologists and virologists. These experts, usually renowned scientists and scholars, often speak in a position of power on behalf of higher institutions. Although most people attribute high credibility to these experts, others show a relatively low *trust in science* (Imhoff et al., 2018). In times of a permanent health risk, the importance of whether people trust in science or not is relevant in many contexts; for instance, the acceptance of a vaccination is highly linked to trust in science (Hamilton et al., 2015).

In addition to trust-related beliefs, given the complexity of scientific findings, laypersons are often not able to fully evaluate the merits of scientific claims on their own and have to mostly rely on experts. This requires an appropriate understanding of which expert sources can be trusted and of the nature of scientific findings. Particularly in emerging fields, the state of knowledge changes quickly when new study results contradict previous assumptions. Science-related *epistemic beliefs* are individuals' views about the nature of knowledge and may range from the naïve view that knowledge is fixed to the more sophisticated understanding that new findings may change old truths (Kerwer & Rosman, 2020). Individuals who have a less sophisticated view of the nature and boundaries of human knowledge evaluate sources of knowledge less critical (Kammerer, 2013), argue in a less balanced manner (Oh & Jonassen, 2006), and accept scientific theories less, even when there is a high level of conceptual knowledge on an issue which is based on valid arguments (e.g., evolution acceptance: Ha et al., 2012). In addition, people who believe that knowledge is highly certain may have problems in processing new science-related messages which contradict previous viewpoints. In a risk scenario where the scientific community has not yet agreed on the consequences of an infection with a fatal virus, the ability to deal with knowledge that becomes evident through scientific discourse could influence the choice of news and its credibility. In other words, sophisticated epistemic beliefs that knowledge is not

fixed could hinder people from intentionally selecting fake news which often simplify the problem and disregard new and contradictory information.

Against this background, we hypothesize that not only trust in politics, traditional media, and science, but also science-related epistemic beliefs could influence how people select and believe in fake news on COVID-19. Thus, we hypothesize:

H6: Trust in politics, trust in the media, trust in science, and sophisticated epistemic beliefs negatively predict the selection of fake news and the attribution of credibility to fake news.

The aforementioned science-related naive epistemic beliefs about the structure and fluctuation of knowledge could also hinder people from checking news, and instead lead them to share news, even if it is fake. In times of health-related crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic where science-related news are often too complex to fully comprehend, a principally low level of acceptance of the joint scientific consensus could foster the distribution of fake news. That could apply to people who generally have a higher belief in the certainty of knowledge and therefore think that the content they share has to be accurate because old truths cannot change so easily. Thus, naive epistemic beliefs expressed by higher rates of the certainty of knowledge dimension could influence people's intention to forward fake news to their network. Therefore, we posit:

H7: Naive epistemic beliefs positively predict the sharing of fake news.

Method

To investigate these preregistered hypotheses, we conducted a survey during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were collected between April 15 and 28, 2020. When the study was launched, a total of 103,228 laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases had been transmitted to the Robert Koch Institute in Germany, and 1,861 deaths had been reported related to COVID-19 (Robert Koch Institute [RKI], 2020). At that time, contact restrictions

were mandated by the Government, and schools were closed throughout Germany. The study was approved by a local ethics committee. The data files and materials are available at the Open Science Framework (OSF) repository:

https://osf.io/f9uah/?view_only=af5552cf82ba4678a45665118eb52330.

Sample

A quota sample was drawn from an online access panel of the German research company “respondi AG”, which was representative for German Internet users aged 18 to 75 regarding gender, age, and education. Based on preregistered exclusion criteria, we excluded participants who were identified as inattentive responders due to their response time (less than 33% of the median time) or those who failed a control question. Based on these criteria, the adjusted sample consisted of 1,101 respondents, representative in terms of gender (female: 50.4%, male: 49.6%), age (18-29: 20%, 29-39: 18%, 39-49: 18 %, 49-59: 22%, 59-75: 22%; $M = 45.69$, $SD = 15.58$), and education (low [no educational qualifications, lower secondary school certificate]: 30%, medium [upper secondary school certificate]: 33%, high [university-entrance level qualification or higher]: 37%).

Procedure

At first, we asked the participants to assess the current threat posed by COVID-19 and the crisis management by the German Government (e.g., “To me, the German Government's crisis management is very convincing”). We further measured people’s media usage before and during the pandemic using fifteen items which listed possible media offers (e.g., daily newspapers, weekly magazines, private or broadcasting TV channels, radio, podcasts, blogs, social networking sites, alternative media offerings). To assess general social media use, we asked the participants about different platforms they use in their daily social media routine (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram) using a 5-point scale

(from 1 to 5)³. In order to evaluate an individual's selection of (mis)information and his or her attribution of credibility to information, we presented twelve different news headlines on the Corona crisis topic (seven fake news items, three real news items, two news pro/contra curfew items). Following an approach initially introduced by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), a stock of fake news articles was identified based on the results of the leading German-language fact-checking websites (e.g., "correctiv.org," "faktenfinder.de," "tagesschau.de"). The stories all included COVID-19-related statements that were verifiably false. The five selected fake news articles all contained similar crisis-related narratives, either blaming one particular actor or group for the outbreak of the pandemic (e.g., "Fratelli d'Italia Party: Italian Chinese community to blame for mass death"), reporting the fake efficacy or ineffectiveness of certain drugs (e.g., "ACE inhibitors, i.e., blood pressure reducers, drastically increase the probability of infection with the coronavirus") or drawing attention to an impending shortage of supplies (e.g., "Agricultural organization "Land creates connection" warns: Germany will not be able to guarantee the supply of safe food from the region to the population for much longer"). All of these narratives trigger fear and insecurity. Two placebo fake news items, which both transmit similar crisis narratives but were never circulated online, were produced to control for a possible inflation of the fake news scores in the upcoming analysis (e.g., "Is the Third World War imminent? How the Middle East is now taking its revenge on the NATO states with a deadly pandemic"). We also included three accurate COVID-19 news headlines (e.g., "Record number of unemployment registrations in the USA in Corona crisis: almost 3.3 million citizens made an initial application for unemployment assistance") and two headlines pro and con curfews during the pandemic (e.g., "People don't take COVID-19 seriously enough: Curfews can no longer be avoided"; "Don't radically limit freedom: Why

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³ These measures were included for an analysis of media repertoires, which is beyond the scope of the present manuscript.

curfews must be avoided”), which were used to measure selective exposure behavior. The order of the displayed headlines was randomized. Participants were asked whether they recalled the news, considered it to be a credible source, or how likely it was that they would read and share the corresponding article. Following the ethical guidelines, after that task, participants were informed in detail about which of the headlines contained true or (placebo) fake news. This was supported by additional information about the source that identified the message as false as well as a statement clarifying the news’ incorrect content (e.g., “No human is responsible for the development of the coronavirus. Currently, research is based on the assumption that COVID-19, as with the SARS and MERS viruses, was transmitted by animals.”). Finally, participants were fully debriefed and were invited to download the explanation of the news headlines as a PDF document.

Measures

Exposure to attitude-consistent content. After each news headline, participants were asked how likely it was that they would read the full article and then forward it to their social media contacts. The likelihood of selection and sharing was measured on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). To assess participants’ exposure to attitude-consistent content, we asked them to report on their attitude towards curfews during the Corona pandemic ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.29$; “In Germany, the curfews should be even stricter” on a 5-point scale). This item was dichotomized to differentiate between opponents (values 1-2, $n = 546$) and supporters (values 4-5, $n = 266$) of curfews, thereby allowing categorization of attitude-consistent vs. attitude-inconsistent news selection (e.g., attitude-consistent when a supporter/opponent would like to read the full pro-/con-curfew article; attitude-inconsistent when a supporter/opponent would like to read the full con-/pro-curfew article). The resulting variables represented a likelihood score of a participant selecting an attitude-consistent or attitude-inconsistent news item. For further analysis, we calculated a corresponding ratio

score by subtracting the attitude-consistent news selection variable from the attitude-inconsistent selection variable. This enabled us to detect the likelihood of exposure to attitude-consistent over attitude-inconsistent content on a continuous level ($M = 0.42$, $SD = 1.91$).

Fake news exposure, recall, believability, and sharing behavior. To assess the participants' exposure to fake news and sharing behavior, we calculated the overall mean score of the likelihood of reading ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.63$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$) and sharing ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 1.33$, $\alpha = .87$) the articles of the displayed headlines on a 7-point scale. We further asked whether the participants had already encountered the news item (1 = no; 2 = yes). The perceived credibility was measured with a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 "certainly false" to 4 "certainly true" adapted by Zimmermann & Kohring (2020). We again calculated the overall mean score, which represents the average credibility of the presented fake news item ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.68$, $\alpha = .59$).

RWA. RWA was assessed with the commonly used short scale of authoritarian attitudes (B-RWA-6: Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2015), which includes six items (e.g., "Our society must crack down on criminals"; "The country would be better off if young people were more aware of values and traditions"; 5-point scale); the values for these items were averaged ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.67$). It has to be acknowledged that the internal consistency of the scale in the sample was low ($\alpha = .57$). Given that it is a standard scale, and other studies have reported similar low reliability scores (Jedinger & Burger, 2019), we did not further modify the selection of the items.

SDO. Three items measured social dominance orientation (e.g., "Every society needs groups that are above and others that are below the social hierarchy"; $M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.85$) by adapting the short KSDO-3 scale (Aichholzer, 2019), based on a translation of the SDO7 scale (Ho et al., 2015). Like the B-RWA-6 scale, the KSDO-3 scale is listed in the GESIS

ZIS catalog and is considered a valid measuring instrument for SDO in German-speaking countries. However, a similar weak reliability score, as above, must be noted for our sample ($\alpha = .56$).

Trust in politics, traditional media, and science. We captured trust in politics using three items (e.g., “People in government waste tax money” (reverse-coded)) which were rated on a 7-point scale ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.46$) with an acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .75$) adapted from the American National Election Studies (ANES). To measure trust in traditional media, we employed the following three items (Schultz et al., 2017): “The established media report in a balanced way,” “The reports of the established media are accurate,” and “The established media give a full account of the events.” These items were rated on a 7-point scale ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.58$, $\alpha = .94$). To ensure that participants’ answers referred to traditional news media, they were explicitly requested to think of the established media in Germany, i.e., the large TV stations or newspapers that most people know. To assess trust in science, we asked respondents to rate a single item (“How much trust do you have in science and research in Germany?”; $M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.35$) using a 7-point scale.

Certainty of knowledge. To assess the epistemic belief that knowledge is fixed, we included one dimension from a scale by Hofer (2000). The participants rated eight items (e.g., “On this subject the truth does not change”) on a 7-point scale ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.91$, $\alpha = .70$) to assess their perceived certainty of knowledge in the field.

Controls. Gender, age, and education as well as political ideology, which was measured on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 “left-leaning” to 10 “right-leaning” ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.81$), were assessed as further variables.

Results

According to our first hypothesis *H1*, we expected people to select attitude-consistent content more frequently than attitude-inconsistent content. To determine whether there was a

mean difference between an attitude-consistent and attitude-inconsistent selection, we conducted a parametric paired sample t-test. As predicted, the paired t-test revealed a significant difference between the mean scores of both variables, $t(1101) = 7.227, p < .001$ (two-tailed) (attitude-consistent selection: $M = 3.38, SD = 3.15$; attitude-inconsistent selection: $M = 2.96, SD = 2.97$). Hence, *H1* was supported by the data. Exploratively, regarding *RQ1*, we examined whether there was a mean difference between those who shared attitude-consistent content and those who shared attitude-inconsistent content. A paired t-test indicated a significant difference between the variables, $t(1101) = 5.721, p < .001$ (two-tailed) (pro attitude-consistent sharing: $M = 1.69, SD = 2.43$; attitude-inconsistent sharing: $M = 1.40, SD = 2.14$).

To test the subsequent hypotheses, we conducted five hierarchical regression analyses with the dependent variables: (1) selective exposure behavior (ratio score variable: attitude-consistent selection over attitude-inconsistent selection), (2) fake news selection likelihood, (3) perceived fake news believability, (4) crisis news sharing, and (5) fake news sharing. As predictors, the following variables were entered: (1) gender and age (as control variables); (2) RWA and SDO; (3) trust in politics, trust in traditional media, trust in science, and certainty of knowledge. Four of five regression models were significant (see Table 1).

[Table 1 here]

The influence of ideological beliefs

Based on *H2*, we expected that RWA would increase preference for attitude-consistent over attitude-inconsistent content. However, RWA was not a significant predictor of preference for attitude-consistent over attitude-inconsistent content, calculated based on the ratio score variable ($\beta = -.058, p = .520$); therefore, this assumption was not supported.

Fake news selection and believability. In *H3*, RWA was assumed to positively predict the selection of fake news and the attribution of believability to fake news. Whereas

RWA positively predicted the likelihood of selection fake news ($\beta = .150, p < .001$), RWA was not found to have a significant effect on perceived fake news believability ($\beta = .055, p = .071$). Thus, the data only partially supported this hypothesis. Further exploration of this aspect, taking into account the predictor SDO, revealed a significant positive effect of SDO on the dependent variable ($\beta = .100, p < .001$): People high in SDO evaluate fake news as more credible than those who score low on the SDO dimension.

Crisis and fake news sharing. We tested the assumption that right-leaning ideological beliefs could influence people's overall sharing of crisis news and found that both ideological beliefs examined were significant predictors for participants' sharing of crisis news (*H4*). RWA ($\beta = .068, p = .030$) and SDO ($\beta = .102, p < .001$) positively predicted the dependent variable in the regression model. Therefore, *H4* was supported.

Regarding participants' sharing of fake news, we hypothesized that RWA and SDO would be positively related to the dependent variable (*H5*). Whereas SDO ($\beta = .103, p < .001$) positively predicted sharing of fake news, RWA emerged as a positive but non-significant predictor of sharing fake news with social media contacts ($\beta = .059, p = .059$). In conclusion, the data only partially supported *H5*.⁴

The influence of trust- and science-related beliefs

Fake news selection and believability. In *H6*, we postulated that trust in politics, trust in traditional media, trust in science, and sophisticated epistemic beliefs would negatively predict the selection of fake news and fake news believability. The data showed a significant effect of trust in politics, traditional media, and science on participants' fake news selection. Contrary to our assumption, trust in traditional media ($\beta = .081, p = .041$) and trust in science

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⁴ Additionally, we had preregistered the hypothesis that SDO would positively influence peoples' self-perception as an online opinion leader during the COVID-19 pandemic. As expected, that relationship was found to be highly significant. However, to allow for a consistent structure of the manuscript, analyses on opinion leadership were not included but are reported as an appendix on OSF (https://osf.io/f9uah/?view_only=af5552cf82ba4678a45665118eb52330).

($\beta = .101, p = .005$) positively predicted people's fake news selection during the corona pandemic, whereas trust in politics ($\beta = -.092, p = .006$) negatively predicted the outcome variable. Besides, the effect of the participants' overall certainty of knowledge on their fake news selection was non-significant ($\beta = .061, p = .054$). Regarding people's attribution of believability to fake news, the results revealed that people's belief in COVID-19 fake news was significantly influenced by certainty of knowledge, trust in politics, and trust in science but not significantly related to trust in traditional media. Certainty of knowledge ($\beta = .090, p = .005$) positively predicted the perceived believability of fake news, whereas trust in politics ($\beta = -.118, p < .001$) and trust in science ($\beta = -.150, p < .001$) emerged as negative predictors. Consequently, *H6* was only partially supported.

Crisis and fake news sharing. Moreover, regarding the sharing of crisis news, our data exploratively revealed that mistrust in politics, trust in traditional media and certainty of knowledge had a significant influence on participants' sharing behavior. The activity of sharing crisis news with social media contacts was positively related with an individual's trust in the media ($\beta = .087, p = .029$) and certainty of knowledge ($\beta = .153, p < .001$), but negatively related with his or her trust in politics ($\beta = -.096, p = .005$).

As hypothesized in *H7*, certainty of knowledge ($\beta = .156, p < .001$) further positively predicted sharing of fake news. Additionally, trust in politics was found to be a negative significant predictor for fake news sharing on COVID-19 ($\beta = -.099, p = .004$).

Discussion

Given that people's selection and sharing of information apparently increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, we argued that to examine underlying attitudinal belief systems could benefit the understanding of news usage under threat. Based on representative survey data, we aimed to investigate the importance of ideological, trust-, and science-related beliefs which may influence how people select and share (fake) news items and evaluate news

sources as credible. In the following, we will discuss our findings' implications in order to highlight the importance of individuals' beliefs related to our dependent variables in response to a threat. With our results, we aim to contribute to better understanding people's information selection and sharing under threat, focusing on why some people are particularly vulnerable to fake news, whereas others seem to be relatively resilient.

Initially, our results showed that people generally preferred attitude-consistent over attitude-inconsistent information on COVID-19 (with the example of the topic of curfews). Consistent with other research, people are most likely to select congenial information which upholds their prior attitudes (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). In addition, we exploratively detected such confirmation bias also for people's sharing behavior. People are most likely to share attitude-consistent content on COVID-19. This result supports findings of studies investigating people's sharing behavior of partisan news: People more often share news items in line with their prior attitudes, especially if they are ideologically congenial (Guess et al., 2019).

Beyond these general patterns of people's tendency to select and share like-minded news during the COVID-19 pandemic, we mainly focused on the influence of three different belief systems which, under conditions of threat, can guide their selection, sharing, and belief of COVID-19 (fake) news.

An examination of the influence of *ideological beliefs* anchored in political conservatism revealed that RWA is an influential factor for the selection of fake news. This finding supports recent suggestions that fake news, which often incorporates extreme right-leaning and conspiracy-inspired narratives, could be particularly attractive to people high in RWA (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020). With regard to the hypothesis that RWA is activated by threat, unlike Lavine and colleagues (2005), we did not identify RWA as a significant predictor for people's selection of attitude-consistent over attitude-inconsistent content. Thus,

against our assumptions, our data did not support RWA's influence on people's news congruency under threat.⁵ A possible explanation for this is that our field study was conducted in a real-life risk situation in which people were exposed to an abundance of threatening news daily, rather than measuring selective exposure behavior under threat in a laboratory experiment. That imminent confrontation with COVID-19 threat might have mitigated RWA-related activation effects over time compared to acute stimuli, made salient under laboratory conditions on short notice. Furthermore, with an experimental design, it is possible to control the effect of a stimulus. Our study only determined the degree to which participants felt threatened by COVID-19 and did not determine the type of threat, including possible political, economic, intergroup, or intrapsychic varieties. Related to that differentiation needed in terms of different types of threats, related studies suggest that authoritarian predispositions are more frequently activated by increasing the social, demographic, or political diversity of society (Feldman, 2003), whereas other research lines highlight the role of mortality salience (Lavine et al., 2005). Further research is needed to identify the types of threat that may activate RWA, however, the present findings suggest that people high in RWA do not necessarily exhibit a stronger confirmation bias in crisis situations – but instead show a higher likelihood of selecting fake news.

On the other hand, SDO, not RWA, emerged as a decisive predictor for people's attribution of believability to fake news and sharing them. In other words, our results revealed that people high in SDO are more likely to believe in COVID-19 fake news and to disseminate them online. The findings suggest that ideological beliefs in the legitimization of hierarchy and social dominance lead to a higher engagement with fake news. To our knowledge, albeit related studies positively associated SDO with self-promotion as a strong

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⁵ To check whether there was a direct interaction effect of threat perception and RWA on people's attitude-consistent news selection, we also calculated a moderation analysis with the PROCESS macro for SPSS by Hayes (2013). We did not identify a significant interaction effect for both the ratio score variable and the attitude-consistent selection variable.

predictor for sharing news (Islam et al., 2020), the present research is one of the first that connects SDO directly to the belief in and the sharing of fake news. Therefore, predicting distinct outcomes regarding people's fake news usage and related activities, both RWA and SDO are worthy to further investigations.

Second, including *trust-related beliefs* in our analysis, the results indicated that political trust, as one of the most consistent predictors, plays a crucial role. Whether people selected, shared, and believed in fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic was strongly related to their mistrust in politics. Likewise, recent findings by Zimmermann and Kohring (2020) demonstrated a negative relationship between trust in politics and people attributing credibility to fake news. Along these lines, recent research on the acceptance and adoption of COVID-19 behavioral protective measures uncovered a consistent negative effect of political trust (Dohle et al., 2020). Consequently, results on trust in politics support previous assumptions that people evaluate information based on attitudinal cues related to institutional mistrust, often resulting in affective political polarization (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In contrast to mistrust in politics, trust in traditional media and science were unexpectedly found to be ambivalent predictors for fake news selection, sharing, and believability. Contrary to results reported by Zimmermann and Kohring (2020), trust in traditional media even positively predicted fake news selection but did not have a significant effect on people's belief in fake news. Furthermore, trust in science was positively related to selecting and sharing fake news, while negatively associated with its believability. Accordingly, contrary to our hypotheses, the findings suggest that trust in traditional media and trust in science do not mitigate people's reading and sharing of unverified COVID-19 news, but partly foster it. As reported by other studies of crisis scenarios, a possible explanation could be that in times of crisis people experience a higher need to inform themselves on the crisis topic and generally tend to select more information (in a more thoughtless way). In this process, trust in

traditional media and science can particularly increase the need and amount of selecting and sharing of news, regardless of whether the news is accurate or not. In other words, people with overall higher levels of trust in traditional media and science are more likely to select and share crisis news, even if the news is fake. Perhaps their trust is also somewhat mindless in that it also extends to dubious media sources.

Concerning *science-related beliefs*, certainty of knowledge as one relevant epistemic belief emerged as a stable predictor for almost all dependent variables. People who are firmly convinced that knowledge is fixed and relatively unchangeable are more prone to select, share, and believe in (fake) news. Our findings corroborate results indicating that epistemological reasoning influences people's ability to process new knowledge and scientific progress. People's belief that knowledge is relatively stable and unchangeable may undermine necessary measures to prevent disease spread as individuals avoid, deny, or misinterpret relevant information. In this vein, because certainty of knowledge is strongly related to a person's vulnerability to fake news, our results support the assumption that a new "endangered role of science in society is characteristic of post-truthism" (Kienhues et al., 2020, p. 144).

Overall, in terms of limitations, the study exhibits a potential sampling bias due to the recruitment procedure which was conducted using an online access panel, as with all Internet-based research. In order to counteract this problem, we tried to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible by using quotas for gender, age, and education. Second, we have to consider that the study design incorporated a rather artificial scenario in which the information was selected. We assessed the choice, believability, and intention to share the information by retrieving items related to the corresponding news headlines. While fake news headlines were overrepresented in the selection task, the participants were initially unaware of which of the headlines contained true or false information. Therefore, our study's

quasi-experimental procedure highly reduced the complexity of a person's selection process, and observational studies would prove useful. Furthermore, we could not include all misinformation distributed online during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we tried to weaken this limitation by drawing on major German fact-checking websites when selecting the most prominent fake news, and by considering a wide range of narratives. Additionally, it should also be noted that the measurement methods of both ideological beliefs produced a relatively low reliability score, which reduces the validity of the corresponding results. For further research, we therefore recommend not using short versions of the scales, as adopted in the present study, and broader measurement procedures to assess both RWA and SDO more adequately including subtle differences in meaning. Moreover, the present study's results should be interpreted with caution due to the unique sample set-up of the COVID-19 pandemic. Replications and further testing of threat-related interaction effects are required.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the present preregistered study confirms the influence of prior belief systems on people's information selection and sharing in response to a threat. Based on our data, we can provide insights into people who are particularly susceptible to misinformation. In our summary of the core results, we will focus on the risk factors identified for usage of fake news on COVID-19.

Within the three belief systems examined, RWA and SDO as ideological beliefs, mistrust in politics as a trust-related belief, and certainty of knowledge as a science-related belief emerged as key antecedents of people's information behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to politically disenchanted citizens, people who uphold right-wing authoritarian attitudes, refuse to be subordinated to a social system, and struggle with processing new, often contradictory, scientific knowledge selectively turn to, believe in, or share fake news on COVID-19 with their online networks.

As theoretically presumed, a closer examination of the results on ideological beliefs revealed that RWA and SDO predict two distinct outcomes (Duckitt, 2001). Accordingly, our findings indicated that RWA is a prominent belief which influences people's selection of COVID-19 fake news, whereas SDO is more decisive for sharing them. The sharing of fake news seems to meet an individual's need to attain a higher status within a competitive world, to influence others' opinions, and to spread news in one's network. RWA, on the other hand, which is predominantly based on a dangerous worldview, stimulates people's need to overcome uncertainties as fast as possible. Fake news narratives on COVID-19 might be more likely to provide individuals with like-minded cognitive closure than contradictory statements made by scientists or politicians. Thus, both of these outcomes are the behavioral consequences of different motivational goals produced by distinct ideological beliefs. However, because we only assessed a person's news selection and sharing intention but not the underlying motives (e.g., attraction to right-leaning narratives, intention to influence or enlighten a network), further research is needed to disentangle the empirical connections. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, no other study has yet examined SDO in relation to humans' information behavior. Because our findings reveal notable relationships, it would be of interest to test the predictive power of ideological beliefs for selecting and sharing news and opinions in further study designs.

Additionally, the significant role of mistrust in politics and epistemic beliefs in predicting people's selection and sharing of fake news has practical implications for combatting the abundance of misinformation. Apart from measures to increase people's confidence in politics, initiatives to promote students' competence in using and evaluating knowledge could be one approach to reduce the risks of both factors. This is because epistemic beliefs are often established at an early stage in education. Epistemic beliefs, which were assessed based on people's certainty of knowledge in the present study, can predict

related outcomes, for instance, whether people exhibit or use epistemic cognition skills (e.g., how to create, evaluate, and use knowledge), including critical thinking (Greene & Yu, 2016). According to the epistemic risk factor identified, to fully develop such skills, teacher training and education programs in schools would be vital to promote critical thinking and prevent individuals from being susceptible to fake news.

In summary, the findings of the present research suggest that people's selection, belief, and sharing of information on COVID-19 is based on pre-existing belief systems. As expected, behavioral outcomes are related not only to trust issues, but to more in-depth psychological internalizations such as ideological or epistemic beliefs. However, because the abundance of information during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in fake news becoming more prominent in public debates, further research is needed to specify the circumstances under which prior belief systems may strengthen people's susceptibility to misinformation. We hope that the present study will contribute to a better understanding of people's information behavior in response to a threat while providing an application framework for the conception of preventive measures that limit an information behavior rooted in partially distorted beliefs

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Table 1

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Including Selective Exposure, Fake News Selection, Fake News Believability, Crisis News Sharing, and Fake News Sharing as Dependent Variables (N = 1101)

	Selective exposure			Fake news selection			Fake news believability			Crisis news sharing			Fake news sharing		
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE_B</i>)	β	ΔR^2	<i>B</i> (<i>SE_B</i>)	β	ΔR^2	<i>B</i> (<i>SE_B</i>)	β	ΔR^2	<i>B</i> (<i>SE_B</i>)	β	ΔR^2	<i>B</i> (<i>SE_B</i>)	β	ΔR^2
Step 1			.001			.023			.010			.006			.008
Gender (1=male/2=female)	-.02 (.12)	-.01		.30 (.10)	.09**		.09 (.04)	.07*		-.03 (.08)	-.01		-.05 (.08)	-.02	
Age	.00 (.00)	.00		.01 (.00)	.07*		-.00 (.00)	-.07*		-.01 (.00)	-.14***		-.01 (.00)	-.13***	
Step 2			.001			.029			.015			.020			.018
RWA	-.06 (.09)	-.02		.37 (.07)	.15***		.06 (.03)	.06		.14 (.06)	.07*		.12 (.06)	.06	
SDO	-.05 (.07)	-.02		.10 (.06)	.05		.08 (.02)	.10***		.17 (.05)	.10***		.16 (.05)	.10***	
Step 3			.022			.026			.056			.030			.028
Trust in politics	-.07 (.05)	-.06		-.10 (.04)	-.09**		-.06 (.02)	-.12***		-.09 (.03)	-.10**		-.09 (.03)	-.10**	
Trust in media	-.08 (.05)	-.07		.08 (.04)	.08*		-.02 (.02)	-.04		.07 (.04)	.09*		.03 (.03)	.04	
Trust in science	-.09 (.05)	-.07		.12 (.04)	.10**		-.08 (.02)	-.15***		-.05 (.04)	-.05		-.06 (.04)	-.06	
Certainty of knowledge	.00 (.07)	.00		.11 (.06)	.06		.07 (.02)	.09**		.23 (.05)	.15***		.23 (.05)	.16***	
Total R^2			.023			.079			.081			.055			.054

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.