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The Pandemic Through the Social Media Lens:

Correlates of COVID-19-related Social Media Use in Austria

Abstract

During the first year of the pandemic, many Austrians have turned to social media to inform themselves and engage in discussions about the COVID-19 pandemic. However, early on, the World Health Organisation, as well as the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, raised serious concerns about an "infodemic" of misinformation spreading on the most commonly used social media platforms. Against this background, this study uses a cross-sectional survey design (n = 1,859) to explore if and to what extent citizens who nevertheless engaged in COVID-19-related information-seeking behaviours on social media during the first year of the crisis may have systematically different attitudes and beliefs related to the pandemic compared to citizens who did not. We found the most distinct patterns across platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp) as well as across different activity types (i.e., reading, click speech, writing) when it comes to trust in institutions as well as COVID-19 conspiracy belief. Findings lead us to believe that the social media lens shows a stark imbalance that potentially makes (at least some of the) platforms a subpar and possibly seriously distorted source of information during an extreme health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
Keywords: Social Media, Coronavirus, Trust in Institutions, Conspiracy Belief, Survey Design

Zusammenfassung

Im ersten Jahr der Pandemie haben viele Österreicherinnen und Österreicher soziale Medien genutzt, um sich zu informieren und an Diskussionen über die COVID-19-Pandemie teilzunehmen. Sowohl die Weltgesundheitsorganisation als auch das österreichische Bundesministerium für Inneres äußerten jedoch schon früh ernsthafte Bedenken über eine "Infodemie" von Fehlinformationen, die sich vor allem auf den am häufigsten genutzten Social-Media-Plattformen verbreiten würde. Vor diesem Hintergrund wird in dieser Studie anhand einer repräsentativen Querschnittserhebung (n = 1.859) untersucht, ob und inwieweit Bürger*innen, die sich im ersten Jahr der Krise dennoch in sozialen Medien auf COVID-19-bezogene Informationssuche begeben ha-

ben, systematisch andere Einstellungen und Überzeugungen in Bezug auf die Pandemie haben als Bürger*innen, die dies nicht getan haben. Wir fanden deutliche Unterschiede zwischen verschiedenen Plattformen (d. h. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube und WhatsApp) sowie zwischen verschiedenen Aktivitätsarten (d. h. Lesen, Click Speech, Schreiben), wenn es um das Vertrauen in Institutionen und den Glauben an COVID-19-Verschwörungstheorien geht. Die Ergebnisse führen uns zu der Annahme, dass der Blick durch die Social-Media-Brille (zumindest bei einigen der Plattformen) größere Verzerrungen der politischen Wahrnehmung zur Folge haben kann und damit keine adäquate Informationsquelle während einer extremen Gesundheitskrise wie der COVID-19-Pandemie darstellt.

Keywords: Soziale Medien, Coronavirus, Vertrauen in Institutionen, Verschwörungsmythen, Umfragen

1 Introduction

Just like in previous health crises, high levels of uncertainty have led some citizens to flock to social media to inform themselves and to engage in discussions about the CO-VID-19 pandemic (Strekalova, 2017; Su, 2021; Thackeray, Croockston, & West, 2013). However, already early on during the pandemic, on 15 February 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General raised concerns about an "infodemic", i.e., the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19-related misinformation concerning the virus' origins, severity, and the efficiency of mitigation strategies (World Health Organization, 2020). Soon after that, the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2020) warned explicitly against such misinformation referring to its spread via social media and urged citizens to trust information from official sources only. Given these circumstances, this short paper sets out to explore if and to what extent Austrian citizens who nevertheless engaged in COVID-19-related information-seeking behaviours on social media during the first year of the crisis may have systematically different attitudes and beliefs related to the pandemic than citizens who did not.

We build on a large body of literature that is concerned with questions of why and how citizens (politically) engage on social media, more generally, or on different platforms, in particular (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, Huber, & Liu, 2017; Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012; Praprotnik, Perlot, Ingruber, & Filzmaier, 2019; Vonbun & Schönbach, 2014). Some focus on content characteristics and show that different content advantages different types of engagement (Eberl, Tolochko, Jost, Heidenreich, & Boomgaarden, 2020; Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019). Others are concerned with individuals' motives of engaging in rather passive *reading*, low cognitive effort clicking of the "Like" or "Share" button – so-called *click speech* –, and higher cognitive effort *writing* (e.g., Jost, Ziegele, & Naab, 2020). In sum, this research finds notable differences between people who engage in information-seeking on social media and those who do not. Furthermore, studies identify specificities in the correlates for the use of different

social media platforms as well as between different types of social media activities. However, the literature on social media use in times of the pandemic is still thin, particularly when it comes to taking differences between platforms and activities into account. This is where our study aims to expand on previous research.

2 Literature Review

In the context of previous pandemics, perceived health risks and anxieties have been shown to lead to increased social media information-seeking behaviour (Strekalova, 2017; Thackeray et al., 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, first studies have argued that the relationship might, instead, be inverse in that social media use may lead to emotional contagion, therefore increased anxiety amongst individuals (Wheaton, Prikhidko, & Messner, 2020). Respective studies, however, often derive their conclusions from bivariate analyses and have neither differentiated between different kinds of anxieties nor between different social media platforms or activities.

Another strand of research is concerned with the association between political and societal trust and social media use. Trust in government can be seen as an indicator of democratic health as citizens' trust legitimates and enables governments to tackle difficult policy problems and react in times of crisis (Kritzinger, Foucault, Lachat, Partheymüller, Plescia, & Brouard, 2021). The occasionally found negative association between governmental trust and social media use (e.g., Klein & Robison, 2020) might thus be particularly problematic during a pandemic, when trust in, and adjustment to governmentally sanctioned virus mitigation measures become crucial (Allington, Duffy, Wessely, Dhavan, & Rubin, 2020). On the other hand, studies also find that citizens who inform themselves via social media tend to be *more* trusting of traditional media (e.g., Praprotnik et al., 2019). A similar positive relationship has been argued about social media information-seeking behaviours and trust in scientific expertise (Huber, Barnidge, Gil de Zúñiga, & Liu, 2019). However, these studies cannot account for the large uncertainty, the elite-driven and top-down policies, as well as the increased media visibility and scrutiny of scientific experts (Eberl, Huber, & Greussing, 2021; Wormer, 2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic that may have put citizens' public trust under particular stress.

Another frequently discussed issue that may come with a lack of public trust is the belief in alternative theories about the way things are, i.e., all sorts of conspiracy theories that root in the assumption of an evil and all-powerful elite at work (Eberl et al., 2021). Additionally, research on COVID-19 conspiracies finds strong associations between social media use and COVID-19 conspiracy belief (e.g., Allington et al., 2020; Romer & Jamieson 2021; Su, 2021), and conspiracy belief and vaccine hesitancy (Paul, Eberl, & Partheymüller, 2021), thus potentially confirming the concerns of the detrimental consequences of a possible "infodemic" initially raised by the WHO. Again, however, these studies did not account for possible differences between social media platforms (but see Theocharis et al., 2021) or different types of engagement on social media. Hence, by dis-

tinguishing different social media platforms as well as social media activities, the present paper aims to bring this previous literature together and investigate the relationship between pandemic attitudes and beliefs and social media use in a more nuanced manner.

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Study Design

Inspired by the short literature review above, we explore the correlates of COVID-19-related social media use. We do so by using survey data collected by the Austrian Corona Panel Project (ACPP) that is publicly available via the Austrian Social Science Data Archive (AUSSDA). The data collection of the multi-wave online panel survey started in March 2020. A representative sample of about 1,500 Austrian residents aged older than 14 years was drawn based on quotas from a major online access panel (certified under ISO 20252). Respondents were interviewed at regular intervals, with dropouts being compensated for by the recruitment of fresh respondents. In addition, post-stratification weights are available to match the sample distributions with population targets (see Kittel et al., 2020a and Kittel et al., 2020b). Primarily, we make use of the eighth and seventeenth wave of the ACPP survey (field period: wave 8 – 15/05/2020–20/05/2020 and wave 17 – 13/11/2020–20/11/2020, respectively), each of which includes a module on COVID-19-related social media use as well as a set of attitudes and beliefs about the pandemic. If a specific variable is not available in wave 8 or 17, respectively, we impute them from surrounding waves.[1] These two datasets are then stacked and analysed together controlling for wave and with standard errors clustered within respondents.

3.2 Measurement and Variables

To measure social media use, two indicators, covering two dimensions, are used as dependent variables: (i) platform-specific coronavirus information-seeking behaviour and (ii) non-platform-specific coronavirus social media activity (i.e., reading, click speech, writing). First, we asked respondents to indicate to what extent they were using some of the most widely known social media platforms during the past week to inform themselves about the pandemic: (a) Facebook, (b) Instagram, (c) Twitter, (d) YouTube, (e) WhatsApp. The responses were recorded on a five-point scale from 1 "not at all", 2 "once a week", 3 "several times a week", 4 "once a day", 5 "several times a day". Second, we used the same five-point scale to assess the extent to which respondents engaged in different types of activities on social media platforms in the past week: (a) "Read posts by others that deal with content about the coronavirus" [*Reading*], (b) "When others post about the coronavirus, pressed the 'like' button, 'shared', or 'retweeted' it" [*Click Speech*], (c) "Wrote postings about the coronavirus in social media networks" [*Writing*].

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1) In a few instances, responses to some independent variables stem from waves fielded a few weeks before or after these two primary waves. Control variables have been asked whenever the (fresh) respondent joined the panel survey.

Our analyses focus on different kinds of predictors, pandemic-related attitudes and beliefs, that are deemed relevant based on the literature review above. First, we examine to what extent COVID-19-related economic and health anxieties are associated with respondents' social media use. In this line, we asked participants to indicate the degree to which they perceived the pandemic as threatening for their health and economic standards on five-point scales. Answers were recoded and grouped in three categories (1 "very/rather low", 2 "medium" to 3 "very/rather high"). Second, we take into account respondents' institutional trust. In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 "no trust at all" to 10 "very much trust", how much they trust each of the following institutions in the context of the pandemic: (a) "the federal government", (b) "public television (ORF)", (c) "science and research". For better readability in the figures below, the variables were rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Third, we measured respondents' support for the containment measures by asking how much they agreed with the following statement using a five-point scale: "It was a mistake to adopt all these measures to contain the coronavirus". Answers were grouped and recoded into three categories (1 "very/rather low", 2 "medium", 3 "very /rather high" support). Fourth, we tap into respondents' COVID-19-related conspiracy beliefs by constructing an additive index that has reasonably high internal consistency (Chronbach's alpha = .86). The six items used measure respondents' agreement with the facticity of different statements such as "The coronavirus is a bioweapon that was deliberately developed to harm humans" or "Bill Gates wants to vaccinate humanity by force to earn a lot of money", for example (see Table A1 in the Appendix for a full list of statements). As Sutton and Douglas (2014, 256) explain, "[t]o believe in any conspiracy theory is to believe that authorities can be malevolent, that they can conceal their evil-doing, and that official explanations for major events may be lies." Again, for better readability, the index was rescaled to range from 0 (= respondent does not believe in any of the conspiracy statements) to 1 (= respondent does believe in all of the conspiracy statements).

Finally, we control for some potentially confounding factors. First, we include key demographics such as age, gender, and education. Specifically, we compare social media use between three age groups (<31, 31-65, >65 years), men and women, and three educational levels (low, medium, high). Furthermore, to ensure that our COVID-19-related beliefs are disentangled from respondents' ideological leaning, we asked and controlled for respondents' left-right self-placement on a scale from 0 "left" to 10 "right". As for previous variables, the values were rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Lastly, respondents were asked to indicate whether they suffered from any pre-existing conditions that may lead to an increased health risk due to the virus.

3.3 Statistical Analysis

The statistical analyses proceed in three steps: First, we explore the descriptive distribution of the measures capturing COVID-19-related social media activity. Then, we

conduct two sets of multivariate linear regression (OLS) analyses to identify correlates of coronavirus information-seeking behaviour with each of the five platforms surveyed, on the one hand, and with the three types of activity on social media platforms more generally, on the other hand. Furthermore, we include all pandemic attitudes and beliefs as well as controls simultaneously. We do so to account for mutual confounding effects and to assess the relative importance of each of the predictors. COVID-19-related social media use and pandemic attitudes and beliefs have been measured once during (or close to) each of the two primary waves. To counteract small sample sizes due to the use of variables from several different waves, the datasets of wave 8 and wave 17 were stacked. We apply listwise deletion of missing values, which leaves us with a consistent basis of 1,859 observations (933 from wave 8 and 944 from wave 17) for 1,270 respondents with full records on all variables.

4 Results

4.1 COVID-19-related Social Media Activity

Both platform-specific information-seeking behaviour, as well as the type of activity on social media platforms, show distinct response distributions (Table 1). The results show that a substantial share of the population has been using social media regularly to inform themselves about the pandemic. 29 % and 26.8 % of Austrians informed themselves once a day or more via WhatsApp and Facebook, respectively. 13.6 % and 14.2 % did so via Instagram and YouTube. Still a not insignificant share 5.4 % informed themselves at least once a day using Twitter. When asked about the types of activity on social media, 19.4 % of respondents said that they read content about the coronavirus once a day or more often, 9.3 % interacted with content using click speech, and 4.7 % wrote postings or comments about the coronavirus themselves.

Table 1: Frequency COVID-19 related Social Media Activity (in %)

	Platform-specific information seeking					Type of activity		
	Face-book	Insta-gram	Twitter	YouTube	WhatsApp	Reading	Click Speech	Writing
several times a day	18.6	9.2	3.5	9.2	23.2	11.6	5.1	1.7
once a day	8.2	4.4	1.9	5	5.8	7.8	4.2	3
several times a week	12.7	5.4	4	10	11.1	22	13.2	5.7
once a week	7	4.4	3.3	9.4	4.9	11.4	7.1	6
not at all	53.4	76.5	87.3	66.5	55	47.2	70.4	83.7

Note: ACPP data (N = 1,859; 15-20 May and 13–20 November 2020; data is stacked and weighted)

4.2 Correlates of COVID-19-related Social Media Use

To examine the relationship between pandemic attitudes and beliefs and platform-specific coronavirus information-seeking behaviours as well as different types of social media activities, we ran multiple multivariate regression models, one for each platform and activity.

Figure 1. Multivariate Analysis of Platform-Specific Coronavirus Information-Seeking Behaviour (OLS)
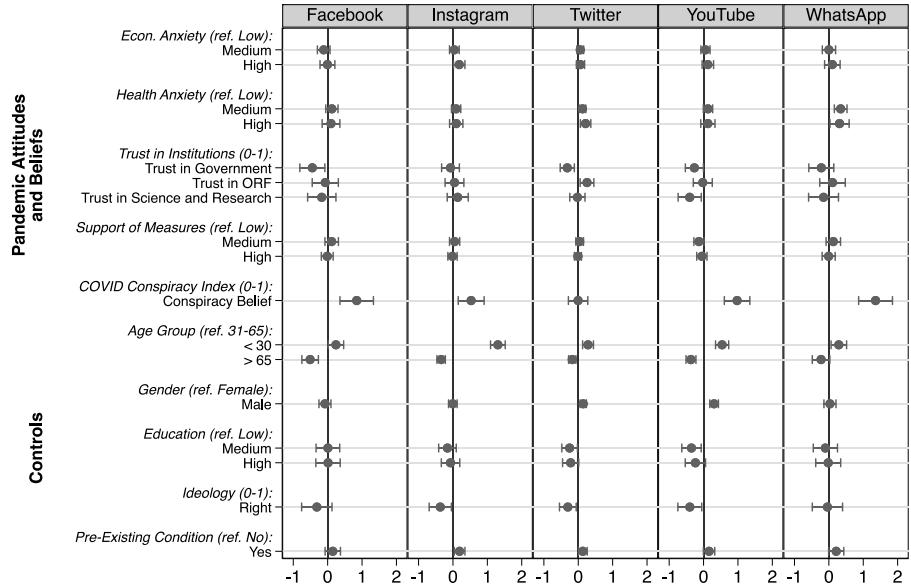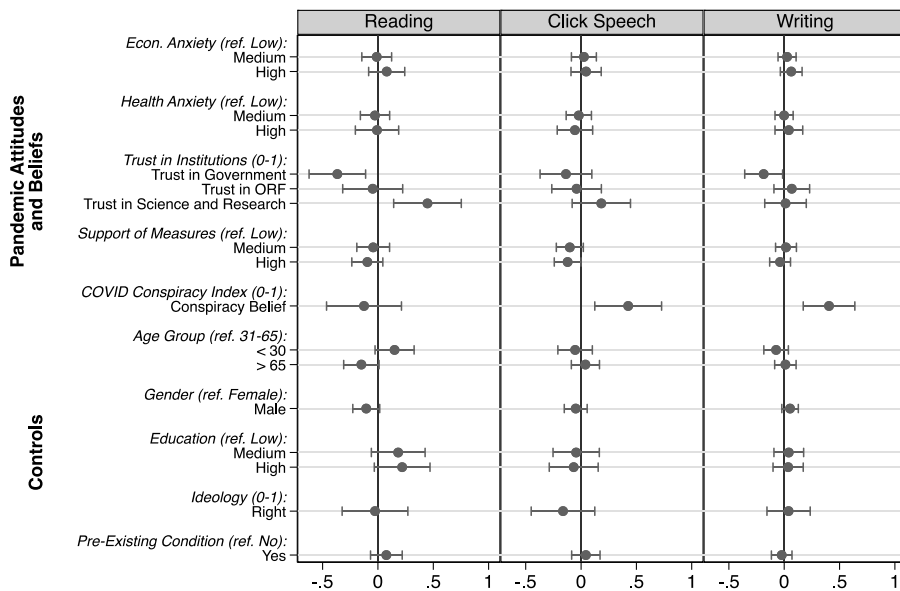

Note: Displayed are unstandardized coefficients from OLS regression alongside 95 % confidence intervals. Each platform-specific model includes all listed predictors simultaneously. Data is stacked (N observations = 1,859; N clusters = 1,270). Standard errors clustered by respondents. Dummy variable for the respective wave included but not shown.

Investigating the relationships with platform-specific coronavirus information-seeking behaviours (see Figure 1), we first look at COVID-19-related anxieties. By and large, economic and health anxieties seem un- or only weakly associated with platform use. However, we find that respondents who perceive high levels of economic anxieties use Instagram more frequently than respondents with low economic anxieties. Both Twitter as well as WhatsApp usage, conversely, are related to increased health anxieties. Second, we can see that Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube use are negatively associated with trust in government. Twitter use, however, relates positively to trust in the public broadcasting service (ORF). YouTube use, conversely, is the only platform use that negatively relates to trust in science and research. Third, support for COVID-19 containment measures is not a relevant covariate of any of the surveyed platform-specific coronavirus information-seeking behaviours. Turning to our last variable of pandemic attitudes and beliefs, we find that information-seeking on all platforms but Twitter significantly covariates with conspiracy belief, with the associations being strongest for WhatsApp and YouTube use. Controls show a largely linear effect of age on platform-specific coronavirus information-seeking behaviour. Twitter and YouTube users tend to be more male, and there are no significant relationships when it comes to the level of education. Holding the remaining variables constant, Instagram, Twitter,

and YouTube users tend to be more left-leaning. Compared to other respondents, those with a pre-existing condition tend to rather inform themselves about the pandemic on Instagram or Twitter. There is, however, no significant relationship (below p = 0.05) between pre-existing conditions and coronavirus information seeking when it comes to Facebook, YouTube or WhatsApp.

Next, we investigate how pandemic attitudes and beliefs relate to different types (i.e., reading, click speech, and writing) of non-platform-specific coronavirus social media activities (see Figure 2). COVID-19-related anxieties show no link to any of the measured activity types. While lower trust in government coincides with increased reading and writing on social media, higher trust in science is associated with increased reading only. Trust in the Austrian public broadcaster shows no relationship to the surveyed social media activities. Respondents who support the containment measures tend to use less click speech while interacting with COVID-19-related content on social media than respondents with low support in these measures. Finally, looking at respondents' conspiracy belief, we find no significant relationship with reading on social media. However, it strongly relates both to click speech as well as writing activities on these platforms. None of the controls shows a statistically significant relationship with the investigated social media activity types.

Figure 2. Non-Platform-Specific Coronavirus Social Media Activity (OLS)

Note: Displayed are unstandardized coefficients from OLS regression alongside 95 % confidence intervals. Each platform-specific model includes all listed predictors simultaneously. Data is stacked (N observations = 1,877; N clusters = 1,283). Standard errors clustered by respondents. Dummy variable for the respective wave included but not shown.

To assess the robustness of these findings, we dichotomized the dependent variables so that the answers "not at all" and "once a week" are recoded into 0, while "several times a week", "once a day", and "several times a day" are recoded into 1. We then re-ran the same analyses as above using logistic regressions and found all results to be substantially the same.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This short paper set out to explore if and to what extent citizens who engaged in COVID-19-related information-seeking behaviours and activities on social media systematically differ in terms of attitudes and beliefs related to the pandemic compared to citizens who did not. Overall, we found that health and economic anxieties, as well as support for containment measures, play a subordinate role when differentiating social media users from other respondents. However, we saw distinct patterns across platforms as well as across the different activity types when it comes to trust in institutions and COVID-19 conspiracy belief.

Regarding platform-specific information-seeking, we found that while distrust in the government coincides with the use of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, trust in the public broadcasting service relates to the use of Twitter, and distrust in science and research is associated with the use of YouTube. However, belief in conspiracy theories is positively associated with all platforms but Twitter, suggesting that it may be Twitter users' trust in public broadcasting services that help their resilience to the belief in such misinformation (Humprecht, Esser, & van Aelst, 2020). In terms of social media activities, we found that distrust in government coincides with reading and writing about COVID-19 on social media, while trust in science and research relates to reading only. Conspiracy belief, in contrast, is positively associated with click speech and writing, not, however, with reading.

Our study, furthermore, has shown that future research may need to differentiate between platforms, as users on different platforms may hold very different attitudes and beliefs and with that possibly generate and consume different content. Most previous studies on social media use imply a very broad understanding of information-seeking and did not differentiate between different activities that require different levels of cognitive effort and influence platforms differently. Going forward, we thus ask researchers not to neglect this multidimensionality of social media use further as this practice may come with crucially biased results and interpretations.

Finally, we are aware that the cross-sectional nature of our analysis does not allow for any causal conclusions and we urge for further studies linking users' attitudes with read, clicked, and written content on the platforms to allow for such inferences. Our results are worrisome nonetheless since we find that particularly those respondents distrusting of the government and those who believe in conspiracy theories have used social media as a source of information. As social media platforms are largely fed by

the information put in by other users who might be equally distrusting, particularly the positive association between conspiracy belief and click speech and writing is troublesome. These kinds of interactions by a minority of users make (possibly problematic) social media content disproportionately more visible and, by that, seem more trustworthy to other users (Alhabash, McAlister, Hagerstrom, Quilliam, Rifon, & Richards, 2013; Borah and Xiao, 2018). Restricting themselves to being a silent majority, the voice of the informed, who trust in scientific expertise, thus risks remaining unheard on these platforms. Taken together, our findings lead us to believe that the social media lens shows a stark imbalance that potentially makes (at least some of the) platforms a subpar and possibly seriously distorted source of information during an extreme health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria.

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Appendix

Table A1. COVID-19-related Conspiracy-Belief Items

Item	Wording
C1	The vaccine against the coronavirus has already been developed but is being held back by large pharmaceutical companies
C2	The vaccine against the coronavirus has already been developed but is being held back by the government.
C3	The coronavirus is a bioweapon that was deliberately developed to harm humans.
C4	The coronavirus was accidentally released during a secret US military experiment.
C5	Bill Gates wants to vaccinate humanity by force in order to earn a lot of money.
C6	The new 5G transmitter masts are responsible for the spread of the coronavirus.