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Social representations of COVID-19 skeptics: denigration, demonization, and disenfranchisement

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ABSTRACT

Denialism accompanies many global threats, such as climate change, HIV/AIDS, and now also SARS CoV-2 and COVID-19. We analyzed a corpus of 624 English-language news items to examine emerging social representations of people who question the existence of the virus or the measures to contain it. Using thematic analysis and social representations theory, we focused on the use, meanings, and implications of labels, such as "denier", "skeptic", or "contrarian", and the social representations that they generate. The analysis yielded the following themes: (1) Establishing negative social representations of skeptical beliefs, (2) Personifying COVID-19 denial, (3) Conversion stories vs. schadenfreude, and (4) Resisting representations of COVID-19 denial. Overall, the representation of people doubting pandemic science and/or policy was almost entirely negative, denigrating, and sometimes demonizing. We argue that this hegemonic media representation may entrench already existing division, polarization, and disengagement, potentially undermining collective efforts to manage the pandemic.

Introduction

In late 2019, a novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, was detected in Wuhan, China. Subsequently, the virus spread to all continents, leading to outbreaks of COVID-19, a SARS-like illness, all over the world. By January 2021, over 88.2 million people had been infected and 1.9 million had died. Various mutant strains of the virus subsequently emerged (WHO 2020). To manage the pandemic, governments and health officials have relied upon public health measures, including isolating whole countries, regions, or cities, generally called "lockdown"; telling people to quarantine or isolate as individuals or groups; enforcing "social distancing" (see Nerlich and Jaspal 2021); recommending or mandating the use of face coverings or masks; and, since January 2021, attempting to vaccinate their populations (Breakwell, Fino, and Jaspal 2021). Reactions to the emergence of the virus and measures to prevent its spread have been mixed, ranging from acceptance to dismissal or outright denial. Indeed, as Longe and Monscheuer (2021, p. 2)

note, "[e]ven with over 100 million people infected by the disease worldwide and more than 2 million associated deaths, a notable segment of the population denies the threat posed by – or even the existence of – the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2".

Denial of the threat posed by COVID-19 is often associated with skepticism about measures imposed to control it. This has led to anti-lockdown movements, which are also rooted in opposition to the restrictions on individual freedoms. Such movements can also be linked to anti-mask movements. Anti-vaxxer sentiment has been reignited as people have been invited to receive their COVID-19 vaccination and, more recently, their "booster" jabs (Burki 2020). Overall, some people display mistrust in aspects of science as well as in governmental institutions. One study of "COVID-10 skepticism" has shown that "fundamentally, anti-mask groups mistrust the scientific establishment because they believe that science has been corrupted by profit motives and by progressive politics hellbent on increasing social control" (Lee et al. 2021).

As Lange and Monscheuer (2021) have pointed out, "[s]ocietal cohesion is key in confining the outbreak of diseases that threaten collective survival. If some part of the society does not comply with public health precautions aimed at stopping the spread of a deadly disease, the effectiveness of public policy and preventative efforts undertaken by others are substantially constrained. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point" (p. 2) They found that, in Germany, "COVID-19 deniers engage less in health protection behaviour" (p. 2).

The two aforementioned studies feature the words "denier" or "skeptic", demonstrating that these labels are also being used in academic writing. These and other labels mirror similar ones that have been employed for many years in the context of health controversies, first in relation to HIV/AIDS (AIDS deniers), then more forcefully perhaps in the context of climate change (climate change deniers). As the *Oxford English Dictionary* now states in its entry on "denialism": "The policy or stance of denying the existence or reality of something, esp. something which is supported by the majority of scientific or historical evidence. Now frequently with modifier, as in climate change denialism, Holocaust denialism, etc." (OED, online). The OED has an entry for "climate denier" echoing this definition.

Now that similar labels are emerging in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an opportunity to assess the meaning and use of such labels in a new context. Jaspal and Nerlich (2020) have argued that it is important to examine social representations of the pandemic to understand how people will react to it. Labels contribute to the formation of such social representations as they are used to construct and/or identify one with certain groups and with their beliefs about the pandemic.

Labeling is key to understanding human responses to the pandemic and, thus, our study attempts to address the following questions:

- How are people who are skeptical about COVID-19 labeled, represented and constructed in the print media?

- What are the broader social, political and psychological implications of such labeling, representation and construction for COVID-19 prevention and management?

In this study, we examine the labels that are used to describe various degrees and types of what can loosely be termed skepticism about the virus and the measures to control it,

specifically in the media. Moreover, we discuss the social representations that they generate, elaborate and challenge. We focus on the media, which still "shape public debate in terms of setting agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects" (Happer & Philo, 2013, p. 321). More specifically, we examine who uses these labels, in which countries, and the content and value that are attached to them. One question concerns the impact of particular labels for fostering trust and collaboration between governments and people, whether they increase rather than decrease skepticism. It is noteworthy that our corpus includes articles published before November 6, 2020, that is, before the COVID-19 vaccines became available and before the mutant strains of the virus were clinically observed. We chose to focus on the early phase of the pandemic to shed light on emerging social representations of COVID-19 skeptics at the time, which will continue to underpin future representations as the pandemic progresses, develops and is remembered. Most notably, our findings concerning the labels applied to people who are skeptical of COVID should also inform debates about vaccine hesitancy.

Media representations of COVID-19

Since its first clinical observations, COVID-19 has been the subject of much social sciences research, focusing on people's perceived risk of infection, identity, behavior and psychological wellbeing (e.g., Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021; Jaspal & Nerlich, 2020; Lupton & Willis, 2021). There has also been considerable work on the denial of COVID-19, including the dissemination of conspiracy theories, largely through the lens of psychology (Calvillo et al., 2020; Miller, 2020; Porumbescu et al., 2020) and science communication (Hart et al., 2020). As the pandemic has progressed, there has been a proliferation of mistrust, misinformation, and conspiracy theories concerning COVID-19. Much of this misinformation is disseminated on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Given the popularity of these platforms, misinformation has competed directly with public health messaging – in many cases, undermining its effectiveness (Romer & Jamieson, 2020). It is on these platforms that COVID-19 skeptics congregate, exchange views, and validate their views.

When a message is released through the media, what matters most is not only what is said but also how it is said (Tankard, 2001). This has been the focus of some of the existing media studies of COVID-19. For instance, a content analysis of global media reporting on COVID-19 has highlighted scaremongering as a major frame (Ogbodo et al., 2020), which tends to evoke fear as an effective response. This is also consistent with survey research that generally shows high levels of exposure to media framing of COVID-19 and high levels of fear in the general population (e.g., Jaspal et al., 2020; Lopes et al., 2021). Furthermore, in their media analysis, Evanega et al. (2020) found that over a third of media stories that included misinformation referenced the then US president Donald Trump. There has also been some research into social representations of COVID-19 and its preventive measures, such as the lockdown (Nerlich & Jaspal, 2021; Paez & Perez, 2020).

There has been some work on stigma communication and the labeling of groups during the pandemic. For instance, Kumble and Diddi (2021) examined the role of Twitter in disseminating stigma messages and found that 37.6% of their corpus of over 3000 Twitter messages included stigma cues and that social media influencers

played a significant role in stigma dissemination. Li et al. (2020) analyzed 155,353 tweets during the early phase of the pandemic and found that tweets that included conspiracy theorizing were more likely to also feature group labeling and the attribution of responsibility, e.g., "Wuhan/China/Asian virus"; "Trump virus". However, there has been no academic study focusing specifically on the labeling of COVID-19 skepticism in the print media and how these labels contribute to the formation of social representations of skepticism. This study attempts to fill this lacuna.

Labels and social representations

Labels can be understood as conceptual anchors, which stabilize abstract ideas in working memory (Clark, 1997). They simplify the world by allowing people to categorize themselves and others in a meaningful way – for instance, to sort friend from foe, insiders from outsiders and so on (Becker, [1963] 1973). Labels are inherently social in origin and purpose, and they determine the ways in which one interacts with others. The label "denier" depicts someone who knows but refuses to accept "the truth" and who is, therefore, irrational. The term suggests that it is futile to attempt to convince the individual who simply refuses to believe.

In addition to other-labeling, people may also label themselves and, in some cases, actively endorse or resist particular labels (Jaspal et al., 2016). Yet, the labels that we give ourselves and those that are imposed on us by others are not always consistent, which can create hostile relations and inhibit communication and understanding. Labeling theory explores the broad social and psychological ramifications of using labels. For instance, Link et al. (1989) show how labeling in the context of mental disorder can lead to a set of beliefs among people who come to use mental health services, potentially influencing their self-esteem, job prospects and social support networks. This demonstrates that labels are not just words but rather possess an action orientation (Billig et al., 1988). In a similar vein, our analysis focuses on the social functions of labeling – that is, how self- and other-labels may facilitate particular patterns of meaning, thinking, and interaction regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, its science and its politics.

Labels such as "coronavirus denier" or "skeptic" are not devoid of cultural values. It is important to examine the social functions of labeling by focusing on the potential implications of using labels in particular ways and in particular contexts. Framing theory provides useful insights into labeling. As Entman (1993, p. 52) observes, "[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." This approach can help show how particular labels of COVID-19 skepticism might foreground a specific issue, its cause, its evaluation and indeed the "ideal" course of action in relation to it.

However, a key aim of this study is to understand how particular constructions of COVID-19 skepticism actually emerge. To do so, we draw upon Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1988), which focuses on collective elaborations of knowledge and how cultural meaning systems evolve. A social representation is defined as a network of ideas, values, and practices in relation to a given social object that facilitates

communication about it. A label essentially turns into a social representation when it is anchored to and objectified in terms of other phenomena that exist in societal consciousness.

Anchoring refers to the process of making something unfamiliar understandable by linking it to something a group or community already knows about. For instance, in the context of climate change, the term "denier" is sometimes linked to the denial of other well-known beliefs (e.g., that the earth is flat), which serves to construct climate change denial as being equally as implausible (Frank, 2019).

Objectification is the process whereby unfamiliar and abstract objects are transformed into concrete and "objective" common-sense realities, either through the use of metaphors or through personification. As Höijer has pointed out, "[i]n objectification through personification an idea or phenomenon is linked to specific persons such as when Freud personifies psychoanalysis or Gandhi political struggle through non-violence. To attach something to well-known public persons is a common discursive mechanism in the media in order to draw attention and popularize courses of events" (Höijer, 2011, p. 13).

Method

The corpus

We sought to identify a series of appropriate keywords to generate a corpus of articles featuring labels used to denote those skeptical of COVID-19. First, we conducted a cursory qualitative examination of articles published in all news outlets and identified the labels listed below. It is noteworthy that the labels used were also consistent with work on skepticism in relation to climate change (e.g., Jaspal et al., 2016). Second, using Google Trends, we were able to confirm that their use was sustained over the period until November 6, 2020. Third, we used the news database Nexis to conduct a search of "All English Language News" (which captures English national and international newspapers, and a selection of blogs, and transcripts of some news shows) in which at least one of the identified keywords was mentioned – covering labels for skepticism about the virus and/or disease it causes: "coronavirus denier"; "covid denier"; "covid 19 denier"; "coronavirus sceptic" or "coronavirus skeptic"; "covid sceptic" or "covid skeptic"; "covid 19 sceptic" or "covid 19 skeptic"; "coronavirus contrarian"; "covid contrarian"; "covid 19 contrarian"; "corona denier"; "corona sceptic" or "corona skepic"; and "corona contrarian". The search was conducted using the high similarity setting, which excluded duplicate articles, on November 6, 2020, just before the first successful vaccine was announced and just after the US presidential election. We specified no start date but the first article in our corpus was published on March 14, 2020 and the last on November 6, 2020, when the search was conducted. The final corpus consisted of 624 articles. Figure 1 presents an overview of the distribution of articles generated by our search terms across the corpus.

The "coronavirus denier" sample contained only 46 newspaper items, while the rest of the sample consisted in blogs, web-based publications and weblinks ($N = 51$) and others. Amongst the blogs, one was particularly active in arguing against deniers, namely the *Boy Genius Blog* ("*BGR*", a blog generally specializing in technology reporting) ($N = 10$).
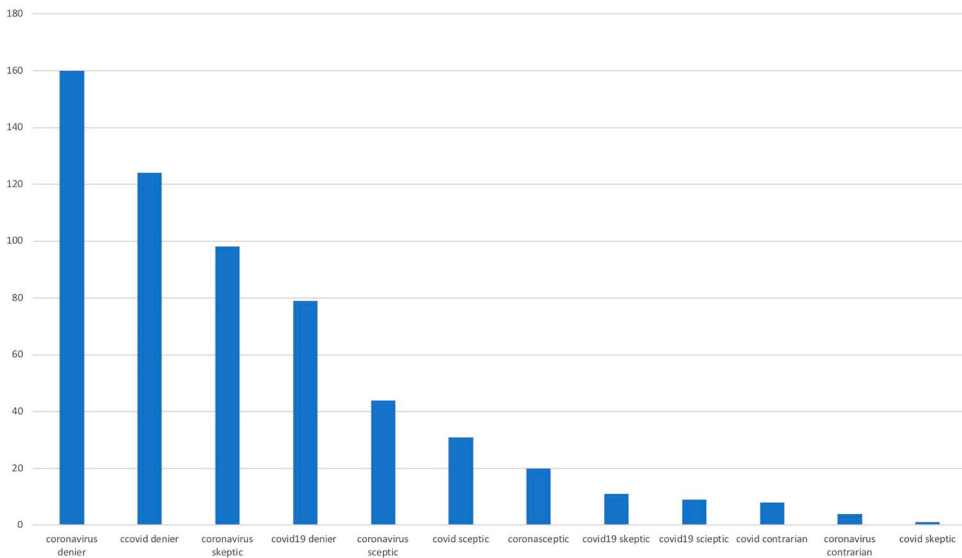
Figure 1. Distribution of labels in All English Language News up to 6 November 2020.

Amongst the newspapers 10 items were published in the *MailOnline*, 9 in *chroniclelive.-co.uk* (Newcastle, *Evening Chronicle*) (mainly focused on Denise Welsh, see below), 7 in *CE Noticias Financieras English*, 2 in the *Cranbourne Leader* (Australia) and many other Australian newspapers (focusing on "deniers" such as Pete Evans and Eve Black, see below). There were no broadsheets in the top 10 newspapers. The label "covid denier" was found in 54 newspaper items and 50 web-based publications and weblinks and only four blogs. At the top of the newspaper list were the *The Mirror* (N = 9), *The Sun* (N = 5), and the *MailOnline* (N = 4) (with a focus on a story surrounding Denise Welsh, see below in the Results for more information), followed a myriad of other newspapers. This time, there were a few broadsheets in the top 10, such as the *Calgary Herald* (Alberta), *The Daily Telegraph* (Australia) (N = 2), *The Daily Telegraph* (London) (N = 2), and *The Guardian* (London) (N = 2). A similar distribution between newspapers and web-based publications and between tabloids and broadsheets can be found in the smaller samples and characterizes the whole corpus.

It is noteworthy that labels for those who dismiss either the virus or the disease, COVID-19, appear to be used mostly in blogs, news show transcripts and tabloid newspapers and rarely in broadsheet newspapers. In this article, we focus on the three most frequently used labels, namely "coronavirus denier" (160 articles), "covid denier" (124 articles), and "coronavirus skeptic" (98 articles), a label mostly used in the United States, but also in some other countries. Examining these relatively larger sub-corpora helps shed light on what "deniers" reportedly say, what journalists and those they quote say about them, and what major stories are told about them. This in turn provides insight into social representations of deniers in three principal ways: social representations of what they (are reported to) think about the pandemic; social representations of the most prototypical deniers (certain politicians and celebrities); and social representations of deniers themselves.

Analytic approach

The corpus was analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, which is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). The method was used to identify emerging social representations of COVID-19 deniers and linguistic and rhetorical strategies used to construct and substantiate these representations in the corpus. Following the analytic steps outlined in Jaspal (2020), we began by reading and re-reading the news items in the corpus. During each reading, we noted initial observations that captured the essential qualities of the items, focusing on units of meaning, instances of anchoring and objectification, and linguistic and rhetorical strategies used to construct meaning. We discussed our respective initial codes, which included general tone, forms of language (e.g., metaphors), comparisons, categorizations, and emerging patterns. These initial codes were then collated into preliminary themes and some of the themes were merged meaningfully (while retaining sub-themes) to address the original research questions. The final four themes were arranged into a coherent narrative structure, which is presented below.

Results

The following four themes emerging from the thematic analysis of the corpus are outlined: (1) Setting the scene: Establishing negative social representations of skeptical beliefs; (2) Personifying COVID-19 denial; (3) Conversion stories vs. schadenfreude; and (4) Resisting representations of COVID-19 denial. Overall, emerging social representations of so-called deniers, contrarians and skeptics were entirely negative. These representations were constructed by anchoring the purported views of deniers to older stigmatized beliefs and conspiracy theories; by personifying their beliefs in relation to controversial and, in some cases, vilified leaders, namely the then US president Donald Trump and Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro; and by using denigratory adjectives and verbs in relation to deniers. Furthermore, the negative representations were reinforced through the presentation of "conversion stories" of former deniers who came to accept COVID-19 after themselves becoming infected or losing loved ones. Finally, we also found resistance to negative social representations among deniers through the use of discursive disclaimers reported in the press.

Setting the scene: Establishing negative social representations of skeptical beliefs

Figure 1 shows that some labels generated more hits than others. For our analysis, we focused on the top three labels, namely, "coronavirus denier," "covid denier," and "coronavirus skeptic," with some excursions into other labels.

The label "coronavirus denier" was first used in the *MailOnline*, as early as 14 March, when Alexandra Shulman (journalist, formerly *Vogue* editor) wrote that "Arriving at a lunch last week, my host introduced me to the other guests as 'a coronavirus denier'". The label "covid denier" was used a few weeks later on 3 April by Arundhati Roy, the novelist, in the *Financial Times*: "The first case of Covid-19 was reported in India on January 30, only days after the honorable chief guest of our Republic Day Parade,

Amazon forest-eater and Covid-denier Jair Bolsonaro, had left Delhi." Here we find already a rather critical appraisal of the president of Brazil, which was a recurrent theme throughout the corpus.

The label "coronavirus skeptic" was also used early on in the pandemic, on 15 March, in relation to then US President Donald Trump, and "coronavirus sceptic", again a few weeks later, on 4 April, in relation to Bolsonaro. "Covid skeptic" appeared in the press on 27 May in a blog post where the blogger said: "I've joked with my wife that I classify people I meet in public as COVID-cautious or COVID-skeptic" – a rare instance of labeling those who are not labeled as deniers. The label "covid contrarian" was used on 11 April in the context of talking about Bolsonaro, but also when describing the Swedish people as a nation of COVID-19 contrarians on 23 July. At the time, Sweden was pursuing a rather laissez-faire policy towards COVID-19, which changed dramatically in the autumn of 2020 as incidence began to rise. The labels "coronavirus denier" and "covid denier" were used across the world, while "skeptic" labels were used mainly in the US and "sceptic" ones were used mostly in the UK.

Deniers were reported as believing that the pandemic was a "hoax", "scam", "con-as-virus", "scamdemic" or a "plandemic". These terms were mostly used without explanation but as John Naughton pointed out in *The Guardian*, "Plandemic" is "a 26-minute "documentary" video featuring Dr Judy Mikovits, a former research scientist and inveterate conspiracy theorist who blames the coronavirus outbreak on big pharma, Bill Gates and the World Health Organization" (Naughton, 2020). This anchoring of those dismissive of COVID-19 to a series of conspiracies was quite typical for reporting on those labeled "deniers" etc., but also quite representative of how people thus labeled described themselves.

These compound nouns follow a similar pattern to those used by people dismissive of other areas of contested science, for example in the context of HIV (e.g., HIV hoax, great HIV hoax) and climate change (e.g., global warming scam, climate change hoax). COVID-19 "deniers" were thus positioned as espousing the same type of conspiracy theory as their counterparts in other domains. Some social science research is now beginning to focus on the overlaps between climate change and COVID-19 denial and in the context of science skepticism (Rutjens et al., 2021).

Some COVID-19 skeptics were reported to complain about "scaremongering", of creating panic and fear through making overblown claims, or by blowing the pandemic out of proportion: A US pastor is quoted as saying that he doesn't deny that people are dying from the virus but that "the thing is blown totally way out of proportion" (*Eurasia Review*, March 31). Hence views are not grounded in full-blown COVID-19 denial but are situated on the same spectrum.

Some skeptics were said to have called the pandemic a mythical story or even a farce: "BBC Look North anchor Peter Levy has slammed a coronavirus denier who branded the virus a "mythical disease"" (*Hull Daily Mail*, March 27) And: "The 38-year-old [in Spain], who claimed health professionals and the media were behind what he called the "Covid farce", urged his social media followers to attack politicians and journalists, police said." (standard.co.uk, August 28). Some link it to socialist indoctrination: "Tony Tenpenny [Trump supporter] […] who had said the pandemic was part of a "socialist agenda" and had been over-exaggerated died over the weekend as a result of complications from Covid-19" (*thesun.co.uk*, September 24). The sources for such beliefs were traced

back to either Facebook or Donald Trump. One person who turned from denier to believer said: "'In great haste, I began prognosticating the alphabet soup about this 'scamdemic.' I believed the virus to be a hoax,' [",,].'" (*MailOnline*, July 28)

Some skeptics used the label "denier" themselves when dismissing COVID-19 as a merely political, rather than a serious, medical, phenomenon. One commentator in an article called "Chat room" said: "If you're still not sure whether COVID-19 is medical or political, consider this: if you don't agree with your local government-sanctioned 'expert' then you're a "<u>covid denier</u>" (*Gold Coast Bulletin*, July 20). Here COVID-19 denialism merges with a popular distrust of experts. More generally, there was talk about groups and movements, even "cults," especially in the Australian and American press. Their beliefs were reported to be linked to a number of other beliefs that either emerged with the pandemic or had been circulating in the context of other denialist discourses before the pandemic. This served to position COVID-19 deniers as part of a broader community of conspiracy theorists whose credibility has long been challenged (e.g., Bodner et al. 2020).

Most reports anchored deniers' beliefs and behaviors to other types of "deviant" beliefs and behaviors, such as being "anti-lockdown", "anti-mask," and "anti-vax", attitudes. Some were even referred to as "flat earthers". Anti-vaccination attitudes were also anchored to the conspiracy belief that the pandemic was caused by 5G masts, that Bill Gates wanted to implant microchips through vaccines and brainwash people, and, in general, that there was a conspiracy to deprive people of freedom, rights and sovereignty and subject them to government control: "Every Saturday in the market square of my quiet, civilized little town, a mild-mannered Covid denier sets up his stall and hands out leaflets to anyone who is passing explaining how coronavirus is a hoax, vaccines are a sinister ploy by Big Pharma and Government to exert mind control, and so on" (*Sunday Express*, September 27). There was also evidence of objectification: a metaphor that was sometimes used in this context was that of people being or becoming "sheep," that is, losing their agency and uncritically accepting the "orthodoxy" of COVID-19 prevention rules: "'You are a sheep, just like the rest of them,' […]. "Why don't you people educate yourself?" (*The Calgary Herald* (Alberta), September 15).

The link to big pharma and also the military was given more credit than scientific evidence – they were seen as "the truth":

> Anti-lockdown conspiracy theorist Carley Louise Stewart says she rejects the scientific evidence about coronavirus and believes "most people know" illnesses are made up by drugs companies in order to help them sell medicines. (*Daily Star Online* September 30)

> She [Kate Shemirani] also shocked thousands when she wrote: "Murder. Genocide. The NHS is the new Auschwitz." […] "These are not views. This is the truth," she told the Daily Mail. She clearly has some very odd views on the vaccines which doctors believe are our main hope of beating the killer virus. Shemirani has said they contain particles powered by military-style technology. … She told listeners that the outbreak city of Wuhan in China had been a "test city for 5G." (*thesun.co.uk*, September 20)

The emphasis on links between COVID-19 denialism and the denial of scientific evidence in relation to other diseases served to position this viewpoint as equally problematic. Furthermore, well-established tropes for denigrating authority, such as its anchoring to militarism, Nazism, and genocide were quoted. Indeed, all of these tropes have been used in discredited conspiracy theories about other diseases (Kalichman, 2009).

Linking COVID-19 prevention measures to authoritarianism was common in skeptical discourse quoted in the news, as for instance by a shop owner in the UK who would reportedly not allow mask-wearing customers into his establishment:

> Mr Scheider's sign - entitled 'Con-A-Virus Notice Government Muzzles!' - states that people cannot shop at the tearoom if they 'consent to Government demands' … .'The reason you're being ordered to stand two metres apart and wear a muzzle is nothing to do with a virus … it's Applied Behavioural Psychology to "CONTROL YOU"'. (*MailOnline* (UK), September 14)

Such actions and such reports helped to anchor COVID-19 denial to other negatively evaluated beliefs and behavior, and to position deniers as posing a direct threat to prevention efforts.

In short, negative social representations of COVID-19 deniers were established with some being positioned as posing a threat not only to public understanding and awareness but also to actual prevention efforts. These emerging social representations were further elaborated as the pandemic progressed. This focus on extreme instances of denial may contribute to stigmatization and, hence, further entrenchment of milder forms of skepticism, thus undermining prevention measures further.

Personifying COVID-19 denial

The objectification technique of personification in Social Representations Theory was significant in the corpus. COVID-19 denial was personified in terms of key political figures, namely Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, alongside the less globally significant leaders of Belarus, Romania, Bulgaria, and Tanzania. Trump was the focal point, however, the "denier-in-chief", as he became known, or the "Great Coronavirus Denier," "Covid contrarian-in-chief," the nation's "biggest COVID denier," the "chief covid denier" and a "consistent" covid denier, as exemplified in these extracts:

> When the history of the coronavirus pandemic is written, President Donald Trump will go down as the great denier-in-chief […]. (*CNN.com*, July 19)

> "Donald Trump does not only support white supremacists; he also supports all kinds of conspiracy theories and is a Coronavirus denier. This is a President who is actually posing a threat to his own people […]". (*The Parliament Magazine (Online)*, October 13)

As the "great denier-in-chief", mirroring the presidential notion of being "commander-in-chief", Trump was positioned as the instigator of catastrophe in the US during the pandemic. Trump's presidency was anchored to white supremacy, conspiracy theorizing and threat (as the enemy within). As the personification of COVID-19 denial, epithets of Trump were associated with denial and those associated with denial were attributed to Trump. This served to elaborate and crystallize the negative social representation of COVID-19 deniers as the purported followers of this "greater denier-in-chief."

Trump tested positive for the virus on 2 October, a few months after Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro's description mirrors that of Trump: "Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, justifiably called the 'Trump of the Tropics', is a confirmed coronavirus-denier"

(*EKantipur.com* April 1). He was also called "the world's other great coronavirus denier," described as "most vocal," "consistent," "staunch," and also "full on".

Alongside Trump and Bolsonaro, the press featured a large number of celebrities – in the UK, Piers Corbyn (an English weather forecaster, businessman, and activist), David Icke (an English conspiracy theorist, and a former footballer and sports broadcaster), and above all Denise Welsh, an actress, whose altercations with TV presenter Piers Morgan were covered widely in the tabloids. Using strong words, such as "branding" and "slamming," the tabloids reported this long-standing dispute:

> Piers Morgan has branded his nemesis Denise Welch a 'dumb, deluded and dangerous Covid-denier' in a ferocious Twitter rant. (*mirror.co.uk*, September 4)

> Piers Morgan slams 'COVID-denier' Denise Welch [actress] for 'idiotic ramblings' … . (*Express Online*, September 8)

> Welsh defended herself by saying: "All I have tried to do is find a balance to offset the five months of scaremongering, fear-inducing, morning waking anxiety that is causing illness, mental and physical." (*Express Online* September 9)

In Australia, two people featured heavily in the press, Pete Evans (a celebrity chef) and Eve Black (who made a viral video of her ignoring a COVID-19 roadblock in Melbourne). The former was described as a "radical health nut, COVID-denier and immunization sceptic" (*The Daily Telegraph Online*, August 29), the latter as "social media conspiracist" who called the pandemic a "SCAMdemic" (*Cranbourne Leader Online*, July 28). Another Australian, Lizzy Rose, was described as a "coronavirus denier and self-described witch" (The Australian, July 29) and "self-proclaimed priestess and exorcist" (*MailOnline (Australia)*, July 30).

> Asked whether she thought wearing a mask was a breach of her human rights, she said: "I do. This is my voice. It is about an agenda. It is not only about a virus." Ms Rose also disputed virus statistics, and said she believed the virus was "biochemically engineered intentionally". A self-proclaimed psychic and witch, Ms Rose runs Facebook page The Illuminating Army, which carries advice on how to resist police directions about masks. (*The Australian*, July 29)

> Ms Rose, who uses her social media platform to spread dangerous conspiracy theories, shared a video of her performing a 'vaccination burn' to cast out the Victorian government, as well as mandatory jabs and face masks. (*MailOnline (Australia),* August 13)

Here denialism meets self-promotion and the promotion of alternative religious beliefs by so-called "'alternative lifestyle' subcultural groups" which can lead to "highly polarized debates on health, the propagation of health myths, and the promotion and selling of fake cures advertised as safe and effective" (Lavorgna & Myles, 2021, p. 1).

There was, overall, a dominant focus on controversial and divisive figures who served to personify COVID-19 denial. These figures were themselves anchored to (or anchored themselves to) stigmatized tropes, positions, and ideologies, such as neo-Nazism, white nationalism, anti-vaxxers, witchcraft, and others. This process further contributed to the negative social representation of COVID-19 denial. Yet, for some deniers, there was redemption – in the form of "conversion."

Conversion stories vs. schadenfreude

One adjective sometimes used with "covid denier" and/or "coronavirus denier" was "former". The most prominent "former" denier was Tony Green from Texas, a Trump supporter, whose story reverberated through our whole corpus. It was essentially a conversion story: "a heartbreaking story of how a coronavirus denier became a believer" (*New York Times*, October 11). This is a story of conversion and confession, of guilt and repentance, recounted by a former COVID-19 denier himself (see Jaspal & Nerlich, 2014 for a discussion of strategic quoting to increase the credibility of a social representation):

> Catching the coronavirus has changed Green's mind on the issue, and he's now calling for an end to the politicization over the virus. 'You cannot imagine the guilt I feel, knowing that I hosted the gathering that led to so much suffering,' he wrote.' You cannot imagine my guilt at having been a denier, carelessly shuffling through this pandemic, making fun of those wearing masks and social distancing. You cannot imagine my guilt at knowing that my actions convinced both our families it was safe when it wasn't.' 'For those who deny the virus exists or who downplay its severity, let me assure you: The coronavirus is very real and extremely contagious,' he added. 'Before you even know you have it, you've passed it along to your friends, family, coworkers and neighbors.' Trump has for months downplayed the urgency of the US coronavirus outbreak. (*Newstex Blogs The Business Insider*, July 28)

> Green was a hardcore coronavirus denier … I admit traveling deep into the conspiracy trap over COVID-19. All the defiant behavior of Trump's more radical and rowdy cult followers, I participated in it. I was a hard-ass that stood up for my 'God-given rights.' In great haste, I began prognosticating the alphabet soup about this 'scamdemic.' (*Newstex Blogs Boy Genius Report,* July 29)

In these extracts, former COVID-19 deniers are strategically quoted not only as repenting personally for their denialism but also as denigrating other current deniers, especially the key figures who personify denial in media reporting. They are quoted as framing denialism as "politicized", as "leading to suffering" and deniers as "cult followers". They themselves ridicule some of the compound nouns created to substantiate COVID-19 denial, e.g., "scamdemic". Thus there is essentially a reinforcement of negative social representations of COVID-19 denial and deniers through their dissemination and promotion by former deniers themselves.

Some of the deniers who did not "convert" were said to have contracted COVID-19 themselves. Trump and Bolsonaro are notable examples. Quite often articles told stories of those who had criticized the wearing of masks as hype and who subsequently died, as for example here:

> A 37-year-old US army veteran who published memes decrying the use of protective masks and criticised the 'hype' about the corona-virus pandemic on Facebook has died of COVID-19 just three days after testing positive to the deadly virus. (*The Daily Telegraph (Australia),* July 13)

In reporting of persons who did not "convert" but who, subsequently, died, there was a subtle construction of schadenfreude (i.e., an implicit sense of "told you so"). As observable in the extract above, the victim's demise from COVID-19 is emphatically juxtaposed with his "decrying" of protective face masks and his criticism of the "hype" of

the pandemic. Furthermore, consistent with our argument that "deniers" are stigmatized in press reporting, it is noteworthy that contempt for others based on a judgment of their socially devalued actions (in this case, COVID-19 denialism) has been shown to under-pin feelings of schadenfreude (Berndsen & Tiggeman, 2020).

In short, deniers were positioned either as having converted or as having contracted the virus themselves. This positioning too contributed to the negative social represen-tation of COVID-19 denialism as flawed and those espousing it as deviant, with some evidence of schadenfreude in cases where deniers themselves contracted the virus. In view of this coercive representation, there was evidence of resistance to it among deniers themselves.

Resisting social representations of COVID-19 denial

Social representations of deniers and their beliefs were entirely negative and, in most cases, denigrating and stigmatizing. In this context it was unsurprising that some of those appearing in the press tended to resist such stigmatization by saying "I am not a … ." or "I am no … ," or by pre-empting such stigmatization through discursive disclai-mers, such as "I am not a denier, but … " Interestingly, this was more common with "covid" than with "coronavirus" denier.

Most instances of "I am not a denier"/"I am no denier" occurred when people wanted to stress that they accepted that the virus posed risks but that these risks had been exag-gerated – echoing arguments made by so-called "lukewarmers" in the context of climate change:

> "I'm not again negating that people are dying from the coronavirus. We're not saying that, just saying that the thing is blown totally way out of proportion," he said … . (*Eurasia Review,* March 31)

Interestingly, most instances of self-distancing from stigma occurred in broadsheets, which, in general, had seemed to resist the use of labels – our search term did not identify many articles using labels published in broadsheets.

> Don't get me wrong. I [Sally Vickers] am not a Covid denier. Covid is a menace and a real one. But to my mind, the downside of the means taken to tackle this challenge now far out-weigh the gains. (*telegraph.co.uk* September 13)

> (After talking about restrictions to freedom): I (Gillian Bowditch) am no Covid denier. I have hardly been more than five miles outside of my home in the past five months. My mask etiquette is acceptable. This has been a serious outbreak and at its peak, the news was grim. (*thetimes.co.uk,* September 6)

> And I should make clear that I am not a Covid-denier; this is a serious disease that should be taken seriously. [in context of criticising the rule of six] (*telegraph.co.uk,* September 11)

Quite often saying that one was not a denier was followed by "but," thus qualifying self-distancing from that identification, and to deny certain expectations about deniers, namely that they denied the existence of the virus or were opposed to lockdowns or masks. This has been referred to as a discursive disclaimer in discourse analysis (Billig et al., 1988). However, they doubted certain other overly stringent measures

and doubted the severity of the death toll from the disease, as the following quotes demonstrated:

> Another person said: "I am not a Covid denier or anti masker - I'm taking this [very] seriously but I draw the line at compulsory vaccination." (*walesonline.co.uk*, September 22)

> Covid is bad, nobody is denying it, you don't have to be a Covid denier, but 1 per cent of people die of COVID but 100 per cent people die of cancer. (*thesun.co.uk*, September 23)

Those resisting denier labels mainly put forward economic and scientific arguments. They argued that, although they accepted the existence of the virus, lockdowns were harmful to the economy or that mask-wearing was based on faulty science. In the first quote of the interview, a cafe owner used one of the rare metaphors in our corpus stating that the virus made the economy ill:

> I'm not a COVID denier and I'm not talking about opening up event venues, but opening small businesses so people can put food on the table. (*The Times of Israel*, October 9)

Some people argued that the measures taken against the virus did more harm than good:

> I'm aware that saying such things is liable to result in me being labelled a 'Covid denier' or similar. For the record, I fully believe the virus is real and I don't for one minute dispute that it can pose a very real threat to the vulnerable (I have family members with underlying health issues who are potentially at risk). But at what point do the measures being put in place become more destructive than Covid-19 itself? (*Jersey Evening Post*, October 31)

Others still doubted the science underpinning lockdowns, a topic that was rather rarely discussed in the corpus:

> But he was clear: "Look I am not a covid denier, I have taken strong action to make sure we contain the virus, but a lockdown now - there is no scientific basis for that." (*Teeside News*, October 19)

> Whether you agree with my tweet [Allison Pearson] or not, it accurately represents the opinion of a number of distinguished scientists, including Oxford's Prof Sunetra Gupta (whom I interviewed for the Planet Normal podcast) and Prof Michael Levitt, winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2013. Neither is a wacky Covid-denier. … . Increasingly, what we are witnessing is a brutal stand-off between The Science (or one aggressive, politicised version of it) and Humanity. (*telegraph.co.uk*, September 29)

A Welsh GP was quoted at length talking about his views of science which were slightly contradictory:

> I [Dr O'Shea] am not a Covid-19 sceptic or denier of the virus, but after three months we are looking at a very different scenario.

> My main criticism of lockdown, and some of the science, is that a lot of that science has now been challenged as questionable - but that's the nature of science, everything is evolving.

> I don't think there's any science that needs settling on the utility of children going to school and socialising. (*Wales on Sunday*, July 5)

The analysis of our corpus demonstrates that what may be widely interpreted as "denial" is best thought of in terms of a continuum. As with climate skepticism

(Howarth & Sharman, 2015), there may be skepticism about various aspects of science and data, about the severity of COVID-19, transmission risk, and the behaviors and policies deemed necessary to prevent it. However, in view of the unanimously negative social representations of "COVID-19 denial," which is the main umbrella category used to describe all forms of skepticism, some people, as illustrated in the last quote, are resisting the label in order to distance themselves from the associated stigma (see Meisenbach, 2010).

Discussion

Global disasters, such as climate change and pandemics, bring with them fears of the unknown and provoke processes of re-categorization and identification of self and other. To cope with these threatening situations, people invent, use and reconfigure categories and labels to impose some order onto the world. Particular linguistic patterns of response, such labeling, have been observed and studied in the context of the HIV pandemic and climate change. Living through the current pandemic of COVID-19 we observed the emergence of and re-emergence of labels, such as " denier" and "skeptic" to talk and write about self and other – mainly others.

In this article, we attempt to trace the footprint of such labeling in the print media and assess its potential impacts on mutual understanding, behavioral responses, and pandemic management. Our findings show that journalists, commentators, and bloggers used labels, such as "denier" freely and in predominantly negative ways. They applied them, in particular, to certain heads of state and celebrities. There were rare voices challenging such hegemonic media representations. A member of a think-tank said, for example: "I don't want the state-compliant media calling me a 'COVID denier'" (*The Foundation For Research On Equal Opportunity*, May 1) Labels, such as "denier," were also used by people quoted in the news items, such as family members or detractors of what one may call COVID-19 dismissing celebrities.

Our analysis of the plethora of voices using mainly negative labels of those skeptical of COVID-19 revealed that COVID-19 skepticism clearly constitutes a spectrum with some individuals rejecting the existence of the virus and the disease it causes, on the one hand, and others questioning the wisdom of some of the policies designed to limit it, on the other hand. There are also ambivalent views within this spectrum. However, our study shows that much of this diversity is cloaked in the press under the terms "covid denier," "coronavirus denier," and so on. Although other labels are also used in the public sphere, it was clear that the labels used in the press reporting we studied had at least one thing in common: there was a coercive negative social representation of COVID-19 skepticism which was generally reduced to denial.

In the news reports studied here, the nuance between degrees and types of skepticism (e.g., total denial vs. criticism of certain aspects of science of certain preventive measures) was lost. It is noteworthy that this negative social representation of denial was hegemonic – it appeared to be "uniform and coercive" and pervasively disseminated across the wide range of outlets whose articles we examined (Moscovici, 1988, p. 221). This is very different to the use of "climate denier" in the past, a label that was widely rejected, as it was seen as a dissenting voice (Jaspal et al., 2016).

We found that people who questioned aspects of COVID-19 science and policy were consistently presented as "COVID deniers" – a stigmatizing category that was anchored to irresponsibility, recklessness and stupidity, and personified in terms of controversial and divisive political figures. The press coverage of COVID-19 skepticism had a strong focus on the denigration, delegitimization and sometimes demonization of so-called "COVID deniers" and the beliefs that they were said to espouse. All this highlights the stigma appended to COVID-19 deniers and the construction of denialism as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and those thought to express denial as "thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Indeed, our analysis shows that deniers are portrayed as being opposed to reality, as posing a threat to "our" health, and as being deficient in their understanding of science and medicine. Following Goffman's predictions, the stigmatization of denialism may contribute to polarization of views and of groups – on the one hand, the stigmatized skeptics may disengage from those who do not share the stigma and align themselves with like-minded others and, on the other hand, those who are not skeptical of COVID-19 may disparage, ignore, and marginalize those who are. The potency of the stigma appended to COVID-19 denialism was further demonstrated by the schadenfreude that characterized some media accounts of "deniers" who themselves contracted, and succumbed to, COVID-19. Indeed, schadenfreude has been empirically observed in relation to publicly disliked dissenters who caught the disease and, crucially, this was associated with decreased willingness to engage in COVID-19 preventive behaviors (Myrick & Chen, 2021). This illustrates the insidious effects of stigmatizing social representations of skepticism, as well as the resultant schadenfreude, for COVID-19 prevention efforts.

In addition to their stigmatization, so-called deniers were represented as posing a threat to "us," that is, people who accept all facets of COVID-19 science and policy. This is consistent with the similarly negative social representations of people who contravened lockdown rules during the first coronavirus outbreak in the UK (Nerlich & Jaspal, 2021). Moreover, the results foregrounded "conversion stories" in relation to former skeptics who were positioned as having finally accepted the veracity of the virus. They were essentially represented as the "good deniers" in contrast to those who continued to deny the virus and promote this stance, as well as those who themselves had contracted the virus and, in some cases, succumbed to it. This is in stark contrast to debates about other scientific topics, such as climate change, where such open stigmatization has generally been avoided, especially in the press, and an inclusive approach to debate has been favored (e.g., Jaspal et al., 2016).

To tackle the current pandemic, it will be essential to ensure both individual and collective compliance with preventive measures. People will need to feel empowered to adopt the measures that they are now being mandated to limit disease incidence and that will continue to be mandated as resurgences of the virus occur (Shahnazi et al., 2020). It is important to acknowledge that these measures are by no means easy for everyone – inequality runs through the whole pandemic. Many have lost their jobs, businesses and livelihoods. Many more need to work to support those who do not need to or cannot work from home. Many lament their inability to see loved ones. Many have experienced the deleterious effects of the pandemic on their mental health. In short, people's identities are subject to threats not only from the

virus but also from the measures introduced to control its spread (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021).

Against this backdrop, some people are questioning the wisdom and necessity of further restrictions, such as the imposition of local and national lockdowns, and some are actively resisting them. Some people are similarly questioning the benefits of vaccination versus the perceived risks. As demonstrated in our analysis, these people are casually being represented as "deniers" and, along with those at the other end of the spectrum, are being stigmatized, marginalized, and excluded from debates about the pandemic and how to control it. Building public trust in science will be a key task. Indeed, Barry et al. (2020) found that mistrust of science was strongly negatively associated with the adoption of preventative strategies, such as physical distancing, and with adherence to public health experts' guidance concerning COVID-19. It has indeed also been shown that mistrust is also a negative correlate of willingness to be vaccinated (Fisk, 2021).

Stigmatizing social representations of people who question the aspects of COVID-19 may plausibly increase public polarization, with some members of the public feeling disenfranchised, excluded, and marginalized from scientific and policy debates (Duan, Bu & Chen, 2020). Our analysis demonstrates that some people are aware of the stigma appended to skepticism and that their views are being cloaked under the generic representation of denial. There was some evidence of them anticipating and resisting this representation through the use of discursive disclaimers. Meisenbach (2010) highlights the significance of self-distancing from membership of stigmatized categories (e.g., "denier") as a strategy for coping with the negative social and psychological effects of stigma. This appears to be consistent with our observation of the discursive strategies used to limit one's categorization in a heavily stigmatized social group – namely the "deniers." This may explain the observed tendency to resist self-categorization as such.

Despite their attempts at self-distancing from the stigmatized category, skeptics' views were represented as being characterized by denial and they were positioned as deniers. This essentially constructed all forms of skepticism and dissent negatively in terms of denial, thereby ostracizing contrarian views. Their skeptical views were presented against the backdrop of the entirely negative hegemonic social representation of denial. This may lead individuals to disengage from the preventive agenda, to accept misinformation and conspiracy theories in lieu of scientific evidence, which in turn may pave the way to more cases of COVID-19 (Romer & Jamieson, 2020). It is clear that people will need to feel included in debate and in the formulation and implementation of preventive policy; othering them as deniers does the opposite.

Empirical research shows that both inclusion, trust and collective working, are key to addressing the pandemic. It is thus counter-productive to stigmatize and marginalize COVID-19 skepticism. In the context of vaccination, which is of course a key means of tackling COVID-19, Rosenbaum (2021) reminds us of the need to empathize with people who are vaccine hesitant, rather than stigmatize them. People have been shown to express legitimate concerns about vaccination (e.g., focusing on the safety and effectiveness of vaccines), often rooted in decreased understanding of science. These concerns may be alleviated if the vaccine hesitant are engaged rather than

marginalized. When people are stigmatized, they may be deprived of feelings of self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity, and positive distinctiveness. They may consequently seek these important identity principles in groups, communities, and contexts in which they are available to them (Breakwell, 2015). Indeed, movements and pressure groups that advocate complete disengagement from COVID-19 prevention and vaccination may provide such a "favorable" context to people who have legitimate concerns but who are marginalized from mainstream debates about the pandemic. The task of scientists, journalists, and policymakers must be to build trust, promote inclusion, and to facilitate collective working across diverse communities.

Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations which should be addressed in future research. First, this study attempted to provide in-depth qualitative depth rather than empirical generalizability. It would be beneficial to supplement it with quantitative approaches to media analysis, such as content analysis and corpus linguistics techniques. Second, there is likely to be variation in the ways in which skeptics have been represented in different countries. Future research should focus on countries where there has been greater institutional endorsement of skepticism, such as Brazil, to shed light on labels used in these contexts. Third, at the time of writing, several vaccines were approved for use in the United Kingdom and it has been observed that some people are refusing to have them. Our preliminary study of social representations of COVID-19 skepticism is an important precursor of subsequent research into social representations of vaccine hesitancy. It will be fruitful to examine social representations of skepticism in relation to the COVID-19 vaccines in a separate study, especially as uncertainty and fear concerning vaccination are still spreading. Finally, a comparative study should be carried out between virus skeptics labels, lockdown skeptics, and mask skeptics labels.

Conclusion

It will be difficult but all the more necessary to enhance public understanding of, and public engagement with, the prevention of COVID-19. It will be vital to ensure an inclusive and balanced debate with key stakeholders, the most significant of whom are of course members of general public who are being asked to comply with preventive measures. In addition to political will, COVID-19 prevention requires individual compliance with preventive measures, such as the wearing of face masks, social distancing, use of test and trace, testing, self-isolation, and now vaccination. There is now a hegemonic negative social representation of skepticism as denial which stigmatizes skeptical beliefs and those who espouse them and does so across a wide spectrum of beliefs and opinions which range from privileged opinion leaders to those worried about their futures. This hegemonic representation may pave the way to division, polarization, and disengagement, undermining collective efforts to sustain public health measures, such as mask wearing, social distancing, hygiene, and ventilation, and to implement mass vaccination around the world. It is important to find ways of living with dissent that do not stigmatize

certain groups of people, entrench existing inequalities and injustices, and accelerate the polarization of society.

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