



Universität Hamburg

Abteilung Kommunikation und Marketing

Referat Medien- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit

Tel.: +49 40 42838-2968

E-Mail: [medien@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:medien@uni-hamburg.de)

15 July 2021

35/21

A SCIENTIFIC TEST REVEALS HOW SUSCEPTIBLE INDIVIDUALS  
MAY BE TO CORONA MYTHS

## **TWO CHARACTERISTICS THAT PROTECT FROM BELIEVING MISINFORMATION**

**One in five people believes misinformation about corona. How a person deals with information generally is a key sign as to who is particularly at risk, and may even be used as a predictor. This was the result of a study led by Dr. Dr. Marco Meyer from Universität Hamburg. People can now take the test based on the study results online, to check their own susceptibility.**

Roughly 20 percent of the population of the USA believes false claims about the coronavirus, such as for example, that hand dryers can kill the virus, or that it can be carried by house flies. The question of who is particularly susceptible to believing such stories can hardly be answered using previously known factors, such as political identity, level of education, intelligence, personality, or demographic factors.

A team of researchers from Universität Hamburg, Macquarie University in Australia, and the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen in the Netherlands have come up with an answer. They took a new explanatory approach, that of epistemic vices. [The study was published in the journal \*Episteme\*.](#)

Epistemic vices are characteristics that may prevent the gaining, retention, and transmission of knowledge. This includes, for example, ambivalence in the face of the truth or stubbornness in relation to one's own fundamental beliefs. The role of epistemic vices play a significant role in philosophy. But until now, they have



only been rarely investigated for their significance in relation to dealing with knowledge.

“One motivation for our study was the role of epistemic vices in evaluating information in general. The coronavirus pandemic offered us a unique opportunity,” explains Marco Meyer, who holds a doctorate in philosophy and a doctorate in economics. He leads a research group at Universität Hamburg, and focuses on ethics.

The researchers checked their thesis in a survey with 998 people from the United States. They allowed the participants to estimate their tendency towards epistemic vices themselves. They also conducted an observational study in which they measured the degree a person succumbed to epistemic vice using a newly developed scale. In a third stage, they asked the test subjects specifically about their beliefs regarding myths and misinformation about COVID-19.

“We found out that people who do not fall for corona misinformation have two characteristics in common: firstly, they were curious, and secondly, they were in a position to change their points of view when they came across trustworthy sources that contradicted their previous assumptions,” detailed Meyer.

Predictions made by observing an individual's tendency to epistemic vice on whether that person believed corona myths or not, were twice as likely to be accurate as predictions based solely on factors such as political identity, level of education, personality, or other demographic considerations such as age, gender, or ethnicity.

The study also supports the hypothesis that epistemic vices generally hinder the acquisition of knowledge. “These revelations allow us to develop more individual approaches and methods for people to move beyond their epistemic stubbornness or ambivalence, for example through teacher intervention,” explained Meyer. That offers a long-term approach against misinformation and conspiracy theories.

*Do I have epistemic vices? And what does this say about my susceptibility for corona myths? [Try out the researchers' questions with the following survey \(in English\)](#)*

**Queries:**

Dr. Dr. Marco Meyer  
Universität Hamburg  
Department of Philosophy  
Tel: +49 160 800-48 33  
Email: [marco.meyer@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:marco.meyer@uni-hamburg.de)

