News and (Mis)information about COVID-19 in Brazil

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Key Findings

In this report we examine how Brazilians get information and news about the COVID-19 pandemic, whether they trust different institutions and whether they hold misinformed beliefs about COVID-19. We find that:

- News use in Brazil had increased substantially during the height of the pandemic in July.
- At the same time, a third of respondents (34%) say they (almost) always actively avoid news about the pandemic. The avoiders tend to be right-leaning politically. The highest-cited reason for news avoidance is a perception that news about COVID-19 are too repetitive.
- Scientists are the most trusted source of COVID-19 information.rust in official sources varies widely by political ideology. Right-leaning respondents are more likely to trust the federal government, while left-leaning respondents distrust the government, favoring the World Health Organization and the news media as more trustworthy sources for COVID-19 information.
- A majority of Brazilians report frequently seeing false and misleading information about the pandemic on Facebook and WhatsApp. While fewer than 1 in 5 reported having shared misinformation inadvertently on social media, the majority of those who accidentally shared false news are between 34-55 years of age.
- Only a third of respondents were able to correctly identify misinformation about COVID-19 as being false. When political ideology is considered, those on the right are significantly more likely to hold misinformed beliefs about the pandemic.

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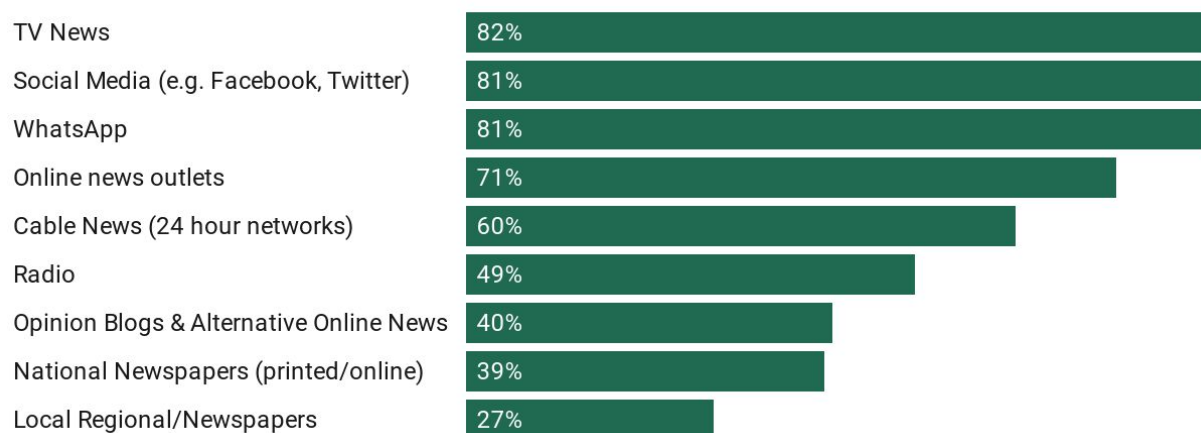*a.kalogeropoulos@liverpool.ac.uk*

Overview

This report provides the key findings about how Brazilians are navigating the informational environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of the project " 'It's on WhatsApp, so it must be true!': Social media and news use as pathways to explain (mis)perceptions and behaviours about Covid-19", supported by the ODA Rapid Response Fund at the University of Liverpool. The survey was designed by Dr Patrícia Rossini and Dr Antonis Kalogeropoulos and fielded by Ibope, a Brazilian survey company. Demographic quotas for age, gender, education level and region were used to represent the Brazilian population online. Two waves were fielded within thirty days. The first wave was fielded from 6 July to 23 July 2020 (N = 2,010), and the second wave was fielded to the same set of respondents from 21 August to 3 September 2020 (N = 1,378).

News use and news avoidance about COVID-10

During the first wave of the survey (6 - 23 July 2020), news use was at high levels in Brazil. As seen in Figure 1, the vast majority of respondents got news from TV (82%), Social Media (81%), WhatsApp (81%), or the websites of traditional news organizations (71%) during the week leading up to the survey. At the same time, a significant minority (40%) got news from alternative and partisan news websites. These findings reflect what we already knew about news use in Brazil: it is heavily skewed towards TV, WhatsApp, and Facebook (Newman et al, 2020). However, these shares are significantly higher when compared to a similar survey of internet users in Brazil in January 2020 (Newman et al., 2020). A similar increase in news use was seen in other countries during the start of the pandemic (Nielsen et al., 2020).

Proportion that used each as a source of news during the past week (July 2020)

Source	Percentage
TV News	82%
Social Media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)	81%
WhatsApp	81%
Online news outlets	71%
Cable News (24 hour networks)	60%
Radio	49%
Opinion Blogs & Alternative Online News	40%
National Newspapers (printed/online)	39%
Local Regional/Newspapers	27%

Q: How often have you used the following channels to follow news in the past week? (Base = 2,010)
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Figure 1: Proportion that used each as a source of news during the past week (July 2020)

In contrast with the increase in news use, a significant minority of respondents claim that they actively avoid news about COVID-19. During the first wave of the survey, 34% of respondents said they always or almost always find themselves avoiding news about COVID-19. The discrepancies between increased news use and high avoidance might mean that respondents may get news about other topics and avoid news about the pandemic. Active news avoidance about the pandemic was found to be particularly high during the same time period in the UK (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2020).

News avoidance is similar across gender lines, and it was higher among the young (40% of those aged 18-24 avoid news about COVID-19 versus 32% of those over 55).
Differences are also pronounced across political lines. We broke our survey respondents into different groups based on how they place themselves on a ten-point scale ranging from 1 ("very left-wing") to 10 ("very right-wing"). Those that selected either 1,2 or 3 were grouped as being on the political left, with the process mirrored to group those on the right (8, 9, 10). The remaining were coded as centrists. Those on the political left were much less likely to avoid news (23%) compared to those on the center (33%) and particularly those on the right of the political spectrum (44%) (see Figure 2). The politicized nature of news avoidance might reflect a broader anti-mainstream media movement bolstered by right-wing parties and politicians, most notably, Bolsonaro, who routinely claims that press coverage is "fake" or biased against his government.

Proportion that avoids news about COVID-19 by political leaning

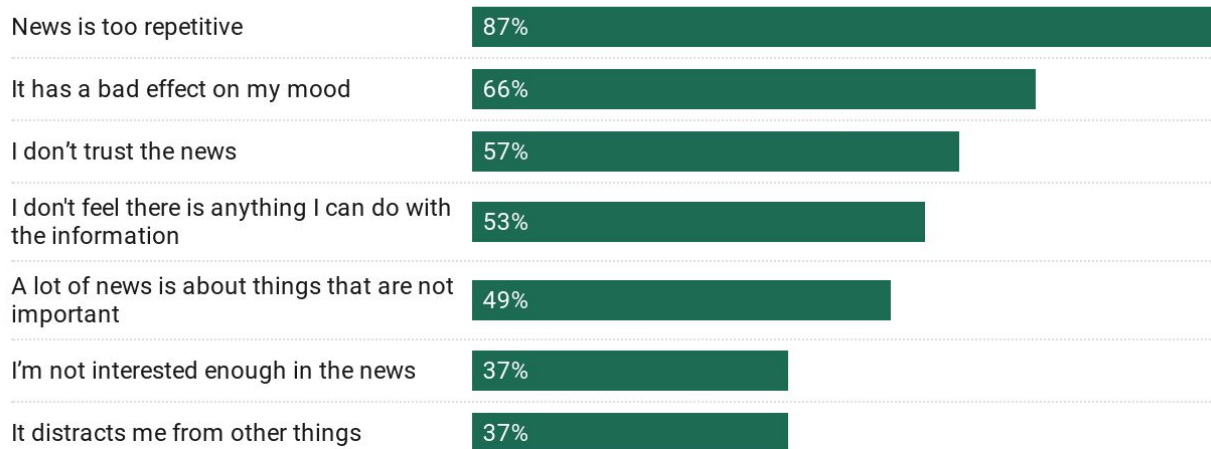|	
Left	23%
Center	33%
Right	44%

Q: Are you currently trying to avoid news about the coronavirus or COVID-19? If so, how often? (Base : Left/Centre/Right = 352/1,148/510). Showing "Always" and "Almost Always"

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Figure 2: Proportion that avoids news about COVID-19 by political leaning

When asked about the reasons why they avoid the news, the vast majority said that they find news about COVID-19 as too repetitive (87%) and that has a bad effect on their mood (66%). More than half of news avoiders claimed that they do so because of their lack of trust in news (57%) (Figure 3).

Proportion of COVID-19 news avoiders that avoid news for each reason

News is too repetitive	87%
It has a bad effect on my mood	66%
I don't trust the news	57%
I don't feel there is anything I can do with the information	53%
A lot of news is about things that are not important	49%
I'm not interested enough in the news	37%
It distracts me from other things	37%

Q: For which of the following reasons have you tried to avoid news about the coronavirus or Covid-19? (Base : Respondents who avoid news about COVID-19 ((almost always/always) = 660). Note: Respondents could pick more than one answer.

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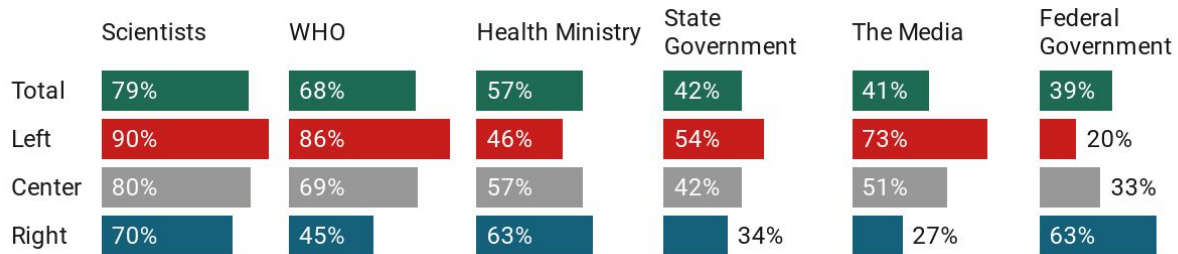Figure 3: Proportion of COVID-19 news avoiders that avoid news for each reason

Trust in sources of information about COVID-19

The declining trust in the news media outlets in several western countries is seen as a consequence of the decline of institutional trust -- a phenomenon that has been described as the "trust nexus" (Hanitzsch et al, 2018). The lack of trust in the media and in official sources may add a further challenge for governments to control the pandemic, as it is paramount that citizens are well informed about how they can protect themselves and others and know where to find information about the disease and its symptoms, as well as about local or national guidelines and restrictions.

Perhaps as a reflection of the polarized political context in the country, trust in institutions and in the media for providing COVID-19 information in Brazil is heavily affected by respondents political leaning: those on the right end of the ideological spectrum trust the federal government at a substantially higher rate than respondents in the center or the political left, but they mistrust state governments, the media, and the World Health Organization as sources of COVID-19 information. Conversely, left and left-leaning respondents were more likely to trust the WHO, the news media, and state governors at a considerably higher rate than their counterparts. Science and scientists were the only institution to enjoy relatively high levels of trust despite political ideology—even though left and right respondents are still 20 percentage points apart, a majority of respondents across the board trust scientists to provide accurate information about COVID-19.

These results suggest that the political divisions that preceded the pandemic also shaped how citizens navigated the information environment by significantly influencing the sources they rely upon for information about COVID-19. From a public health and crisis communication standpoint, these results are problematic insofar as they pose a challenge to providing accurate and updated information to citizens who trust different institutions. The results also demonstrate that the state governors, who in general took more stringent measures to curb the pandemic, and the Ministry of Health were seen as more trustworthy than the federal government (except by those on the right), further suggesting that the mixed signals sent by distinct official authorities can sow confusion and mistrust amidst a public health crisis. Even though the Ministry of Health is a part of the federal government, it initially diverged from Bolsonaro's stance on the severity of the pandemic and the need for restrictions, which ultimately led to two ministers being fired within the period of a month.

Trust in information about COVID-19 from the following sources, by political leaning (%)

	Scientists	WHO	Health Ministry	State Government	The Media	Federal Government
Total	79%	68%	57%	42%	41%	39%
Left	90%	86%	46%	54%	73%	20%
Center	80%	69%	57%	42%	51%	33%
Right	70%	45%	63%	34%	27%	63%

Q: How much do you trust information about COVID-19 from the following sources? (Base: Left/Centre/Right 352/1,148/510)

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Figure 4: Trust in Institutions for COVID-19 information, by political leaning

COVID-19 misinformation prevails on Facebook and WhatsApp

One of the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic is the current informational context, with increased concern around misinformation and disinformation. The World Health Organization has referred to such concerns using the term 'infodemic', raising attention to the threat of misinformation in the context of a developing public health threat of global proportions, as it becomes more difficult to reach people with factual and accurate information. Brazilians are among the most concerned about misinformation globally (Newman et al., 2020) and they also tend to report high exposure to false or incorrect information on social media (Rossini et al., 2020).

The data suggests that these concerns are not unwarranted: in spite of frequently using social media and messaging apps to keep up with the news, a majority of Brazilians who use these platforms reported seeing misinformation about the pandemic always or almost always on Facebook (54%) and WhatsApp (54%). Whilst at a smaller rate than the two most popular platforms, Instagram was considered a venue for frequent misinformation by four in ten respondents, suggesting that the photo-sharing app most frequently used by younger generations is also becoming a source of false and misleading information during the pandemic.

Proportion of respondents who reported always or almost always seeing misinformation on each platform

Facebook	54%
WhatsApp	54%
Instagram	39%

Q: How often you see news about the coronavirus or Covid-19 that you think is incorrect, false, or misleading in the platforms below? (Base: Facebook/WhatsApp/Instagram = 1,795/1,977/1,580).

Created with Datawrapper

Figure 5: Proportion of respondents that report seeing misinformation on social media

A challenge in preventing the spread of misinformation is that many people share it inadvertently, that is, without knowing it is false or misleading. Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic is novel and that much is still unknown about the virus, it is not surprising that people may accidentally share information that is inaccurate, or false, without knowing. When asked if this situation had happened to them on different platforms, 19% of users acknowledged having inadvertently shared misinformation on WhatsApp, 15% on Facebook, and 10% on Instagram. While the overall share is relatively small, there are significant discrepancies across age groups, with people between 35 and 54 years of age being the most likely platform users to inadvertently share misinformation on all platforms. It is also noteworthy that younger people, between 18 and 24, are more likely to have shared misinformation on Instagram than in the other two platforms, corroborating the finding that the photo-sharing app is also becoming flooded with false or misleading information about the pandemic.

The majority of Brazilians believe in at least some COVID-19 misinformation.
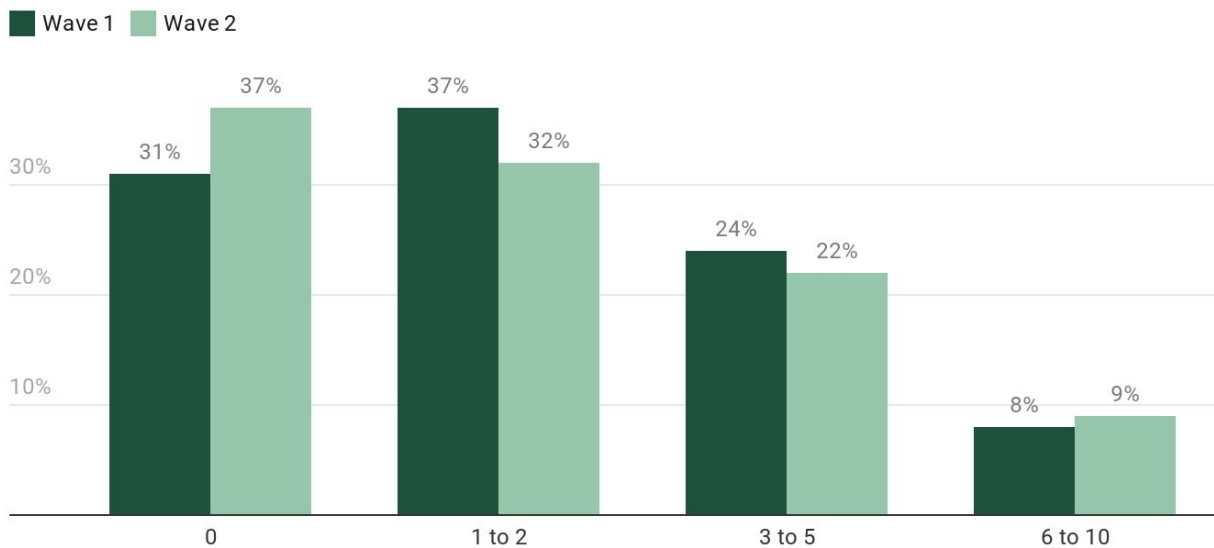
To further investigate whether the crowded information environment around the pandemic was leading Brazilians to believe in false or misleading statements, we selected 10 statements ranging from misinformation about cures, transmission, origins, or preventive measures. These statements were circulating in Brazil and they had been fact-checked by independent fact-checking agencies or the Ministry of Health—for instance, claims that COVID-19 was created in a lab or that the virus did not survive in temperatures above 26C (*see appendix*). These statements were repeated in both waves, meaning that participants in the second wave had already been exposed to them.

In the first wave, only three in ten respondents were able to correctly identify all ten statements as false or probably false, while 32% believed at least three statements were true. When respondents were presented with the same statements on the second wave, there were

slight differences, with 37% correctly identifying all false statements. However, the proportion of respondents who believed in three or more false items remained stable, with 31%.

Given the developing nature of the Coronavirus pandemic, it is not surprising that many respondents were not sure about whether the statements were false, even though we selected items that were visible enough to be fact-checked. However, it is troubling that the majority of respondents believed in at least one false item across both waves and a slightly higher proportion believed in six or more, suggesting that COVID-19 related misperceptions might be resilient to the developing knowledge about the disease.

Proportion of respondents who believed ___ of 10 false COVID-19 statements
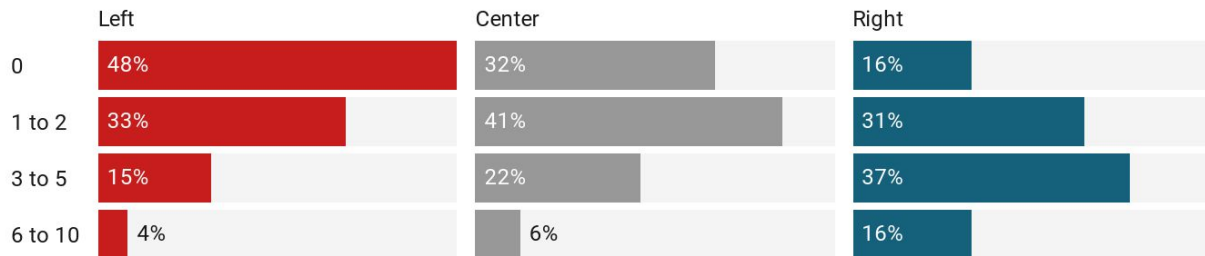

The 'score' for holding misinformed beliefs is based on the number of false statements ranked as "true or probably true" by respondents. The total number of statements is 10. (Base: W1/W2 = 2,010/1,378).

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Figure 6: Proportion of respondents who believed in a number of false COVID-19 statements

However, and similarly to the tendencies observed regarding news avoidance, when political leaning is considered, respondents who identify as right or right-leaning are significantly more likely to report believing in misinformed statements about COVID-19. Looking at Wave 1 results, only 16% of the respondents on the right end of the political spectrum correctly identified all false statements, compared to 48% on the left and 32% of those in the middle. The majority of respondents on the right believed in at least three false statements, with 16% believing in six or more. On average, those on the left believed about 1 incorrect statement, while centrists believed about 2 and right-wing or right-leaning respondents believed in 3.

Proportion of respondents who believed in a number of misinformed statements about COVID-19 by political leaning

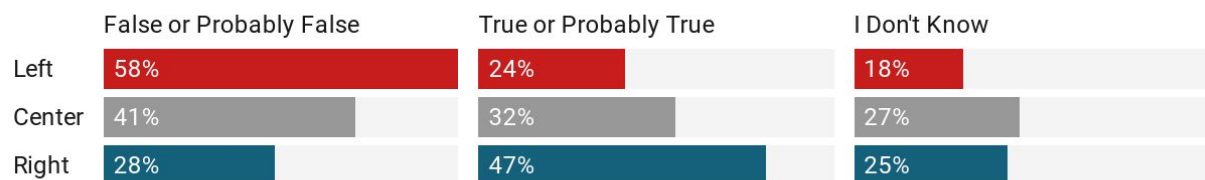|	Left	Center	Right
0	48%	32%	16%
1 to 2	33%	41%	31%
3 to 5	15%	22%	37%
6 to 10	4%	6%	16%

Q: Now let's talk about statements that have appeared in the media and on the Internet recently about coronavirus or Covid-19. Regardless of whether you heard or not, do you think this news is true or false? (Base: Left/Centre/Right = 352/1,148/510).
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Figure 7: Belief in COVID-19 false statements, by political leaning

To illustrate the impact of political leaning on how respondents evaluated the truthfulness of false statements, 58% of those on the left accurately flagged as false the claim that states receive resources from the Ministry of Health per each death by COVID-19 reported in hospitals—a claim that was based on the misperception that the pandemic was a "political prop" and that the number of deaths was being inflated, two common themes in the COVID-19 misinformation spectrum—, while 47% of those on the right believed it was true or probably true.

Q: For each death in the hospital by Covid-19, the state receives more resources from the Ministry of Health.

	False or Probably False	True or Probably True	I Don't Know
Left	58%	24%	18%
Center	41%	32%	27%
Right	28%	47%	25%

Answer options: False, Probably False, Probably True, I Don't Know". (Base: Left/Centre/Right 352/1,148/510).
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Figure 8: Example of answer distribution for a false statement, by political leaning

Conclusion & Limitations

This study focused on the ways in which Brazilians informed themselves during the first wave of the pandemic, specifically investigating pathways of information consumption and avoidance,

trust in official sources for providing credible information about the pandemic, and exposure to, as well as engagement with, false and misleading information about the disease. While there has been a high rate of information seeking behaviors, Brazilians are also actively avoiding news about the pandemic -- mainly because they find it too repetitive, or because it negatively affects their mood. When it comes to trusted sources of information about COVID-19, a majority of Brazilians highly trust scientists and the World Health Organization, but trust declines substantially when it comes to national and local authorities. Shifting the focus to the quality of the information environment, this study finds that Brazilians believe they are frequently exposed to misinformation when using social media, and might also contribute to deteriorate the quality of the information environment, with roughly one in five acknowledging having accidentally shared misinformation on WhatsApp. Importantly, the majority of respondents believed in falsehoods about the disease, suggesting that in spite of the increased news use, getting accurate information about a developing public health threat might still be a challenge given the conditions of the current information environment.

It is relevant to note that this study was conducted during the height of the pandemic, in July and August, and at a time when the political disputes around COVID-19 restrictions were already a part of the day-to-day coverage of the pandemic, creating divisions between state governors and the president, and potentially deepening ideological divisions. The high level polarization surrounding the pandemic in Brazil can be observed in several of the key results, particularly regarding news avoidance, institutional trust, and holding misinformed beliefs, suggesting that the politicization of the COVID-19 response may have influenced not only the sources of information that Brazilians relied and trusted, but also the extent to which political beliefs created more challenges for citizens to discern true and false information about the pandemic. Such findings echo similar concerns raised in the UK: when citizens receive mixed information from public authorities and the media, it becomes difficult to distinguish what--and who--to trust (Kyriakidou et al., 2020). With trust being so heavily influenced by political ideology, it becomes a challenge for public authorities to control a public health crisis insofar as an effective response relies primarily on the ability to disseminate accurate and credible information about preventive measures, restrictions, and guidance to the public.

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Appendix

False statements to measure COVID-19 misperceptions were selected from fact-checked items in the independent fact-checking website Aos Fatos and the fact-checking section of the Ministry of Health. The project investigators went through all items flagged as COVID-19 misinformation and selected claims that could be less time-sensitive (excluding, for instance, misinformation about the exact number of deaths). An initial list of 21 statements was pretested (N=200), leading to the final list of ten false statements. The final statements were selected based on pretest results (i.e. considering the range of credibility of each statement) and with input from the lead strategist from Aos Fatos, Luiza Bodenmüller, who provided insights about the most accessed fact-checked items and topics related to COVID-19.

	True / Probably True	False / Probably False	I don't know
Face masks donated by China to Brazil were contaminated by the coronavirus	11 %	71 %	18 %
The coronavirus dies when the temperature is above 26°C	17 %	57 %	26 %
The medicine irvemeticina cures Covid-19	18 %	55 %	27 %

Empty coffins are being buried in the Amazon as if they were victims of the coronavirus or Covid-19	21 %	57 %	22 %
The coronavirus was created in a laboratory China for financial gain	26 %	50 %	24 %
Wearing masks for long periods of time causes hypoxia (insufficient oxygen in the blood)	21 %	58 %	21 %
5G helps to transmit the coronavirus	5 %	73 %	22 %
Until May, Brazil recorded the world's recovery rate of people infected with coronavirus	36 %	34 %	30 %
The flu vaccine increases the chance of having the coronavirus	83 %	5 %	12 %
For each death in the hospital by Covid-19, the state receives more resources from the Ministry of Health	33 %	43 %	24 %