

# Covid-19 and the grouping Querdenken

Can this group's actions be considered legitimate criticism of the federal government measures, or is this a conspiracy narrative?

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## Abstract

For the Coronavirus disease-19 (Covid-19) pandemic, previous research found a negative association between Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs and health-protective behaviors (Allington et al., 2020; Bierwiazzonek et al., 2020; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Swami & Barron, 2020; Teovanović et al., 2020a) and the intention to be vaccinated against the virus causing Covid-19 (Bertin et al., 2020; Earnshaw et al., 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Teovanović et al., 2020a). *Querdenken*, a government measures' critical movement, shows hostility toward the establishment and science. An increasingly National Socialism-trivializing rhetoric was previously found within the movement (Bundesverband Mobile Beratung, 2020a). *Querdenken* mainly uses *Telegram*, a messenger service, to communicate and connect. For this thesis' purpose to find indications of whether the movement is spreading conspiracy narratives, a virtual ethnography was conducted. It consisted of online observations of relevant groups on Telegram between October 01 and November 01, 2020, and content analysis of shared documents, flyers, photos, and videos. It was found that numerous conspiracy narratives associated with Covid-19 are spread, weaving around two main themes: the narrative of a planned pandemic and the narrative that the pandemic is a hoax. Beyond that, other preexisting conspiracy narratives or myths are circulated. The group is contradictory in whether or not to distance from adherents of conspiracy narratives. They portray themselves as enlightened and awake, setting themselves apart from the average population. Furthermore, the federal government's actions are portrayed as a means of oppressing the population. The state and the media are portrayed as an organized network of disinformation and opinion-mongering. Simultaneously, the population cannot recognize what is being played out due to fear or stupidity.

## Zusammenfassung

Bisheriger Forschung zufolge gibt es einen negativen Zusammenhang zwischen Coronavirus-19 (Covid-19) betreffenden Verschwörungsüberzeugungen und gesundheitsschützendem Verhalten (Allington et al., 2020; Bierwiazzonek et al., 2020; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Swami & Barron, 2020; Teovanović et al., 2020a) sowie der Absicht, sich gegen das Covid-19 verursachende Virus impfen zu lassen (Bertin et al., 2020; Earnshaw et al., 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Teovanović et al., 2020a). *Querdenken*, eine Regierungsmaßnahmen-kritische Bewegung, zeigt eine Feindseligkeit gegenüber dem Establishment und der Wissenschaft, sowie eine zunehmend Nationalsozialismus-trivialisierende Rhetorik (Bundesverband Mobile Beratung, 2020a). *Querdenken* nutzt hauptsächlich den Messenger-Dienst *Telegram*, zur Kommunikation und Vernetzung. Um Hinweise darauf zu finden, ob von der Bewegung Verschwörungsnarrative verbreitet werden, wurde für diese Arbeit eine virtuelle Ethnographie bestehend aus Online-Beobachtungen relevanter Gruppen auf Telegram zwischen dem 01. Oktober und 01. November 2020 und einer Inhaltsanalyse von geteilten Dokumenten, Flyern, Fotos und Videos durchgeführt. Die Analyse zeigt, dass Verschwörungsnarrative, die mit Covid-19 assoziiert werden zahlreich verbreitet werden und sich um zwei Hauptthemen ranken: das Narrativ einer geplanten Pandemie und das Narrativ, dass die Pandemie ein Schwindel ist. Darüber hinaus werden auch bereits existierende Verschwörungsnarrative oder Mythen in Umlauf gebracht. Die Gruppe ist sich uneinig, wenn es darum geht, sich von Anhängern von Verschwörungsnarrativen zu distanzieren. Sie stellen sich selbst als aufgeklärt und wach dar und grenzen sich damit von der Durchschnittsbevölkerung ab. Darüber hinaus werden die Maßnahmen der Bundesregierung als Mittel zur Unterdrückung der Bevölkerung und der Staat und die Medien als ein organisiertes Netzwerk der Desinformation und Meinungsmache dargestellt. Die Bevölkerung kann aus Angst oder Dummheit nicht erkennen, was ihr vorgespielt wird.

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## List of Abbreviations

### A

AfD – Alternative für Deutschland

AIDS – Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

### C

CDU – Christlich Demokratische Union

COSMO – Covid-19 Snapshot Monitoring

Covid-19 – Coronavirus Disease-19

CSU – Christlich-Soziale Union

### F

FDP – Freie Demokratische Partei

FFP2 – Filtering Face Piece, Protection class 2

### G

GDP – Gross domestic product

### H

HIV – Human Immunodeficiency Virus

### I

IfSG – Infektionsschutzgesetz

### N

NWO – New World Order

### P

PCR-Test – Polymerase Chain Reaction Test

### R

RKI – Robert Koch Institut

### S

SARS-CoV-2 – Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2

SPD – Sozialdemokratische Partei

### U

USA – United States of America

### W

WHO – World Health Organization

### Numbers

5G – Fifth Generation of Broadband Cellular Network

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## 1 Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared Coronavirus disease-19 (Covid-19; WHO, 2020c) a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020d). Since then, social distancing can be seen as a new form of decency and politeness, as otherwise there is a risk of infecting others or being infected oneself. During this time, the Internet offers a way to maintain personal ties. Unlike television, users are not passive viewers but can actively shape content and respond to it (Sade-Beck, 2004).

Using the platform Twitter, Donald Trump, the former president of the United States of America (USA), has lent credibility to many conspiracy narratives, such as the assertion that vaccines would cause autism (Andrade, 2020). Some observers assume that a new era of conspiracy beliefs has emerged under his influence (Hellinger, 2018). Related to health topics, Twitter plays a significant role in opinion formation and information dissemination (Denecke et al., 2013). Although medical conspiracy narratives, such as that vaccines would cause autism, are most likely false, they are not overly bizarre (Andrade, 2020).

In Germany, the current pandemic is exacerbating inequality (Kohlrausch et al., 2020) so that some people are experiencing social exclusion, material poverty, or discrimination even more than usual. Criticizing these conditions is a fundamental requirement of liberal democracies. In some cases, the criticism might be challenging to distinguish from conspiracy narratives (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, 2020).

This thesis focuses on the *Querdenken* movement in Germany, which claims to be critical of the German government's actions responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. This movement uses *Telegram*, a messenger service with non-regulated content, to communicate and network. This thesis aims to find indications of whether the content disseminated by the movement can be seen as criticism or whether conspiracy narratives are being spread.

The threat posed by the proliferation of Covid-19 related conspiracy narratives is

particularly alarming given the pandemic situation. They might lead to denial of health-promoting behaviors such as maintaining social distance (Bierwiazzonek et al., 2020) or intention to get vaccinated (Khan et al., 2020). The goal of this thesis is not to debunk the conspiracy narratives being spread by the Querdenken movement. Instead, it aims to answer the following research questions.

1. How are the federal government's measures in response to Covid-19 presented by the Querdenken movement supporters?
2. How is the population's reaction to the restrictions of freedom in the time marked by Covid-19 represented by the supporters of the Querdenken movement?
3. How is the general reporting in the time shaped by Covid-19 represented by the Querdenken movement's supporters?
4. Which elements of Covid-19 related conspiracy narratives or myths can be seen in the Querdenken supporter's statements?
5. Which elements of preexisting conspiracy narratives or myths can be seen in the Querdenken supporter's statements?
6. How do the supporters of the Querdenken movement portray themselves?



## 2 Theoretical Background

Chapter 2.1.1 addresses the definition of conspiracy narratives. After, attempts at explaining such beliefs are presented and divided into psychological, social, and political factors. This is followed by the processes in a group of conspiracy believers, the communication of conspiracy narratives, and the implications of these beliefs. The chapter ends with a medical conspiracy narrative which is an example relevant to this thesis. The next chapter covers the topic of Covid-19 and the course of this disease, followed by the federal government's measures in Germany. After that, the consequences of the pandemic and the federal government's actions are addressed. The chapter ends with criticism and controversies. The last topic to be addressed is the Querdenken movement formed due to the German government's measures in response to Covid-19. At first, development and actors are thematized, followed by the group's financing, the channels they use, and the profile of the participants. Finally, an overview of the actions carried out by the group and the resulting criticism of the movement is given.

### *2.1 Conspiracy Narrative*

On December 4, 2016, a 28-year-old man armed with an assault rifle attacked a pizzeria in Washington DC. He was convinced that the restaurant's basement was the center of a pedophile network (Kang & Goldman, 2016). This narrative originated in an online community whose members are constantly trying to make sense of the cryptic clues provided by a user named *Q*. These clues often come as incoherent sentences or in the form of poems. In their interpretations, the Q-Anon community concluded that the word pizza must be a code word for child abuse and human trafficking. This became a serious matter when a restaurant was subsequently bombarded with hateful messages. The hatred culminated in the appearance of the armed 28-year-old in the pizzeria. The event, also known as *Pizzagate*, became a

worldwide example of a fatal conspiracy narrative (Wendling, 2016). To outsiders it seems ridiculous, but there is a genuine concern for children's lives behind this action. It appears that sometimes and for some people, it is not easy to distinguish conspiracy narratives from the truth. For the definition in the following chapter, it must be kept in mind that an approach that dismisses genuine concerns out of hand and without due consideration is not good enough. There must be a clear rationale for clarifying the bizarre from the reasonable (Grimes, 2016).

### *2.1.1 Definition*

Debates about conspiracies often produce very different and confusing terms. Conspiracy *theory* seems to be a rather euphemistic word for a narrative that is not scientifically grounded. In their recently published book, Nocun and Lamberty (2020) suggest defining a conspiracy myth as an abstract template uniting individual conspiracy narratives. As an example, they state the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, written in Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The text contains a fictitious speech by an anonymous person of Jewish faith. He explains how the alleged world Jewry is planning to take over the governments and thus world domination, which he describes as tyranny and all-encompassing terror (Sammons, 2001). Although already at that time, there were doubts about the authenticity of the text (Cohn, 1967), that did not stop the National Socialist Regime in Germany from instrumentalizing the pamphlet for propaganda. Stories about an alleged Jewish world conspiracy were becoming quite popular at that time. Jews would take over the world by organizing a communist conspiracy in Russia. At the same time, Jews would try to control the financial market of the USA. Since then, the wrong myth of the Jewish world conspiracy has been used as a template for abstruse and anti-Semitic theories. Allegedly, 4.000 Jews would not have shown up for work on September 11, 2001. Here it becomes clear which absurd interconnection, power, and homogeneity are assumed to the Jews as a group (Nocun & Lamberty, 2020).

In summary, then, a conspiracy myth is more of a concept, but what criteria must a conspiracy narrative meet? Douglas et al. (2016) define a conspiracy narrative as an attempt “to explain the causes of events as secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups rather than as overt activities or natural occurrences” (p.57). One famous example is that the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center in September 2001 would have been an inside job of the American government, orchestrated by President George W. Bush (Parakkal & Laine, 2017). The *flat earth movement* is another example. This narrative is spread mainly on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/>) and includes the belief in a disc-shaped earth. This disc would be surrounded by a vast wall of ice (Mohammed, 2019). Often, the government is stated as conspirator. But any group could be accused of conspiring as long as they are perceived as powerful and malicious. Politicians, power companies, managers, journalists, and religious groups (such as Jews and Muslims) are frequent targets of these narratives (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Still, conspiracy beliefs about climate change, for example, accuse scientists, communists, the United Nations, Democrats, the oil industry, and of course the government among others (Douglas et al., 2019). The belief in a conspiracy narrative seems to be corresponding to the perceived likeability and threat of various groups (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), which is often depicted as out-group (van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). Van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) propose five critical components that qualify a belief as a conspiracy narrative.

1. Patterns or the chain of incidents that caused an event did not occur coincidentally;
2. agency or the event was caused on purpose by intelligent actors;
3. coalitions or multiple actors are involved;
4. threats or the pursued goals are evil, selfish, or otherwise not in public interest;  
and
5. secrecy or the coalition of people operates in secret.

Another important term is conspiracist ideation. Brotherton et al. (2013) described this as the general tendency to engage with conspiracist explanations for events. The authors described five facets of such beliefs:

1. governments commit secret criminal and terrorist acts against their citizens,
2. small global elites control important events,
3. governments hide evidence of extraterrestrial contact,
4. diseases are spread, there are tests of mind-controlling technologies on an unaware public, and
5. organizations (including governments) suppress information from the public.

These five identified dimensions of a conspiracist ideation were found to be highly intercorrelated and Brotherton and colleagues stated that conspiracy narratives frequently merge these different themes. Collectively these beliefs are thought to promote beliefs in individual conspiracy narratives, resulting in a network of specific conspiracist beliefs. The defined terms are summarized in table 1.

Table 1. *Definition of Used Conspiracy Related Terms*

Used Term	Definition	Example
Conspiracy Myth	Abstract template uniting individual conspiracy narratives (Nocun & Lamberty, 2020).	There is a Jewish world conspiracy.
Conspiracy Narrative	Attempt “to explain the causes of events as secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups rather than as overt activities or natural occurrences”. (Douglas et al., 2016, p. 57)	Attacks against World Trade Center in September 2001 have been an inside job.
Conspiracist Ideation	General tendency to engage with conspiracist explanations for events (Brotherton et al., 2013).	Mixed conspiracy beliefs like governments hide evidence of extraterrestrial contact, and a small global elite controls the world.

The term conspiracy narrative is pejorative. But in some cases, such narratives can be reasonable. Dentith (2014) defends conspiracy narratives primarily because they

contribute to the maintenance of democratic control over powerful elites, and some conspiracies have turned out to be true. For example, between 1932 and 1972, as a part of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the course of syphilis infections was investigated in the USA. Three hundred and ninety-nine black Americans, who were already infected, were not informed of their illness because the scientists wanted to observe how the disease would progress if left untreated. The researchers had taken into account that the patients would unknowingly infect their partners and children with syphilis. When the case became public in 1972, many participants had already died (Brandt, 1978). The definitions were chosen to ensure that they do not a priori dismiss all beliefs in conspiracies as being false (Grimes, 2016).

### *2.1.2 Psychological Factors*

As the definition of conspiracy narratives indicates, there has to be a powerful and malicious group that can be blamed. Conspiracy narratives overlook the unintended consequences of actions and assume that someone must have intended all consequences. The question of who might benefit from something takes priority (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). People with an intuitive thinking style do not tend to believe that significant events were caused by coincidence and prefer coherent, causal stories (Kahneman, 2011, p. 146). Swami et al. (2014) showed that the belief in conspiracy theories was with a small to medium effect size significantly negatively correlated with an analytic thinking style and open-minded thinking, and with a small effect size positively correlated with intuitive thinking style and need for closure. Further, Lewandowsky et al. (2013) showed that a conspiracist ideation is associated with the rejection of science. Particularly terrible events produce outrage leading people to seek causes and attribute those events to someone's intention (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Van Prooijen and van Dijk (2014) found that people who endorsed conspiracy narratives were more likely to commit to the proportionality bias, the tendency to attribute small causes to insignificant events, and large causes to more significant

events.

As Festinger (1957) proposes, people seek content that is consistent with their preexisting positions when confronted with terrible events. That is part of what he calls the theory of cognitive dissonance. Because people tend to avoid dissonant perspectives and instead integrate dissonant information into their preexisting beliefs, media have little opportunity to persuade. This effect could even be enhanced by a digital media environment because that allows selective exposure with little effort (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

However, to the intentional threat of a powerful and malevolent group it should be added, that enemies serve as a psychologically effective projection for what are otherwise diffuse threats to one's well-being that are impossible to control (Sullivan et al., 2010). Van Prooijen and Acker (2015) showed that when reminding people of a time where they had no control, the endorsement of conspiracy narratives increased. In contrast, the belief decreased when inducing a sense of control. Additionally, threats to personal control increased the enemy's perceived conspiracy power (Sullivan et al., 2010).

Conspiracy narrative beliefs might also be more appealing to individuals seeking patterns and order in their environment (van Prooijen et al., 2018). Some individuals are more prone to find patterns, connections, or meaning in casually unrelated events as a reaction to complex events experienced under stressful conditions or anxiety, for example, caused by terrible events (Balzan et al., 2012; Swami et al., 2016; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Grzesiak-Feldman (2013) examined possible relationships between anxiety and conspiracy thinking in Polish students and found that conspiracy thinking about Jewish people, Germans, and Arabs was positively related to the type of anxiety found in a pre-exam situation. The most meaningful results were obtained in the case of conspiracy thinking about Jewish people. Paradoxically, the belief in conspiracy narratives also seems rather to increase (than decrease) feelings of powerlessness for the individual (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a). Uncertainty and the

perceived morality of authorities also seem to influence people's tendency to believe or disbelieve in conspiracy narratives (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013).

Several studies found that the strongest predictor of belief in one conspiracy narrative is preexisting belief in another conspiracy narrative (Swami et al., 2010; 2011; 2013; 2017). This phenomenon occurs even when conspiracy narratives contradict each other (Sutton & Douglas, 2014; Wood et al., 2012). Wood et al. (2012) describes this phenomenon as follows:

conspiracy advocates' distrust of official narratives may be so strong that many alternative theories are simultaneously endorsed in spite of any contradictions between them. (p.768)

Van Prooijen et al. (2018) also found the belief in fictional conspiracy narratives to be significantly correlated with belief in existing conspiracy narratives and supernatural beliefs.

Cichocka et al. (2016a) found that individual narcissism was significantly positively correlated with conspiracy beliefs even when adjusting for its overlap with collective narcissism, which will be discussed with the social factors. The authors suggest that individual narcissists might be especially prone to believe in conspiracy narratives due to their elevated self-consciousness, their exaggerated feelings of being in the center of others' attention, and perceiving others' behavior as intentionally targeted against them. That is in line with research suggesting that those who have a high personal need for uniqueness believe in conspiracy narratives (Lantian et al., 2017). The belief in conspiracy narratives is sometimes portrayed as pathological (Hofstadter, 1965), and conspiracy beliefs were shown to be significantly and positively correlated with paranormal beliefs, paranoid ideation, and schizotypy (Darwin et al., 2011). Contrary to that view, a large share of the population believes conspiracy narratives (Zick et al., 2019). They appear to appeal to those who feel disconnected from society and to those who have a cynical worldview (Rose, 2017).

### *2.1.3 Social Factors*

As Hofstadter had already noted in 1964, conspiracy beliefs predominantly emerge because citizens feel powerless or voiceless in the political debate. Groups feeling that they have no access to the political process “find their original conception of the world of power as omnipotent, sinister, and malicious fully confirmed” (p.39). Van Prooijen and van Lange (2014) state that conspiracy beliefs are likely to be associated with feelings of rejection by the out-group while at the same time being linked to a strong sense of connectedness with the in-group that is perceived to be under threat. This out-group, as mentioned above, can be represented by the political elite (e.g., the government), corporate leaders, scientists, or, more generally, an out-group that is being feared or despised (e.g., Muslims, Jews). The in-group consists of equals who believe in the respective conspiracy narrative. Additionally, the authors outline, that conspiracy beliefs are stronger among marginalized minority groups in society. Feeling that one’s entire group is marginalized in the social context is likely to be a strong predictor of conspiracy belief.

Belief in the in-group’s greatness, or collective narcissism, is associated with the attitude that others do not appreciate the group enough. This conviction has been linked to conspiracy belief (Cichocka et al. 2016a; b). Furthermore, collective narcissism seems even to foster beliefs in the out-group's conspiratorial intentions (Cichocka et al., 2015).

Education and its relation to conspiracy narratives is a contentious issue in the literature. On the one hand, higher education appears to prevent people from conspiracy beliefs (Georgiou et al., 2019; van Prooijen, 2017). Lower levels of education are also associated with increased belief in conspiracy narratives. This relation is thought to be mediated by the general tendency to attribute intentionality and agency where it does not exist (Douglas et al., 2016). On the other hand, Yang et al. (2016) found that higher shares of otherwise mandatory vaccination exemptions are observed in



private schools in predominantly white and wealthy areas in California, where the level of education can be assumed to be relatively high.

#### 2.1.4 Political Factors

Several political factors are thought to be related to the belief in conspiracy narratives. According to van Prooijen (2018), distrust in leaders or political or financial turmoil can lead to belief in conspiracy narratives. In this respect, van Prooijen and Douglas (2018) propose that conspiracy narratives could be seen as a form of rational coping strategy to make sense of the chaos or uncertainty arising from significant events. Besides, Doyle (2011) found that cynical views of political institutions and politicians being seen as deceitful and plotting secret plans to take global power are associated with preferences for populist parties.

Populism is a particular conception of politics, according to which a morally pure, homogeneous population is confronted with immoral, corrupt, and parasitic elites (Müller, 2016). Silva et al. (2017) argue that the worldviews of conspiracy narratives and populism are very similar. Both emphasize the role of the people and are highly critical of elites. Whoever is meant by these categories is thereby arbitrarily interchangeable. Conspirators are seen as those who control society for their personal gain at the expense of ordinary people.

Political extremism is characterized by its rejection of the democratic constitutional state and its requirement to restrict or eliminate it (Jesse, 2013). Hardin (2002) suggests that political extremists have a *crippled epistemology*. They receive or trust information about political issues mainly from their extremist in-group and ignore other sources of information. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) propose the same concept for those who believe in conspiracy narratives:

Those who hold conspiracy theories of this distinctive sort typically do so not as a result of a mental illness of any kind, or of simple irrationality, but as a result of a 'crippled epistemology,' in the form of a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources. (p. 204)

Conspiracy beliefs are thought to serve extremism’s demand to make sense of events through clearly delineated assumptions about the world, also known as black-and-white thinking (van Prooijen et al., 2015). In their study, the authors found evidence that participants at the extreme left and the extreme right are more inclined to believe in conspiracy narratives than politically moderate participants.

A summary of the described psychological, social, and political factors for the believe in conspiracy narratives is given in table 2.

Table 2. *Factors for the Believe in Conspiracy Narratives*

Psychological	Social	Political
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intention assumption<sup>a</sup>,</li> <li>- intuitive thinking style<sup>b</sup>,</li> <li>- lack of control<sup>c</sup>,</li> <li>- seeking patterns and order in the environment<sup>d</sup>,</li> <li>- anxiety<sup>e</sup>,</li> <li>- perceived morality of authorities<sup>f</sup>,</li> <li>- preexisting belief in another conspiracy narrative<sup>g</sup> even when conspiracy narratives contradict each other<sup>h</sup>,</li> <li>- Individual narcissm<sup>i</sup>,</li> <li>- high personal need for uniqueness<sup>k</sup>,</li> <li>- paranormal beliefs, paranoid ideation, and schizotypy<sup>l</sup>, supernatural beliefs<sup>m</sup>,</li> <li>- feeling of being disconnected from society and a cynical worldview<sup>n</sup>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feelings of rejection by the out-group and feeling of connectedness with the in-group perceived under threat<sup>o</sup>,</li> <li>- being part of a marginalized minority group<sup>p</sup>,</li> <li>- collective narcissism<sup>q</sup>,</li> <li>- education as prevention<sup>r</sup> (but exception for vaccination<sup>s</sup>),</li> <li>- lower levels of education<sup>t</sup>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Distrust in leaders or political or financial turmoil<sup>u</sup>,</li> <li>- association to the worldview of populism<sup>v</sup>,</li> <li>- having a crippled epistemology<sup>a</sup>,</li> <li>- being politically extreme left or extreme right<sup>w</sup>.</li> </ul>

Note. <sup>a</sup>Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009. <sup>b</sup>Swami et al., 2014. <sup>c</sup>van Prooijen & Acker, 2015. <sup>d</sup>van Prooijen et al., 2018. <sup>e</sup>Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013. <sup>f</sup>van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013. <sup>g</sup>Swami et al., 2010; 2011; 2013; 2017. <sup>h</sup>Sutton & Douglas, 2014; Wood et al., 2012. <sup>i</sup>Cichocka et al., 2016a. <sup>k</sup>Lantian et al., 2017. <sup>l</sup>Darwin et al., 2011. <sup>m</sup>van Prooijen, 2018. <sup>n</sup>Rose, 2017. <sup>o</sup>van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014. <sup>p</sup>van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014. <sup>q</sup>Cichocka et al. 2016a; b. <sup>r</sup>Georgiou et al., 2019; van Prooijen, 2017. <sup>s</sup>Yang et al., 2017. <sup>t</sup>Douglas et al., 2016. <sup>u</sup> van Prooijen, 2018. <sup>v</sup>Silva et al., 2017. <sup>w</sup>van Prooijen et al., 2015.

### 2.1.5 Processes in a Group of Conspiracy Believers

When people discuss in groups, they tend to make more extreme decisions than the average of their individual judgments would suggest. The discussion has a polarizing

effect (Myers & Lamm, 1976). As argued by Brown (1986), during the consultation, the members' position shifts toward a more extreme one. One reason could be the occurrence of information cascades. An information cascade occurs when an individual, having observed its predecessors' actions, imitates the behavior of the predecessor without regard to its own information (Hirshleifer, 1995). Once the group's median view begins to move in a particular direction, doubters and halfway-believers will tend to leave the group, while intense believers will remain (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Festinger et al. (1952) discovered that people who have opinions that are highly different from others withdraw from the group before the group has a chance to reject them. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) described the consequences as follows: "The overall size of the group may shrink, but the group may also pick up new believers who are even more committed, and in any event the remaining members will, by self-selection, display more fanaticism" (pp. 217-218). The authors further describe that group members who are both informationally and socially isolated become increasingly suspicious of everyone else's motives. This suspiciousness leads to an overestimation of the amount of attention they receive. Incidental actions that happen to disadvantage the group are taken as purposeful plots intended to harm (Kramer, 1994).

People tend to favor information that reinforces their existing views and dismiss those that contradict their views. This phenomenon is usually referred to in the literature as confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) and is reminiscent of the concept of cognitive dissonance mentioned above. According to Nyhan and Reifler (2010), people even tend to engage in a biased search-process to seek out information, confirming their existing beliefs and finding counterarguments for contradicting opinions. The belief in multiple conspiracy narratives is thought to form a closed-off worldview. The individual conspiracy narratives support and serve as evidence for each other. That is called a *monological belief system*, (Goertzel, 1994; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Wood et al., 2012). The fact mentioned above that the strongest predictor of belief in

one conspiracy narrative is a preexisting belief in another seems to support this thesis. Brotherton et al. (2013) suggest that conspiracy believers do not appear to evaluate specific stories on their account but rather tend to accept the whole package. Hagen (2018) criticizes the existence of a monological belief system in a commentary and argues that such is a usual way of arguing apart from the belief in conspiracy narratives. Conspiracy narratives are, in his view, characterized as unfairly negative.

Nyhan and Reifler (2010) showed that political misperceptions resist, even when confronting people with corrective information. Paradoxically, in some cases people tend to become even more confident in their false beliefs. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) found individuals being confronted with unwelcome information to support their opinion even more insistent. That is what they call a “backfire-effect” (p. 307). Nyhan et al. (2014) conducted a randomized trial to dispel misperceptions about vaccination to increase their application rates. The authors' apprehension that public health communication about vaccination may reduce vaccination intention is an especially concerning example of the backfire-effect. The findings of Wood and Porter (2019) contradict these findings. Across five studies and 52 commonly misconstrued policy areas among 10,100 respondents, they did not observe a single instance of factual backfire. “Overwhelmingly, when presented with factual information that corrects politicians – even when the politician is an ally – the average subject accedes to the correction and distances himself from the inaccurate claim” (Wood & Porter, 2019, p. 26).

### *2.1.6 Communication of Conspiracy Narratives*

Denialism, such as smoking does not cause cancer or climate change is a hoax, a crucial phenomenon in conspiracy narratives, is characterized by the rejection of scientific evidence (Diethelm & McKee, 2009). There is an overwhelming consensus of evidence among scientists. Still, there are also vocal commentators who reject it and

convince many people in public and often the media that the consent is not based on *sound science*. In this view, the peer review process is seen as a means by which the conspirators suppress dissent. Another strategy of communicating conspiracy narratives is that individual dissenting voices are presented as the ultimate authorities on the topic. Another tactic is using fake experts, individuals who purport to be experts in a particular area but whose views are entirely inconsistent with established knowledge. Furthermore, targeting isolated but supportive pieces of evidence and discrediting all others. Frustrating tactics, too, are creating impossible expectations of what the research can deliver or using logical fallacies, such as misrepresenting the opposing argument to make it easier to refute.

There are also risks associated with communicating only within a particular group. As described above, a group of conspiracy narrative believers forms an ideologically homogenous group, and though, is at risk to find itself in an echo-chamber. The same opinion is always reproduced and repeated without being questioned. Warner and Neville-Shepard (2014) found that media echo-chambers can increase belief in conspiracies regardless of prior belief. Either believers are not exposed to evidence that refutes the conspiracy or dismiss contrary information and only accept messages that reinforce their belief. That is in line with the mentioned concept of a crippled epistemology (Hardin, 2002). Those who believe that powerful people intentionally planned the Covid-19 outbreak (Schaeffer, 2020) may respond quite rationally to the informational signals they receive. “Those beliefs may well be justified from the standpoint of the individuals who hold them, even if they are preposterous in light of the information available in the wider society” (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 212). So, without moderating or dissenting voices, members of this shielded group may end up being so extreme in their claims that their views are distasteful to those outside of the echo-chambers. However, to ban dissenting views from the interaction, online discussion settings must be private (Wood, 2013).

### *2.1.7 Implications of Conspiracy Beliefs*

One implication of conspiracy narratives is that they can lead to distrust of political institutions (Georgiou et al., 2020). Furthermore, Jolley and Douglas (2014a) demonstrated that even exposure to information supporting conspiracy narratives reduced participants' intentions to engage in politics compared to participants who received information refuting conspiracy theories. Another consequence of conspiracy ideation is the resistance to critical medical and public health interventions. This includes an unwillingness to receive vaccines, the rejection of conventional medical or dental treatments, or possible devotion towards potentially dangerous treatments based on pseudoscientific belief systems (Douglas et al., 2017; Jolley & Douglas, 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014).

### *2.1.8 Medical Conspiracy Narratives*

According to a representative survey, 57 percent of people in Germany believe that website content is an appropriate source for seeking vaccination information (Horstkötter et al., 2019). Kata (2012) further adds a growing trend to seek information from user-generated websites, such as online newsgroups and blogs, rather than more traditional evidence-based vaccine information sites. Dubé et al. (2015) summarize the quality of this content as “highly variable with a substantial amount of inaccurate information” (p.106). They further argue that some of the statements used by vaccination opponents have been used for about 200 years now:

vaccines are ineffective or cause diseases; vaccines are used to make profit; vaccines contain dangerous substances; harms caused by vaccines are hidden by the authorities; vaccination mandates violate civil rights; natural immunity is better than immunity induced by vaccines or natural approaches to health and alternative products (e.g., homeopathy, vitamins) are superior to vaccines to prevent diseases (p.106).

In 1990, the fear that childhood vaccines should sterilize women thwarted a vaccination program in Cameroon. The vaccine against smallpox (extracted from cowpox) in 1802 provoked satiric rumors that they would cause the development of bovine

features. Not to mention Thabo Mbeki's denial that the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) causes Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). This prevented thousands of HIV-positive mothers in South Africa from receiving treatment so that they would unnecessarily transmit the disease to their children (Bateman, 2007). The unproven assertion by Andrew Wakefield in 1998 that measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccination was linked to autism was already controversial at that time (Dubé et al., 2015) and has since been refuted several times (Hviid et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, the alleged link is still a reason for parents not to have their children vaccinated (Brown et al., 2012). The associated drop in immunization rates was followed by measles outbreaks and deaths (McBrien et al., 2003). These are examples for the thesis of Dubé et al. (2015) that “evidence statements on statistics and probabilities, often used in public health communication about vaccination, are not nearly as powerful as emotive anecdotes” (p.107). In general, Jolley and Douglas (2014b) demonstrated a significantly negative relationship between anti-vaccine conspiracy beliefs and vaccination intentions. Furthermore, the authors revealed being exposed to material supporting anti-vaccine conspiracy narratives leads to less intention to vaccinate.

As mentioned before, Yang et al. (2016) showed that factors as higher income, being white, and visiting a private school significantly predicted greater increases in exemptions from otherwise mandatory vaccinations. In contrast, higher educational attainment was associated with smaller increases. Nonmedical exemptions allow individuals to opt-out of school-entry and other requirements for vaccinations on the basis that they hold a sincere philosophical or religious belief opposing vaccination. Douglas et al. (2019) state that conspiracy narratives have led people to reject mainstream medicine to the point where once-cured diseases are reoccurring in some parts of the world.

## 2.2 Covid-19

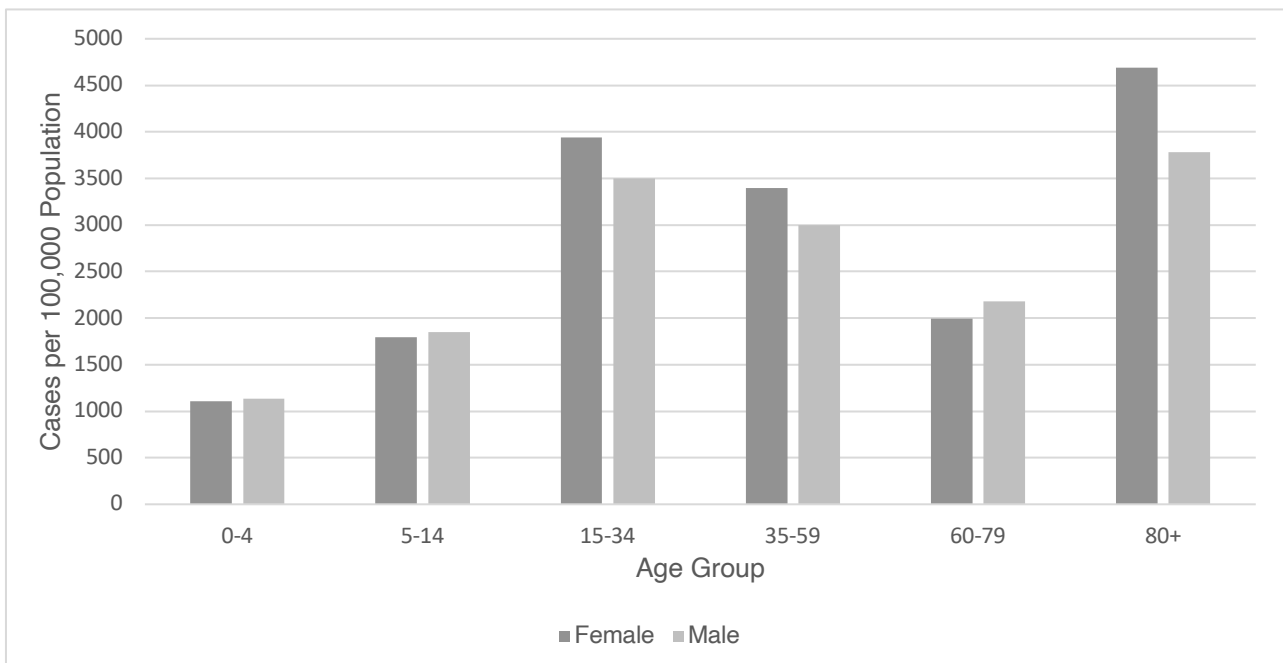
In December 2019, a novel virus from the coronavirus family emerged in China. It is called SARS-CoV-2, meaning Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2 (Coronaviridae Study Group of the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses, 2020). SARS-CoV-2 causes the pulmonary disease Covid-19. The following chapters refer solely to the situation in Germany.

### 2.2.1 Course of the Disease

The disease is thought to be highly contagious from person to person by airborne droplet or smear infection (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2020a). On the first of March 2021, about 2,451,011 people have been infected, and 70,463 people have died from the disease in Germany so far (NP GEO, 2021). Figure 1 contains Covid-19 cases by age group and sex per 100,000 population.

#### Figure 1

*Covid-19 Cases by Age Group and Sex/100,000 Population (NP GEO, 2021).*



*Note.* This figure demonstrates the status as of March 01, 2021 in Germany.

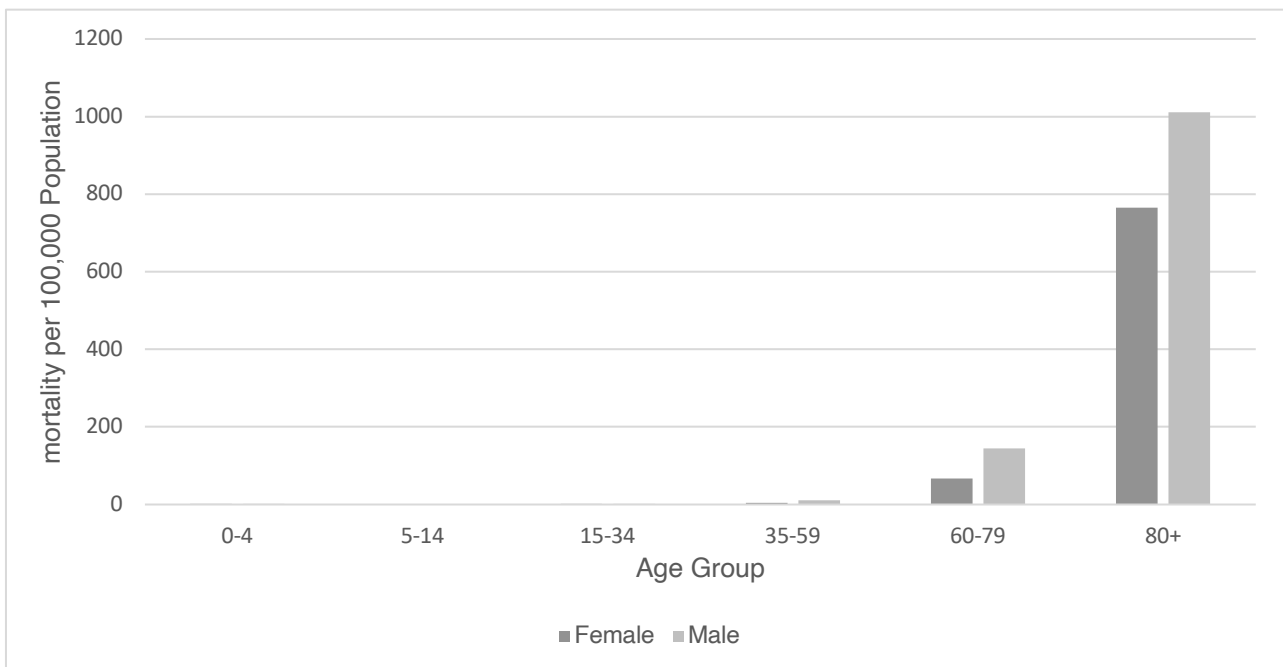


Figure 1 shows Covid-19 is a disease of high morbidity. However, the current best estimate is that about 80 percent of people with Covid-19 have mild illness and never require hospitalization (Schilling et al., 2020; Wu & McGoogan, 2020). Schilling et al. (2020) analyzed all laboratory-confirmed cases (pathogen isolation, nucleic acid detection) in Germany with SARS-CoV-2 infection submitted to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) between January and May 2020, regardless of the type of clinical symptomatology. Cases with required records up to October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, were included. Two-thirds of patients were younger than 60 years (median age is 50 years). Cases aged 40 to 59 years had the longest period from onset of illness to hospital admission (with a median of six days) and, if admitted to an intensive care unit, at the same time the longest period with treatment requiring intensive care (with a median of eleven days). The most commonly reported symptoms were cough, fever, and general signs of illness such as weakness and muscle and limb pain across all age groups. Other common respiratory symptoms reported were rhinitis and sore throat. Age group-specific, pneumonia and shortness of breath were most common in age groups 60 years and older, whereas rhinitis was significantly more common in younger age groups. During the last three weeks of data collection, loss of smell or taste, respectively, could also be transmitted as a symptom. At least one of these two symptoms has been reported in 9.1 percent of cases since then. A systematic review showed evidence that olfactory and gustatory disorders are strong predictors of infection by SARS-CoV-2 (Costa et al., 2020). A polymorphic skin-related manifestation of the disease occurring after other symptoms has also been reported (Zhao et al., 2020). A mild course of the disease was most frequently reported for the younger age groups, dropping to 62 percent among those aged 60 to 79 and 38 percent among people aged 80 and older. In contrast, the proportion of severe and critical cases was most frequently recorded among the elderly. Almost every second case among those aged 80 and older was hospitalized, and every third case died (Schilling et al., 2020). In summary, male, older than 65, comorbidities, and currently smoking are risk

factors for a more severe course of Covid-19 (Zheng et al., 2020). A meta-analysis even showed a significant association between a history of smoking and the progression of Covid-19 (Patanavanich & Glantz, 2020). Especially cardiovascular disease, diabetes, neurologic disorders, pulmonary disease (Schilling et al., 2020), and hypertension (Moazzami et al., 2020) are common risk factors. Figure 2 illustrates Covid-19 deaths by age group and sex per 100,000 population in Germany.

## Figure 2

*Covid-19 mortality by age group and sex/100,000 population (NPGEO, 2021).*



*Note.* This figure demonstrates the status as of March 01, 2020 in Germany.

### 2.2.2 Measures of the Federal Government

Because of the two leveled federalist system in Germany, all 16 states are allowed to enact their own regulations and laws. The ordinances for addressing the pandemic have been very heterogeneous over time. For reasons of clarity, this chapter refers to the regulations of the federal government.

In the end of January 2020, as the first person to be infected in Europe, a man from

Bavaria was tested positively on SARS-CoV-2. Until February 12, 2020, cases have occurred in many countries around the world. In Germany, 16 people were infected with the virus. All have been isolated and underwent treatment. At the end of February, a national crisis committee was set up. The decision was made to identify contacts of those infected and subsequently impose domestic quarantine for the incubation period of two weeks.

At the beginning of March, the government banned the export of medical protective equipment (respirators, gloves, protective suits, etc.) to foreign countries. Further, it was recommended to postpone scheduled surgeries to gain hospital capacity and cancel large events with more than 1,000 expected participants (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a). The number of daily cases increased within two weeks from less than 100 to 4,000, and the first Covid-19-related deaths were recorded (NPGEO, 2020). On March 17, 2020, the heads of governments of the EU decided on an entry ban for non-EU citizens (Klormann, 2020). The German population was urged to stay at home whenever possible. Two laws were passed at the end of March 2020. The *Covid-19 Hospital Relief Act* to cushion the economic impact on hospitals and the *Act to Protect the Population in the Event of an Epidemic Situation of National Significance*. In particular, it empowers the Federal Ministry of Health to take measures on primary health care by order or ordinance without the Bundesrat's consent (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a). At the end of March, more than 400,000 cases of Covid-19 were reported worldwide in more than 150 countries. An increasing proportion of global cases were from countries in the European Union and the United Kingdom (ECDC, 2020). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared a travel warning for all non-essential tourist travel abroad.

As of March 22, 2020, contact restrictions are in place. Staying in public space was only allowed when alone, with one's household, or another person not living in the household. Most businesses in the retail sector that are not necessary for daily life, gastronomic businesses, service establishments in personal care, and similar

businesses were closed (Bundesregierung, 2020a). Far-reaching visitation bans were in place in nursing facilities nationwide (Ott, 2020), schools were closed, the spring term was held primarily online (Kuhn, 2020; Weis & Zimmermann, 2020). The debt brake was suspended, and the government announced an additional federal budget of 150 billion euros. Short-time work was introduced, allowing companies to temporarily reduce working hours and employees to receive income support from the state for hours not worked (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a).

On April 2, first-wave infections peaked at 6,553 per day (NPGEO, 2020). The government's activities focused on the procurement and distribution of medical protective equipment. Since the end of April, mouth-nose protection is mandatory throughout Germany for shopping and public transport (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a).

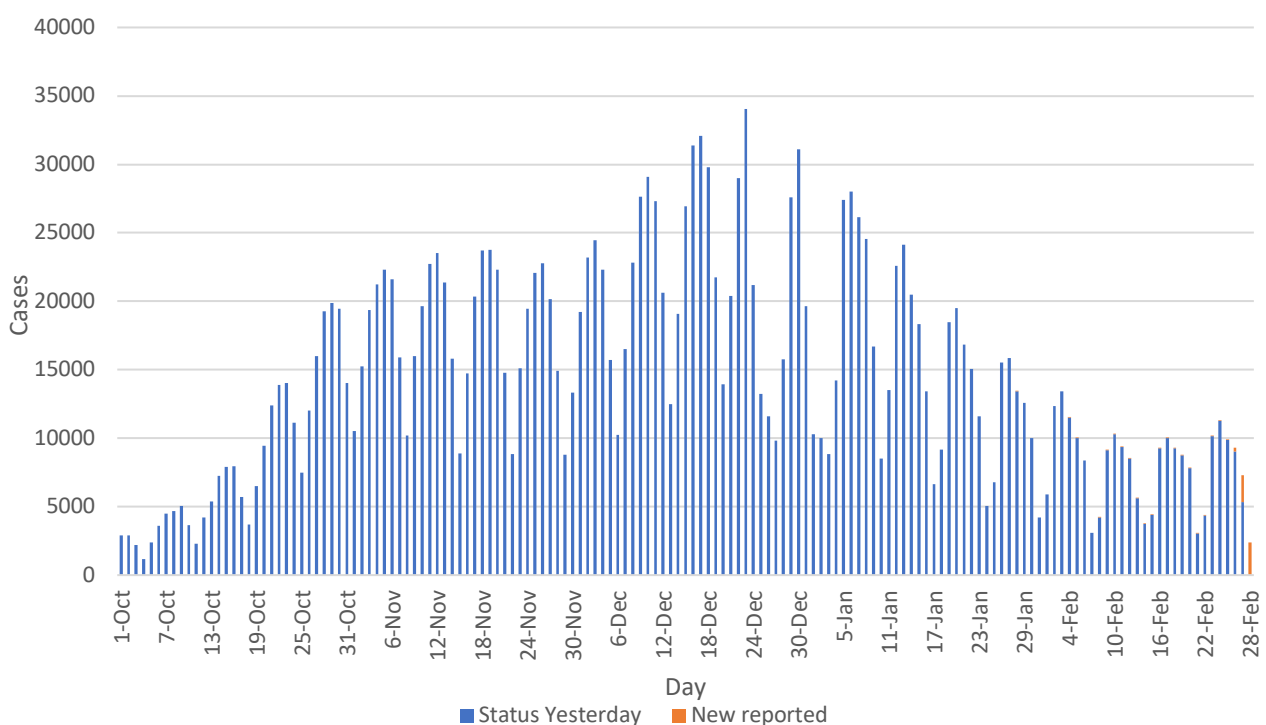
The stricter lockdown measures from late March appeared to be effective, with case numbers dropping from May (NPGEO, 2020). Since the beginning of May, there was a gradual lifting of restrictions. The case numbers remained on a low level until the end of June. The cumulative incidence ranged from two to five cases per 100,000 population nationwide (RKI, 2020a). The update of the *Act to Protect the Population in the Event of an Epidemic Situation of National Significance* was enacted on May 14. It essentially refers to an adaptation of the health care system to the epidemic situation. For example, since then, statutory health insurers may be obliged to pay for tests for SARS-CoV-2 or antibody tests (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a). The economic stimulus package agreed by the governing parties' coalition committee in early June included 9.5 billion euros for strengthening the healthcare system. On June 16, the Corona warning app was launched. Using the app, people can be informed anonymously if they have been in an infected person's vicinity (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a). The December 2020 RKI report on the app's usage showed 24.2 million downloads by this target point. However, only about 55 percent of users shared their positive test results (RKI, 2020b). And since only the

positive test results are relevant for interrupting chains of infection, this limits the app's effectiveness. As of August, anyone coming from abroad could be tested for SARS-CoV-2 free of charge. It was decided that travelers returning from risk areas must be tested (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a). The number of new infections per day again reached the 1,000 threshold (NPGEO, 2020).

When the seven-day incidence reached 27.5 cases per 100,000 population in October (RKI, 2020a), the hotspot strategy was in effect. Regulations were adapted on a region-specific basis depending on the Covid-19 incidence (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a). Figure 3 illustrates Covid-19 infections per day between the beginning of October 2020 and the end of February 2021.

### Figure 3

*Covid-19 Infections per Day by Reporting Date (NPGEO, 2021).*



*Note.* This figure demonstrates the status as of March 01, 2021 in Germany. *Status yesterday* refers to the status as of February 28; *New reported* refers to the cases newly reported on March 01.

The months of October to December were dominated by increased numbers of infections and tightened measures. Since the end of December, the number of cases is declining steadily. For the time being, the third and last revision of the *Act to Protect the Population in the Event of an Epidemic Situation of National Significance* was enacted in November. Only if the Bundestag determines an epidemic situation of national scope can the Federal Ministry of Health or the Federal Government issue specific Covid-19 regulations. Those must be based on established criteria. The Federal Parliament can declare the epidemic situation of national scope to be resolved at any time (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a). According to § 28a Abs. 1 IfSG, these regulations include, among others, the following:

- ordering a distance requirement in public spaces;
- obligation to wear a mouth-nose covering;
- exit or contact restrictions in private as well as public spaces;
- obligation to draw up and apply hygiene concepts for businesses, facilities or services open to the public;
- prohibition or restriction of diverse events, gatherings, establishments, facilities, also the entering of health- and social-facilities, and institutions;
- comprehensive prohibition or prohibition limited to certain times, of the serving or consumption of alcohol in certain public places or certain facilities open to the public;
- prohibition or restriction of travel; or
- ordering the processing of contact data of customers, guests, or event participants to be able to trace and interrupt possible chains of infection after the occurrence of an infection with SARS-CoV-2.

Besides, according to § 28a Abs. 2 IfSG, the following protective measures are still permissible insofar as an effective containment of the spread of Covid-19 would be

significantly endangered even if all other protective measures taken so far were taken into account:

- prohibition of assemblies or processions within the meaning of Article 8 of the *Grundgesetz* and religious or ideological gatherings;
- ordering an exit restriction, according to which leaving the private residential area is only permitted at certain times or for specific purposes; and
- prohibition of entry into or visitation of institutions, such as homes for the elderly or nursing homes, institutions for the disabled, maternity facilities, or hospitals for close relatives of persons treated, cared for, or assisted.

Known as *lockdown light*, some of these measures were implemented at the beginning of November. Schools, kindergartens, wholesale, and retail businesses remained open, but service establishments in the field of personal care and entertainment facilities were closed, and contact restrictions were reintroduced (Bundesregierung, 2020c).

By an ordinance in December, all at-risk groups are provided access to free or discounted Filtering Face Piece (Protection class 2; FFP2), masks (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2020c). FFP masks of class 2 are characterized by a low total leakage (maximum 8 percent), which causes a reduction of infectious aerosols in the inhaled air (Ruscher, 2015). Due to high infection rates, very severe restrictions on public life are again in effect as of December 16. Schools and kindergartens, most of the remaining businesses, and establishments were closed with a few essential exceptions. There was a special rule for the Christmas holidays to permit a celebration with the immediate family. For New Year's Eve, there was a ban on assemblies and gatherings and the sale of fireworks (Bundesregierung, 2020d).

In all EU member states, the distribution of the novel SARS-CoV-2 vaccine began on December 26 (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a). The vaccine distribution is staggered into three groups, starting with nursing facilities and those over 80 years

of age, followed by those over 70 years of age and people at very high risk or with a high probability of severe disease progression. Close contacts of people in need of care, people in asylum or homeless shelters, and police and law enforcement officers who are at high risk of infection in the course of their duties to ensure public order, especially during demonstrations, can also be vaccinated in the second group. The third group includes all people over 60, people with various severe diseases, and people with obesity. It also has people who work in food retail and teachers (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020b).

In January, further restrictions were added. People living in areas where the seven-day-incidence of Covid-19 per 100,000 people exceeds the value 200 were restricted to a radius of 15km in their freedom of movement (Bundesregierung, 2020e).

Since January, infection rates have been falling significantly, as can also be seen from Figure 2. However, various virus mutants have emerged that are presumably even more contagious than the virus's original form (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a). The measures have been extended until, for the time being, March 28, 2021 (Bundesregierung, 2021). The vaccination ordinance was amended on February 24, 2021, to allow persons working in child-care facilities and schools to be vaccinated in advance (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2021).

### *2.2.3 Consequences*

The pandemic had an economic, social, and psychological impact in Germany. Economically, Germany is particularly affected by the current developments. This is because, as an open economy that is intensively integrated into global value chains, it is more vulnerable than other countries to the economic impact of SARS-CoV-2 (Ragnitz, 2020). According to the German Federal Employment Agency, the number of recipients of short-time-working benefits has increased considerably due to the Covid-19 crisis. Compared to 2019 (40,000), it was highest in April at about 7 Million people receiving short-time benefits (p. 10). Not surprisingly, it was above all those



sectors of the economy that were severely affected by the restrictions that suffered the greatest losses in business. Above all, the lodging industry (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2020a), the transportation industry, the gastronomy, and the event sector were affected. In most cases, there are still de facto business bans in place at the beginning of March 2021. Parts of the retail sector are also still suffering from pandemic-related restrictions. Even if all stores are allowed to reopen, stricter hygiene regulations and consumers' lower propensity to buy appear to be holding back business. The risk of business closures is also greatest in the mentioned areas (Ragnitz, 2020). There was a year-over-year change in unemployment of 638,000 fewer people employed at its maximum in June (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2020b). Around 800,000 jobs are estimated to have been lost due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Ragnitz, 2020, p. 25). Since mid-March, visits to specialists have declined significantly. Depending on the specialty group, by 25 to 75 percent compared with the same quarter of the previous year (Hillienhof, 2020). During the pandemic, countries around the world spent considerable financial resources to cushion the economic impact of the crisis. The stock of public debt in relation to GDP (Gross domestic product) will thus rise to about 80 percent in 2020. At the end of 2019, the debt ratio was about 60 percent (Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft Köln, 2020, p. 12).

As a social implication of the Covid-19 pandemic, cases of discrimination have increased. Presumably, because the first report of SARS-CoV-2 was from Asia, the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency received reports of *racial profiling* of people with Asian appearance. This refers to the method of using a person's physical appearance, such as skin color or facial features, as a decision-making basis for police measures such as personal checks, investigations, and surveillance (Cremer, 2014). Others turned to the counseling center because, for example, mandatory masks were taken without consideration for disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities. People with walking aids, on the other hand, failed due to requirements in supermarkets when a shopping cart was mandatory there (Antidiskriminierungsstelle

des Bundes, 2020).

UN Women (2020) drew attention to another social consequence of the pandemic. As a result of the curfew in various countries, increasing cases of domestic violence against women and girls were reported. They state France as an example, where domestic violence cases are thought to have increased by 30 percent (p. 2).

During the Covid-19 crisis, there was much discussion about the division of care work between fathers and mothers. Concern arose that school closures and the forced shift of work to home office could lead to a re-traditionalization of gender roles. A study by the Federal Institute for Population Research (Bujard et al., 2020) found that this was not the case. Among parents, the decrease in work hours was exceptionally high for fathers, at 2.4 hours, while it was 0.8 hours for mothers (p. 37). But this statement does not provide a comprehensive picture of the situation. For mothers, the number of hours spent on household and family work during the Covid-19 crisis increased from 6.6 to 7.9. While for fathers, the mean increased from a previous 3.3 to 5.6 hours a day (p. 37). Thus, fathers worked less during the pandemic than before and spent more time on housework, but mothers still took the larger share in terms of time.

Besides, there are eight times more single-parent mothers than fathers in Germany. However, in a partner situation, women always spent more time on housework and family chores than men during the Covid-19 crisis. For this effect, it made no difference whether both partners worked at home, or only one partner worked at home, or both went to work (Bujard et al., 2020). Additionally, it was found that the lock-down circumstances generally have a negative effect on the satisfaction with work and family of individuals in Germany. Still, effects differ between fathers and mothers, with the latter being more negatively affected (Huebener et al., 2020; Möhring et al., 2020).

A review showed the psychological impact of social quarantine during the Covid-19 pandemic and for Ebola contact cases, for example, and found diverse stressors

during and after quarantine. Stressors during quarantine included fear of infection, frustration and boredom, inadequate basic supplies, as food, water, or accommodation, and poor communication from health authorities that resulted in insufficient information, such as the purpose of quarantine and the severity of the pandemic. Financial worries and stigma were common stressors even after quarantine. Adverse psychological outcomes included posttraumatic stress symptoms, confusion, and anger (Brooks et al., 2020).

Luo et al. (2020) reviewed more psychological factors: anxiety, depression, distress, stress, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. They examined prevalence among health care workers, the general population, and patients at increased risk of Covid-19. They found a high heterogeneity between the groups for anxiety (overall prevalence 33 percent; p. 4) and depression (overall prevalence 28 percent; p. 5). The prevalence of anxiety and depression was higher among patients compared to healthcare workers and the general public. The overall prevalence of distress, stress, and insomnia was 35 percent, 40 percent, and 32 percent, respectively (p. 5). The prevalence's of all mentioned psychological factors were similar between healthcare workers and the general public. The prevalence of post-traumatic stress symptoms/disorders was the highest among patients with Covid-19 (93 percent) which was higher than that reported in healthcare workers and the general public, where the prevalence ranged between 3 percent to 16 percent (p. 5). According to their study, common risk factors for a higher psychological impact of the pandemic included:

- being a woman,
- being a nurse,
- having a lower socioeconomic status,
- having a high risk of contracting Covid-19, and
- social isolation.

Protective factors included having sufficient medical resources, having up-to-date and accurate information, and taking preventive measures.

To also address a positive consequence of the pandemic, it should be mentioned that the German federal government is now significantly more committed to health care. As a consequence of the Covid-19 crisis, the federal government intends to establish a national health reserve with essential material for health care facilities in the case of an emergency at 19 locations (Bundesregierung, 2020b). In total, the Federal Ministry of Health's support for the WHO this year includes more than 500 million euros (Bundesgesundheitsministerium, 2020a), and there is a proposed law on the further development of health care, which is intended to improve the quality of hospitals (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2020b).

Additionally, and contrary to expectations, Germany's target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40 percent in 2020 compared with 1990 was exceeded as due to the Covid-19 crisis and associated one-off effects in various sectors (Agora Energiewende, 2021, p. 9).

#### *2.2.4 Criticism and Controversies*

Much confusion was caused at the beginning of the pandemic by the discourse on the effectiveness of wearing a simple mouth nose covering. Initially, the WHO recommended only ill people to wear one (WHO, 2020a), and the RKI described the wearing of them as unnecessary, only to reverse this opinion at the beginning of April and recommend wearing them (Eckert, 2020). The changing advices of science seemed to unsettle the normal population and led to some ridicule (Schnabel & Probst, 2020).

In spring 2020, there was an impression of a lack of opinion in the debate about the pandemic measures. Both the government (Lau, 2020) and the media (von Billerbeck, 2020) would present the lockdown as having no alternative. Dissenting views would not be given any space in the debate.

Nevertheless, Naumann et al. (2020) analyzed survey data between March and May and showed very high approval rates of the policy measures at the beginning of March. In early April, the approval rate began to decline steadily and continued to drop week-on-week until May. Just as broad support for the measures steadily declined over time, so did feelings of threat and subjective perception of risk. They also found the mentioned negative economic consequences of the pandemic as unemployment or moving to short-time work not to affect everyone equally but to aggravate existing social inequalities. Lower educated workers tended to lose their jobs, be suspended without pay, or experience a partial income loss by short-time work to a much higher degree than higher educated workers. If they could keep their jobs, they tended to have to work on-site with increased risks of infection.

Heike Schmoll, editor specializing in education, clarifies the problems caused by the pandemic and the associated homeschooling. The lack of digitalization in the German education system exacerbated children's writing and reading deficits in elementary school since children of this age rely on face-to-face instruction. For adolescents nearing graduation, the homeschooling situation has led to the reinforcement of achievement inequality. Previously good students may have done well, but deficits can be expected for previously poor students. In general, school closures put children from precarious backgrounds at a disadvantage compared to children whose parents can invest money in digital resources and time in homeschooling (Caspary, 2021).

In April 2020, six people frequently heard in the debate over the measures from medicine, philosophy, politics, economics, and law (Kekulé et al.) published a contribution to the discussion. With that, they drew attention to the fact that we were threatened with a recession that would inevitably affect the general quality of life and the health of the population in the future with the prevailing measures. They compared the threat of Covid-19 to the annual flu infections that society accepts as the unspoken price of freedom and economic prosperity. They proposed a change in strategy basically on the assertion that equal treatment under the Grundgesetz can also mean treating

unequal things unequally and taking factual differences into account. They suggested protecting risk groups through FFP2 masks, distance, and hygiene rules, not to be seen as discrimination but as special protection and smart distancing for the rest of the population to ensure a slow spread of the pandemic. By smart distancing, they mean mouth nose covering when shopping or in public transportation.

A similar but more extreme approach was also suggested in early October by the Great Barrington Declaration (2020). It is a recommendation of a strategy the initiators call Focused Protection. Led by three American professors and allegedly signed by over 50,000 health care professionals, it demands that the elderly should be isolated, so everyone else could return to normal.

In a motion, the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) parliamentary group calls for an awareness campaign on fundamental rights restrictions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic with the argument that restrictions on fundamental rights are anything but ordinary. Domestic isolation, working from the home office, and contact restrictions in public spaces are listed as examples. According to the request, this educational campaign should be age-appropriate, multilingual, and barrier-free (Deutscher Bundestag, 2020b).

There was also criticism from the opposite direction. In particular, the Minister Presidents' conference in October was widely criticized. Although the infection rate rose dramatically, the Minister Presidents agreed on modest restrictions, the mentioned *lockdown light*. Criticism was directed at the federalist system in particular. It would lead to lengthy decision-making processes with ineffective results (Brost & Pörksen, 2020; Rürup, 2020).

On October 27, the presidents of six major German research organizations (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft et al., 2020) published a statement on the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany. They warned of an uncontrollable increase in infections with severe consequences for treatment capacities and mortality rates. They further demanded a consequent reduction of social contacts to make effective case

tracking by health authorities feasible again. It was added that the earlier and more consistently contacts are restricted, the shorter these restrictions can be.

The procurement of vaccines and their shortage was also criticized. The vaccines had to be pre-ordered at a time when their efficacy was not yet proven. The German government is criticized for not ordering enough vaccines from the German manufacturer Biontech (Remme, 2021). The opposition criticized the EU and the German government for relying on the wrong vaccines and ordering too few (Crefeld, 2021).

### *2.3 Querdenken*

When speaking of criticism of the federal government's measures, one must also refer to the political movement Querdenken. Armin Nassehi, professor of sociology at Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, provided a summary of the group. He described it as heterogeneous and consisting of right-wing populists, right-wing radicals, vaccination opponents, and people from the anthroposophical scene, and certainly people who have difficulties in dealing with the current situation. Similar to other protest movements, these people unite in their criticism of the elite. These can be political, scientific, cultural, but also media elites or simply the establishment. In this context, the term establishment has the function of being very imprecise so that everyone can project their ideas onto this term (Caspary, 2020; 00:00:58).

#### *2.3.1 Development and Actors*

The initiative Querdenken started in April with protest gatherings in Stuttgart. Explicitly, the first protests were directed against the general ban on assemblies due to the measures against the Covid-19 pandemic. Several dozen people gathered to protest the alleged emergence of a dictatorship and demanded their supposedly deprived fundamental rights back. Despite an initial ban by the city, the initiative was allowed to demonstrate because the Federal Constitutional Court granted an urgent appeal against the ban (Baur & Jenkner, 2020). About 350 to 500 people attended the third

assembly in Stuttgart. Simultaneously, more than a thousand people gathered in Berlin to protest the restrictions in the wake of Covid-19, despite a wide-ranging ban (dpa, 2020). The fourth demonstration on May 1 called for the lifting of the current exit- and contact-restrictions. According to the organizer, 5,000 people gathered for this in Stuttgart and again about 300 in Berlin. Even then, critics feared an appropriation by conspiracy believers and right-wing populists (dpa & Hofer, 2020).

The first nationwide demonstration took place on May 9 (Steffen, 2020). At the express invitation, controversial Youtuber Ken Jebsen spoke at the rally (Alternative Video News, 2020; Bury, 2020). Michael Ballweg and his initiative Querdenken-711 announced the rallies against the restrictions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Latter has no defined legal form meaning there is no registered association, no foundation, no company. Instead, Ballweg owns 19 Querdenken brands, which, like Querdenken-711, belong to local groups identifiable by telephone area code (Laufer, 2020). The initiative sees itself as non-partisan and calls for lifting the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 Ordinance of following Articles by its own account (Querdenken-711, n.d.-a).

- Article 1: Human dignity, human rights, legally binding fundamental rights;
- Article 2: Personal liberty rights;
- Article 4: Freedom of belief and conscience;
- Article 5: Freedom of opinion, art, and science;
- Article 7: Education;
- Article 8: Freedom of assembly;
- Article 11: Freedom of movement;
- Article 12: Freedom of occupation; and
- Article 13: Inviolability of the home.

According to his Twitter account, Michael Ballweg once supported the direction of the governmental measures against the Covid-19 pandemic. While on March 19, he was



still retweeting a request from police under the hashtag *we stay home* (Michael Ballweg, 2020a), on April 8, he claimed the death toll from Covid-19 was artificially inflated (Michael Ballweg, 2020b). He already criticized one of the first articles of the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* about the first meetings of *Querdenken-711* as inaccurate. The demonstration was not directed against the Covid-19 measures but for fundamental rights (Bury, 2020).

According to Braun (2020), Michael Ballweg studied business administration and is self-employed. With his company, he has developed software that enables companies to continue using former employees who have retired on a project basis. A few years ago, he launched a purchasable app that allows parents to locate their children at any time. Concerned about the curtailment of fundamental rights, he registered a first demonstration. With reference to the current restrictions, the city of Stuttgart refused. With the help of the lawyer Ralf Ludwig, one of the founders of the party *Widerstand 2020*, which also formed against the Covid-19 measures, but existed only for 54 days (Laufer & Reuter, 2020), he asserted his right to freedom of assembly.

According to his account, some contracts with Michael Ballweg's company were terminated due to his involvement in *Querdenken-711* (Braun, 2020). He ran for mayor of Stuttgart but was not elected with 1.2 percent of the vote (SWR, 2020). Ballweg believes that the Office should observe the federal and state governments for Protection of the Constitution (dpa et al., 2020b). In a speech in Berlin on August 29, he called for a constituent assembly supposed to camp out in Berlin for two weeks and work on a replacement for the *Grundgesetz*. Because of the restrictions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the camp was disbanded early (Garbe & Kalisch, 2020). However, Ballweg is not the only face of the *Querdenken* movement. Under the title "The Great Corona Info Tour" (Wienland, 2020a, para. 15), Bodo Schiffmann, a doctor in a vertigo outpatient clinic, and Samuel Eckert, a former lay preacher, toured Germany. Since the end of September, they did one to three stops a day for rallies

with short interruptions. The speakers were campaigning against the preventive measures against Covid-19, the existence of which they have already questioned. Bodo Schiffmann also sees himself as the founder of Widerstand 2020 (Wienand, 2020b).

There are many organizations around the opaque web of Querdenken. The founders of *Anwälte für Aufklärung* intend to take action against the government's alleged massive violations of the law and consider the Covid-19 measures unconstitutional. According to the group's self-portrayal on its website, it wants to help clarify the alleged pandemic (Anwälte für Aufklärung, 2020).

Citizens affected by the measures are referred to the association *Klagepaten*, which is supposed to help assert a claim for damages against the state (Deutschlandfunk, 2020). It is an association that helps people on a donation basis. According to the website, the top issues that are dealt with are help with mandatory masks, how to object to a test for SARS-CoV-2 at schools, and how to register a demonstration (Klagepaten, 2020). After incidents between demonstrators and the police occurred at a protest in August in Berlin, Klagepaten has offered a form with which those affected can file criminal charges against officers. This led to 92 criminal charges against police officers in connection with the demonstration. The association's internet domain belongs to Ralf Ludwig's company (Laufer & Reuter, 2020).

According to the website, Ralf Ludwig and Bodo Schiffmann are also part of another association called Das Volk gegen Corona or the people against Corona (Das Volk gegen Corona, n.d.-a; n.d.-b). The goal of the site is to bring together an association of lawyers and physicians, virologists, as well as epidemiologists "in one of the largest lawsuits against the Corona measures" (Das Volk gegen Corona, n.d.-c, para. 2).

Travel to demonstrations in other cities are organized by Querdenken's logistics partner Honk for Hope (Bohr et al., 2020; Garbe, 2020). *Ärzte für Aufklärung* is a coalition of physicians who have spoken at many demonstrations and rallies opposing the Covid-19 pandemic security measures. They do not consider SARS-CoV-2

particularly dangerous and the mask requirement unnecessary (Deutschlandfunk, 2020). Wir2020 is a new party project and sees itself as a parliamentary instrument of the Covid-19 measure's critics (Deutschlandfunk, 2020). They call for the establishment of an extra-parliamentary committee of inquiry into the Covid-19 pandemic (Außerparlamentarischer Corona Untersuchungsausschuss, n.d.-a). As this calls into question the free democratic basic order, it is also a reason why the Baden-Württemberg state office declared Querdenken-711 an object of observation for the Office for the Protection of the Constitution on December 9. The advanced radicalization of Querdenken would make this indispensable (Steffen & Wildschutz, 2020).

### *2.3.2 Financing*

As mentioned before, Querdenken has no legal form. The means of financing must therefore come from private funds. According to Michael Ballweg in a statement published on YouTube (QUERDENKEN 711 - Wir für das Grundgesetz, 2020a), he sold his company's main product back in February. He liquidated all of his annuity policies because he had no belief that the existing pension system would still exist when he needed it. Additionally, many people would provide equipment to Querdenken at no cost. However, even below this video, there is an appeal to support Querdenken together with an account number and the specified purpose: "Schenkung", meaning gift in English. According to Laufer (2020), this account number belongs to Ballweg's private account. Besides, merchandising articles (including clothing and buttons) have been sold through the Querdenken website since at least June (Querdenken-711, n.d.-c). As mentioned, Michael Ballweg owns these brands and accordingly profits from their sale. According to a press release from Querdenken-711 (2020), no profit is made with the demonstrations. Michael Ballweg stated that he does not have a transparency obligation and therefore does not provide information on his finances. The other actors associated with Querdenken also appear to be funded primarily through donations or gifts. Bodo Schiffmann, part of the Great Corona Info Tour, also

asks for financial support with this appeal: "If you would like to support me, you can gift me money. Max. 19,999 euros in 10 years" (Alles\_Ausser\_Mainstream, 2020). As mentioned above, the services of Klagepaten are available on a donation basis. The association pays a company for certain services, which, just like the association's Internet domain, belongs to Ralf Ludwig. Unfortunately, due to the lack of willingness to provide information on those involved, no further details are known (Laufer & Reuter, 2020).

One of the association's Das Volk gegen Corona (n.d.-d) main goals seems to be to raise funds for what they claim is the largest lawsuit in German history. The cost of all this, according to the website, could quickly sum up to millions of euros.

According to Garbe (2020), tickets for a trip to demonstrations with the Honk for Hope initiative cost between 30 and 120 euros. To this must be added possible donations. Of course, for the bus operator, this is a declared way to draw attention to his situation due to the Covid-19 pandemic and a possibility to do business despite this situation. Also, Ärzte für Aufklärung (n.d.) request financial support. No specified purpose is stated, only: "We doctors help the people who suffer from the unobjective Corona measures. We doctors clarify the background. With your support, our Foundation Ärzte für Aufklärung is even more effective."

The party Wir2020 (n.d.-b) and the extra-parliamentary committee of inquiry into the Covid-19 pandemic (Außerparlamentarischer Untersuchungsausschuss, n.d.-b) also give the opportunity to donate but do not specify the purpose.

### 2.3.3 Channels

Querdenken mainly adopts four channels to communicate: YouTube, *Bitchute*, *Facebook*, and Telegram. The main channel on YouTube, QUERDENKEN 711 - Wir für das Grundgesetz (n.d.), with 76,800 subscribers (as of January 7, 2020), contains mainly videos of speakers at various demonstrations, interviews of protagonists such as Michael Ballweg, and advertisements for his candidacy for mayor. The first video

upload was on April 27, 2020, and 282 videos have been published since then (as of January 7, 2020). There used to be a YouTube channel from the Great Corona Info tour (Alles Ausser Mainstream Dr. Bodo Schiffmann, n.d.), but all content has been deleted, allegedly to avoid censorship. There are still 104,000 subscribers (as of January 7, 2020). Instead, the platform was switched to BitChute with 6,711 subscribers (as of January 7, 2020; Alles\_Ausser\_Mainstream, n.d.). The announced goal is to do real journalistic work and to provide people, as far as possible, with information different from what can be found in the public media and government channels. Two more, less successful channels are represented on BitChute. One is also from the Stuttgart offshoot of the movement (Querdenken711, n.d.), the other from the offshoot in Ulm (Haintz, n.d.). As of January 7, 2020, they have 139 subscribers and 487 subscribers, respectively.

On Facebook, there is only one group for the community of Querdenken (Corona-Pandemie fällt heute aus, n.d.). As of January 7, 2020, there are 43.171 members. There are polls, advertisements for partners like Klagepaten, and members sharing articles and the like on this page. One example is a member's article about a two-year-old who took off his mask on a plane to eat something and was subsequently banned from flying (Corona-Pandemie fällt heute aus, 2020). They are mainly polarizing articles.

Unquestionably, the channel most used by Querdenken followers is Telegram. Unlike other messenger services, Telegram does not show any warnings on videos and texts when misinformation is spread there. The use of Telegram has increased considerably. According to its own statement, 400 million people use the service per month, twice as many as two years ago (Sterz, 2020). Querdenken makes use of it in two forms: two-way exchange in groups and one-way distribution of messages to an audience in channels. There are different groups for every location-specific offshoot with a varying number of members. On the website of Querdenken-711, all local initiatives are listed with Telegram link to enable entry (Querdenken-711, n.d.-

b). The local group for Munich Querdenken 089 News Channel (@querdenken\_089) on Telegram is an example of the one-way distribution type. Only the administrator can send messages. In contrast, in the exchange and discussion group (@querdenken089), everyone can send messages.

#### *2.3.4 Participants Profile*

Covid-19 Snapshot Monitoring (COSMO) is a serial cross-sectional online survey. Approximately 1,000 people participate in weekly to biweekly data collections (COSMO, n.d.). As an analysis by COSMO (2020) shows, the willingness to participate in a demonstration against the restrictive measures remained constant between 10 percent and 14 percent between May and December.

Nachtwey et al. (2020) evaluated the sociology of those who did participate in a protest in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland. The study's authors note that many people in this group are presumably skeptical of public institutions, such as the scientific community, and therefore did not participate in the study. Some Telegram groups explicitly warned against participating. Since participation took place via self-selection, they convey an over-coverage of people who would like to put the Covid-19 critics' movement in a positive light. The study is not representative but is an almost unique resource given the topicality of the issue and the distrust of media representatives and science by participants in the Querdenken movement.

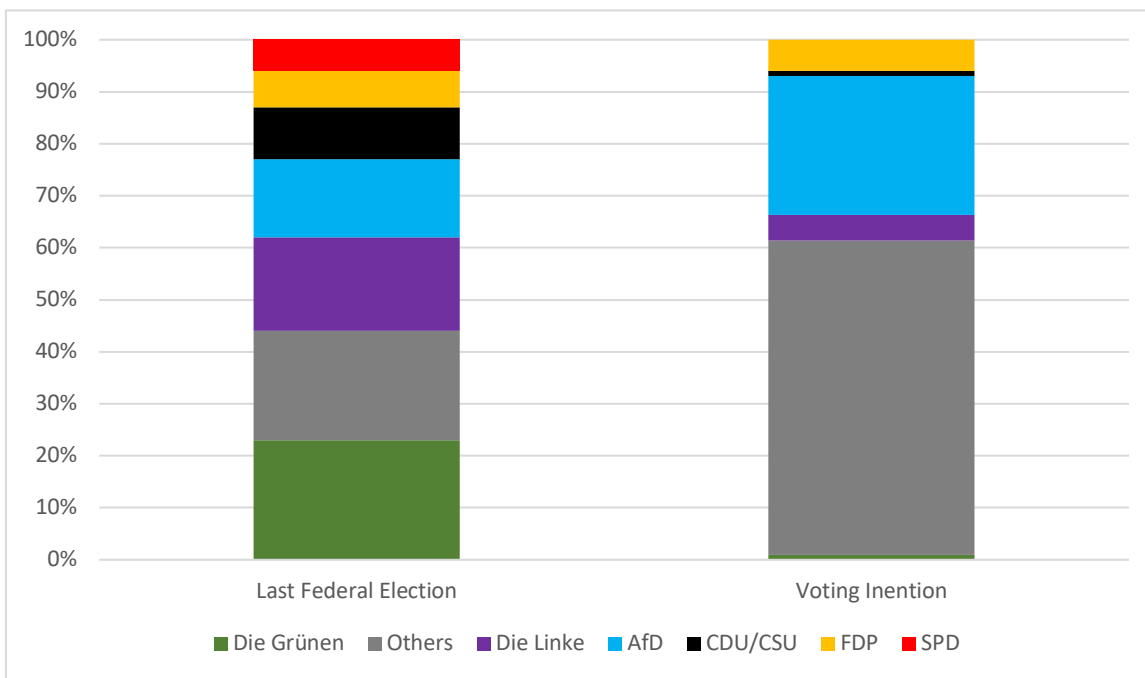
The age distribution shows that a majority (75 percent) of the respondents are over 38 years old. However, the distribution of age groups is almost normally distributed around a median of 48 years (p.6). Slightly more women than men participated in the survey. The education level is relatively high, with 31 percent having a baccalaureate degree and 34 percent having a university degree (p.7). A quarter of the respondents reported being self-employed (p.8).

The survey results on voting behavior among 622 participants before and after the Covid-19 crisis are noteworthy and illustrated in figure 4. Among the sample, the

decline in votes is most drastic among *die Grünen*. The few who voted for the *CDU/CSU* or *SPD* in the last federal election would no longer do so today. The share of the vote for *AfD* has increased. The bulk of the votes considered here would go to minor parties (as *die Basis* and the mentioned *Wir2020*) today.

### Figure 4

*Voting Behavior in the Last Federal Election and Voting Intention Today (Nachtwey et al., 2020, p. 10).*



*Note.* The bar chart shows the percentage of votes among 622 participants. AfD (Alternative für Deutschland); CDU (Christlich Demokratische Union); CSU (Christlich-Soziale Union); SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei); Others also include no party.

The authors summarize it as a movement that tends to come from the political left but moves more to the right. Of those surveyed, more than 95 percent believe that the government is dramatizing or exaggerating the Covid-19 issue and unnecessarily stoking fear. The same number also believes that the government's actions threaten freedom of speech and democracy (p.14) and do not trust the established media (p.40).

According to the federal government's answer to a small interpellation in September

(Deutscher Bundestag, 2020a), various individuals and organizations from the right-wing extremist scene have mobilized in advance for participation in the Querdenken demonstration in August 2020 in Berlin as mentioned above, including on social media, messenger services, and YouTube. In terms of the total number of participants, a relatively small proportion of members of the right-wing extremist scene took part in the demonstration mentioned above entitled "The End of the Pandemic: Freedom Day" (p.10). Translated into German, the event was called Tag der Freiheit, which was also the name of a National socialist propaganda film (Garbe, 2020). In December, the German Ministry for the Interior reported first real indications of extremist aspirations in Querdenken. The group would become increasingly radicalized and infiltrated by extremists (SWR Aktuell, 2020b).

As already mentioned, Querdenken protesters' spectrum is very heterogeneous and partly contradictory (Caspary, 2020; Nachtwey et al., 2020). It ranges from families with children to deniers of the coronavirus to people from the anthroposophical scene, vaccination opponents, and representatives of various conspiracy narratives. Among the latter, the Reichsbürger (Deutschlandfunk, 2020; SWR Aktuell, 2020b), persons who reject the Federal Republic of Germany's legitimacy and sovereignty and its legal system (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2020).

### *2.3.5 Actions and Resulting Criticism*

As mentioned before, the initiative Querdenken organizes nearly weekly rallies and demonstrations since April 2020 (dpa & Hofer, 2020). Already at the first demonstrations, there are reports of violations of the pandemic-related conditions. In many places, the authorized number of participants was exceeded, and journalists were harassed and left the venue under police protection (dpa et al., 2020b).

People from different social and political groups came together on August 1 for one of the largest demonstrations of Querdenken in Berlin to date (Deutschlandfunk, 2020). Although doubted by supporters of the Querdenken movement, the number



of participants at this demonstration was estimated to be about 20,000 (Dambeck, 2020). Again, protesters demanded an end to all impositions. Police declared the rally at the Brandenburg Gate over in the late afternoon because hygiene measures were disregarded. Again, aggressive behavior towards media representatives occurred (rbb24, 2020).

On August 29, 2020, the second large-scale demonstration took place in Berlin. Again, Querdenken supporters tried to spread a higher number of participants, but it was optimistically estimated at a maximum of 32,500 (Dambeck, 2020). Black-white-red imperial war flags – an anti-democratic symbol – were visible both during the demonstrations and during the brief occupation of the stairs at the Reichstag building. The latter took place by Reichsbürger and right-wing extremists when 300 to 400 demonstrators overrun the barriers in front of the Reichstag building but were held back by the police (Engelbrecht, 2020). Michael Ballweg stated, without evidence, that the people who had carried imperial flags had been handed these flags and had not known what they meant. He had not seen any right-wing extremists (May, 2020). “Right-wing, left-wing, anti-Semitic, violent all do not correspond to our movement. We distance ourselves from this” (Fandrey, 2020, para. 12). Additionally, there had been a spatial separation from the gathering of Reichsbürger in front of the Reichstag building (May, 2020).

On October 03, 2020, Querdenken intended to form a "Peacechain" (para. 1) around Lake Constance, but with around 10,000 people, did not reach the required number of participants. The city of Constance's requirements for the demonstration prohibited imperial war flags, imperial flags, and signs that have an apparent reference to the National Socialist-Regime crimes and establish a connection with the current Covid-19 pandemic (SWR Aktuell, 2020a).

According to the Bundesverband Mobile Beratung (2020b), attacks such as the arson attack on the RKI on the night of October 25 and the explosion in front of the Leibniz Society in Berlin the same day can be traced back to the Querdenken movement.

On November 07, 2020, Querdenken planned a demonstration in Leipzig. The city intended to move the protest to the city's fairgrounds the night before it took place. Still, the Higher Administrative Court in Bautzen ruled that the Querdenken movement's demonstration could take place in the city center, subject to conditions such as a maximum number of participants and the obligation to wear masks. Since most of the approximately 20,000 participants did not comply with the requirements, the demonstration was dissolved. This was followed by riots and attacks against police and journalists and a continued protest on the inner-city ring (dpa et al., 2020a; Magoley, 2020).

On November 18, 2020, the Querdenken movement intended a blockage of the Bundestag to prevent the vote on the amendment to the IfSG. There was a ban by the Federal Ministry of the Interior and the Bundestag President on gatherings immediately in front of the Bundestag (Engelbrecht, 2020). Since the templates, such as wearing masks and observance of distance requirements, have not been met, the demonstration was dissolved. There were violent confrontations with the police, who used water cannons to disperse the rally (Potthoff, 2020). On the same day, Members of the AfD parliamentary group had invited guests who caused a disturbance in the Bundestag, including insulting Peter Altmaier and intimidating parliament members, and staged the entire incident in live streams and videos on social media (Mestermann et al., 2020).

After the ban of demonstrations on December 30 and 31, 2020 in Berlin, Michael Ballweg announced a pause from demonstrating (QUERDENKEN 711 - Wir für das Grundgesetz, 2020b).

The Querdenken movement has already been confronted several times with the incomprehension of the population. At a Querdenken rally in Hanover, a 22-year-old compared herself to Sophie Scholl because she claimed that she had been actively campaigning against the restrictions in the Covid-19 pandemic for months. She earned applause for this until a steward left his post and declared that this trivialized

the Holocaust (Hüffer, 2020). In fact, contrary to Michael Ballweg's assertion, Querdenken is certainly confronted with accusations of being anti-Semitic. In response to a small interpellation from the FDP parliamentary group on whether the participants' motivation in demonstrations against Covid-19 measures was anti-Semitic. The federal government replied that it was aware of the participation of right-wing extremist groups and individuals with a clear anti-Semitic attitude and that there was often no differentiation in content from right-wing extremist and, or anti-Semitic groups. However, at least according to the Deutscher Bundestag (2020c), no structural anti-Semitic motivation of the participants could be derived from this.

quietly not to be denounced by her neighbors, a discussion arose about the extent to which their parents instrumentalize children for Querdenken purposes. After the mentioned demonstration on November 18, it was reported that children were deliberately taken to complicate the police operation, notably in this case with water cannons (Potthoff, 2020). In November, Beres and Saathoff (2020) reported about a closed group called "Samuel Eckert Youngsters" (para. 1) on Telegram with at this time more than 270 members. The topics include tips on avoiding compulsory masks at school, conspiracy narratives about the deadly danger of covering one's mouth and nose, and Bill Gates's supposed statements about mass vaccinations. Only 10- to 17-year-olds get access to this group. Interested children and young people must present themselves with video and documents. Also, in Michael Ballweg's campaign commercial for mayor, a child tells his mother he can't breathe through the mask.

The lack of distancing from extremism also arouses incomprehension. Various speakers at the demonstrations at Querdenken openly represent right-wing extremist theses, such as Nikolai Nerling, a right-wing extremist video blogger appearing under the name *Der Volkslehrer*. Stephan Bergmann, press spokesman until the end of November at Querdenken, publicly represents the Reichsbürger thesis. Heiko Schrang, speaker at both demonstrations in August in Berlin, also belongs to the same milieu (Garbe & Kalisch, 2020; May, 2020). Michael Ballweg also had a

meeting with the Reichsbürger Peter Fitzek and opened an account at a bank operated by the Kingdom of Germany (Querdenken-711, 2020).

### 3 Current State of Research

The term *infodemic* refers to "an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not" (WHO, 2020b, p. 2), posing a danger in managing epidemics (Zarocostas, 2020), as it could accelerate the process of infectious disease transmission (Kim et al., 2019). Some studies indicated that targeted disinformation and inaccurate information could spread faster and further than fact-based news (Vosoughi et al., 2018). In their study of adults from the USA, Pennycook et al. (2020) found evidence that people share false claims about Covid-19 in part because they do not think sufficiently about whether the content is accurate or not. The WHO (2020e) collects and refutes some false claims and conspiracy narratives about Covid-19. Gruzd and Mai (2020) demonstrated the spread of misinformation by showing that one tweet with the "hashtag #FilmYourHospital" (p.1) mostly shared by influential conservative politicians and activists in America resulted in a conspiracy narrative. It was based on the assumption that if hospital parking lots and waiting rooms were empty, the Covid-19 pandemic would not be real or not as severe as portrayed. A representative survey in Germany found that 14 percent of the population believed the conspiracy narrative that Covid-19 was just a pretext to oppress people to be true. In contrast, 66 percent of the population thought the statement was undoubtedly false. The same survey found that people with lower formal education were more likely to believe this statement was true than people with higher formal education (Roose, 2020). There seems to be a positive association between Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs and the use of social media as a source of information about this topic (Allington et al., 2020).

In addition, several authors found a negative association between Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs and health-protective behaviors (Allington et al., 2020; Bierwiazzonek et al., 2020; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Swami & Barron, 2020; Teovanović et al., 2020a). This is mainly because participants who believe Covid-19 is a hoax see the pandemic as less threatening (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020;

Romer & Jamieson, 2020) while believing Covid-19 is human-made does not predict a less health-protective behavior (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020). Furthermore, several authors found the belief in Covid-19 related conspiracy narratives to negatively influence vaccine's perceived safety and the intention to be vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2 (Bertin et al., 2020; Earnshaw et al., 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Teovanović et al., 2020a). According to an online survey in the United Kingdom and Turkey, belief in the natural origin of SARS-CoV-2 significantly increased the likelihood of accepting vaccination against the virus (Salali & Uysal, 2020).

Georgiou et al. (2020) showed that Covid-19-related conspiracy beliefs were strongly related to a conspiracist ideation, as also demonstrated by Imhoff and Lamberty (2020) and Alper et al. (2020). Beliefs in Covid-19 conspiracy narratives were also more likely in individuals with lower levels of education and positively (albeit weakly) correlated with more negative attitudes toward government action (Georgiou et al., 2020). Sallam et al. (2020) found indications among students in Jordan that lower levels of knowledge about Covid-19 and higher levels of anxiety of the disease were associated with beliefs that the disease is part of a conspiracy.

A more intuitive thinking style, lower tolerance of uncertain situations, higher religiosity, and more politically right-wing attitudes were associated with belief in a Covid-19 conspiracy narrative, with belief in a Covid-19-related conspiracy narrative measured only by the item "Coronavirus was developed and spread around the world by certain people for their own purposes" (p. 3) and a reversed item (Alper et al., 2020). A study by Escolà-Gascón et al. (2020) suggests that pseudoscience beliefs have increased after social quarantine due to Covid-19 in Spain. According to WHO (2020e), this poses a problem since many pseudoscientific methods for curing Covid-19 are in circulation. For example, the WHO clarifies that drinking methanol, ethanol, or bleach does not prevent or cure Covid-19 and poses an acute danger. Further, Teovanović et al. (2020a) found a positive relationship between pseudoscientific

practices and the belief in Covid-19 conspiracy narratives. Covid-19 related conspiracy narratives are summarized in table 3.

Table 3. Covid-19 Related Conspiracy Narratives

Topic	Covid-19 Related Conspiracy Narrative
Exaggeration of dangerousness	<p>“The virus is intentionally presented as dangerous in order to mislead the public”<sup>a</sup></p> <p>“Experts intentionally mislead us for their own benefit, even though the virus is not worse than a flu”<sup>a</sup></p> <p>“Pneumonia vaccines are effective against the Wuhan coronavirus”<sup>b</sup></p> <p>“Some in the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, also known as CDC, are exaggerating the danger posed by the coronavirus to damage the Trump presidency”<sup>c</sup></p>
Bioweapon/ intentional outbreak to gain world power	<p>“Dark forces want to use the virus to rule the world”<sup>a</sup></p> <p>“Novel coronavirus is engineered, laboratory-generated virus either accidentally or deliberately released in the area of the Wuhan seafood and animal market”<sup>b</sup></p> <p>“COVID-2019 outbreak was planned”<sup>b</sup></p> <p>“It’s a bio-weapon funded by the Bill &amp; Melinda Gates foundation to further vaccine sales”<sup>b</sup></p> <p>“Biological weapon manufactured by CIA”<sup>b</sup></p> <p>“President Donald Trump targeted the city with coronavirus to damage its culture and honor in Iran”<sup>b</sup></p> <p>“This outbreak is a medical terrorism”<sup>b</sup></p> <p>“The coronavirus was created by the Chinese government as a biological weapon”<sup>c</sup></p> <p>I think that coronavirus is lab-made, it was not transmitted from animals to humans by accident<sup>d</sup></p> <p>It is clear that China developed this coronavirus to rule the world.<sup>d</sup></p> <p>The coronavirus circulates among people for a long time, but now, the appropriate moment „to reveal it“ was used<sup>d</sup></p> <p>The Americans imported the coronavirus to China to weaken the Chinese economy, but not it returns to them like a boomerang<sup>d</sup></p>
Means to create economic war	<p>“The virus is an attempt to wage ‘economic war on China”<sup>b</sup></p> <p>USA and Israel of being behind the creation and spread of the deadly coronavirus as part of an economic and psychological war against China<sup>b</sup></p> <p>The coronavirus is a weapon of a modern economic war between world superpowers.<sup>d</sup></p>
Population control	<p>“Corona was intentionally brought into the world to reduce the population”<sup>a</sup></p> <p>“This outbreak is a population control scheme”<sup>b</sup></p> <p>Since coronavirus mostly kills older and chronically ill, it is easy to conclude that it serves to lighten up the pension funds.<sup>d</sup></p>
Covid-19 Vaccination is harmful	<p>One should be careful when a vaccine against coronavirus is developed because no one knows what they will inject in us.<sup>d</sup></p>
Pharma industry created it	<p>“The pharmaceutical industry created the coronavirus to increase sales of its drugs and vaccines”<sup>c</sup></p> <p>It is clear that pharma-industry, that will make astronomical amounts of money by producing vaccines and drugs, stands behind this pandemic<sup>d</sup></p>
Diversionary tactic	<p>The so-called coronavirus pandemic serves as a smokescreen to cover up big geo-strategic operation.<sup>d</sup></p>

5G related to Covid-19	The exposure to the new electromagnetic field of the 5G technology affects the coronavirus pandemic. <sup>d</sup> 5G mobile networks spread COVID-19 <sup>e</sup>
Masks are harmful	The prolonged use of medical masks, causes CO2 intoxication or oxygen deficiency <sup>e</sup>

Note. <sup>a</sup>Imhoff & Lamberty (2020, p. 7-8). <sup>b</sup>Islam et al. (2020, p. 1626). <sup>c</sup>Romer and Jamieson (2020, p. 4). <sup>d</sup>Teovanović et al. (2020b, p. 11). <sup>e</sup>WHO (2020e)

As part of the COSMO (2021) study, supporters of anti-Corona protests were examined. The results show that the willingness to participate in such a demonstration correlates negatively with the knowledge about effective protective measures. This is also true for the trust of these individuals towards the federal government and the RKI. There is a strong correlation, by nature, between the willingness to participate and the opinion that the measures taken in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic are exaggerated. Besides, there is a strong correlation with the opinion that the measures are annoying, frustrating, disruptive, and restrictive of personal freedom.

As for Querdenken, there are already several indications that some people in the initiative believe in conspiracy narratives. In the study on the sociology of the Corona protests, Nachtwey et al. (2020) found that more than half of the respondents believed that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions and that politicians are only puppets of the powers behind them. As for Covid-19, 60 percent of respondents agreed that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation aims to have forced vaccination for the whole world. Nevertheless, 15 percent agreed with the statement that the government would implant microchips in people employing vaccination to monitor them more effectively; 32 percent did not make any statement on this.

According to the Bundesverband Mobile Beratung (2020a), the Corona protests in Germany are in large parts not demarcated from extreme right-wing actors. Contradicting the previous view of the Deutscher Bundestag (2020c), anti-Semitic conspiracy myths are structurally adopted and spread further even in places where right-



wing extremists are not part of the local discourse (Bundesverband Mobile Beratung, 2020a). Furthermore, the reference to the Grundgesetz is linked to common conspiracy narratives. Among them, the assumption that the WHO is corrupt and an association of the pharmaceutical industry. In addition, the anti-Semitic conspiracy narrative that influential persons as George Soros control the world to dominate and enslave people called *New World Order* (NWO) is widespread among these kinds of protests. These initiatives' protagonists refer to these narratives and raise questions about who is earning from the crisis.

The Bundesverband Mobile Beratung further argues that this is accompanied by massive hostility toward the establishment and science. Increasingly, the so-called alternative media, which accompanies the protests via YouTube videos, compare the current situation to historical dates such as 1933 and 1989, and people stylize themselves as victims of a totalitarian state power to legitimize their right to resist. Besides, there is an increasingly National Socialism-trivializing rhetoric and expression, for example, shown by the yellow stars with *Ungeimpft* meaning unvaccinated inscriptions worn at demonstrations or the framing of the IfSG as an enabling act (Bundesverband Mobile Beratung, 2020b). Furthermore, an allegedly synchronized *mainstream press* is constructed by the movement. As an alternative, the conspiracy ideologue Ken Jebsen with his wide-reaching Youtube channel KenFM and the former TV presenter Eva Herman play a central role in the protest movement. Latter provides over 100,000 people with anti-Semitic conspiracy myths via her Telegram channel (Bundesverband Mobile Beratung, 2020a).

## 4 Methods

This thesis aims to find indications of whether the content disseminated by the movement Querdenken on Telegram is criticism or whether conspiracy narratives are being spread. Since the movement mainly communicates and networks online and “digital ethnographic methods are an efficient means to simultaneously capture heterogeneous data sources such as text, audio, photographic images, and video” (Murthy, 2011, p. 162), a virtual ethnography was conducted. It consisted of online observations of relevant groups on Telegram between October 01 and November 01, 2020, and content analysis of shared documents, flyers, photos, and videos during the same period.

Since such groups are self-selecting by nature, collecting a wide range of data on opinions that only a minority of people may hold is enabled. If that is desired, the use of the channel telegram can be quite anonymous. One decides for oneself how much personal information should be revealed. This anonymity facilitates the honest expression of opinions that may not be held in high social esteem elsewhere (Wood & Douglas, 2013). The on September 30 two largest groups (“Querdenken 30 - Wir für das Grundgesetz” and “Querdenken (089 - MÜNCHEN) | Diskussion & Austausch - Wir für das Grundgesetz”) where messages by every group member were allowed, were chosen to be observed. The group for Berlin was formed on June 7, 2020, and the one for Munich was formed on July 3, 2020. When the observation began, the Munich group had 6,009 members, and the group in Berlin had 7,547 members.

Due to the high number of members and their anonymity, it was impossible to monitor them individually. Following the activities of actual people can therefore not be complied. Neither would it be of purpose, as this work aims to analyze Querdenken as a group, including the communication structure and the resulting group opinion. The data dealt with can be described as dynamic. Users generate data “in interactive contexts when they react with their own data to the data of other users” (Marotzki et

al., 2014, p. 453). That holds the difficulty that it is a variable database as it is updated depending on communication speed. Messages can even be deleted or edited. Therefore, the database was monitored as close to real-time as possible and at least daily.

The observations were conducted anonymously. Telegram provides the option to suppress the phone number. The only visible component was a name chosen as the letter T. As described above, there is no barrier to joining the Telegram groups in question. No informed consent could be obtained as the outing would have led to data distorting. Although it would be considered unethical to spy anonymously in other circumstances, it was necessary in this case to avoid social desirability, among other things, of the subjects. Practically it would have been impossible to obtain informed consent because of

- the high number of members,
- the anonymity of the users, and
- the mass of messages.

The number of members would result in a very high administrative effort to obtain individual consent. Additionally, anonymity raises the problem that people could use one username one day and choose another the next. This is not very likely, but still, there is no reliable recognition value for individual group members. The mass of messages would make it very unlikely that members would even notice the information and even less likely to obtain consent. One could also argue that these groups cannot fully be considered private spaces. After all, everyone can join these channels. Also, the users are aware that the communication is not absolutely private, as the analysis showed. It must also be noted that, according to Nachtwey et al. (2020), the participants of the anti-Corona demonstrations are characterized by hostility to science. One could argue that this would not have led to a friendly reception if the reason for joining the group had been revealed.

On two days, group members couldn't send messages themselves. Instead, there was only a one-way distribution of messages to an audience in channels. This change was not announced before. Since demonstrations took place on these days, one can only speculate that the option to send messages oneself was disabled for this reason. To protect the personal data of participants, their names cannot be mentioned. Also, the time and the initials could allow conclusions about the persons in the group. For quotation, only one number is given, representing the day in October when the message was sent.

## 5 Results

The findings are divided into how the grouping portrays and perceives the federal government's measures, the public's response to the measures, and the general news coverage during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is followed by the elements of a Covid-19-related conspiracy narrative, i.e., narratives that are a consequence of the spread of SARS-CoV-2 or the government, media, and public response to it, which can be seen in the statements of supporters of the Querdenken movement. Subsequently, elements of conspiracy narratives and myths that have existed before but are disseminated or used within the group follow. Afterward, how communication can be characterized in Querdenken's Telegram channels is described. Finally, it is elaborated how the group views and portrays itself.

### *5.1 Portrayal and Perception of the Federal Government Measures*

The measures of the federal government are described as arbitrary (6, 20), senseless (6, 12), chicane (15), and even counterproductive. Because of the measures, the infection figures are said to be rising (18, 24). Especially the obligation to wear masks is presented as dangerous because they are supposed to be toxic themselves and cause carbon dioxide poisoning, which is particularly worrying for children. Indeed, on Telegram groups, it is spread that several children have already died due to wearing the mask. When other group members point out that such information should be verified before it is spread, they are confronted with accusations as: "Is someone waiting for the 'official news' to report the dead child thing???" (1). It is additionally singled out to be discriminatory. People who could not wear a mask for medical reasons would be discriminated against (1, 28).

Querdenken is additionally discriminated against if they oppose the measures (5, 7, 10). For example, it was reported that the school would not let parents in because of their attitudes (28). Querdenken would no longer have any rights (27) and would be

labeled as conspiracy theorists (24) and right-wing radicals (9). In this way, the group portrays itself as a minority discriminated against, oppressed, and even deprived of its rights by the majority, which is characterized by the endurance and even enforcement of the measures.

Querdenken can be characterized as fundamentally distrustful of the government, which is portrayed as enforcing demonstrably harmful measures, and the media, which collectively conceals abuses like these. The further exploitation of their power by the politicians depicted by the Querdenken grouping is made clear by presenting the mask compulsion as a demonstration of the power of politics (16) and the so-called Corona hysteria as an experiment in obedience (20). Politicians supposedly use fear to govern with (19) and thus make other citizens subservient to them. Thus, the government is portrayed as an evil force that enforces measures regardless of a threat situation to harass people with them and even worsen the pandemic condition. Fear of the measures is also expressed in the group but above all fear of their consequences. Some members argue that there will be no end to the lockdown, no more elections, and no more democracy (30).

The current policy form is described as a hygiene dictatorship (8). A parallel is drawn to *Corpus Delicti*, a dystopia by Juli Zeh (2009), in which people lead a supervised life and health is declared the highest good at the price of restrictions on freedom. According to several flyers for demonstrations, the movement is convinced that the Grundgesetz has been undermined (16). Therefore, an announcement for a funeral procession is made, as shown in figure 5. It is designed in the form of an obituary showing the year of birth 1949 and death 2020 of the Grundgesetz. Instead of the usual information for such ads when and where the funeral will take place, the dates of the demonstration are given here. The title is Funeral Procession of Democracy. The authors are apparently of the opinion that the regulations resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic would have invalidated the Grundgesetz. and could not be revived. Moreover, there is no longer any hope of being able to revive it.

## Figure 5

*Announcement for a Funeral Procession for the Grundgesetz to be Buried in Munich.*



*Note.* This flyer was shared on October 16, 2020.

Querdenken calls Germany, with its current measures, a surveillance state (15, 16). Consequently, the federal government is depicted as criminal (14, 16), and the politicians should be punished (6, 19). The Act to Protect the Population in the Event of an Epidemic Situation of National Significance is called Jens Spahn's (Federal Minister of Health) permanent authorization for his surveillance and sanitation state (21). Politics are described as a theater, while Democracy is feigned (3, 10), speakers in the parliament are staged (21), and the parliament debates are phony (29). Instead, the policies under which we live in reality are comparable to those of the German Democratic Republic (12, 15, 16, 17, 20, 24, 29) or the National Socialist regime (15, 16, 23, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31). Compared to the current government, depicted as corrupt (25, 28) and mendacious (2, 6, 12, 17, 27, 29), the AfD is presented as the only decent, freedom-protecting party (5, 22, 30). Thus, politics is basically portrayed as a powerful, malicious group ruling apart from the people's will, only pretending to the population to form something like a legitimate, democratic government. Constant insults deny politicians any empathy and conscientiousness. The German Chancellor

is called a Satanist (29), and it is implied that the children who died were sacrificed to the political criminals (1).

## *5.2 Perception of the Reaction of the Population to the Government Measures*

Consistent with comparing the current government with defunct authoritarian regimes, the population is perceived as politically instrumentalized, charmingly also called Mask-Nazis (25). The allegory of a sheep (1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 28, 30, 31), often a sleeping one, embodies the normal population in this context. The population so designated is distinguished by its deference to authority (2), subservience (9), indoctrination (10), callousness (12), dumbness (5, 6, 8, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 26, 29, 30), anticipatory obedience (27), and cognitive distortion (30). Correspondingly common is the call: Wake up! (1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29). Young people are accused of being unquestioning (6), naive, stupid, and believing in politics (8). Altogether, and sometimes serving as an explanation for why people do not engage in the protests (15, 20, 22), they are depicted as coward.

Still, in line with the picture of a politically instrumentalized population, they are called silent followers for fear of punishment without civil courage (15, 20), who like to be incapacitated (20). Figuratively, the population is compared to children covering their eyes and ears (24). Another explanation for the lack of resistance by the people is based on their detached arrogance. They are doing too well (5, 14, 27), they have no disadvantage from the measures (17), and they are too egocentric (14). They are thought to experience the Querdenken demonstrations as negative to ridiculous (9) and instead picture themselves as a would-be intellectual class who thinks they are highly educated lifesavers (19). The lack of cohesion in the population is criticized. It is assumed that this is due to denunciation encouraged by politics (22, 23). From the point of view of the Querdenken movement, the population represents the extended arm of malicious politics. Out of fear or out of stupidity, they are unable to see what



is being played. Their condition is portrayed as zombie-like and sometimes worse, as equally evil, denouncing behavior that is not compliant with the rules.

### *5.3 Perception and Presentation of the General Reporting in the Time Shaped by Covid-19*

The general reporting is depicted as mendacious and often depreciated as lying press (2, 3, 5, 6, 13, 17, 20, 21, 23, 26, 27, 29, 31). The rumor that two WDR employees had brought an imperial flag to a Querdenken demonstration to denigrate the movement persisted for three days (2, 3, 4). It was also spread in the form of an article by Reitschuster (2020) until it turned out to be deliberate disinformation. It is believed that polls conducted on newspaper sites are manipulated. Topics include whether Markus Söder, the Bavarian Minister-President, would make a good chancellor (23) and what Bavarians think of the mandatory mask (8, 9). The subjects are thought to be paid (3, 9, 22, 23), and the calls on the radio to be staged (8). The suspicion is also expressed that Islamist attacks are being downplayed in the media, while the so-called right-wing is being exaggerated, as could have been seen during the walk in front of the Reichstag (29).

Querdenken is somewhat skeptical that the reporting is independent. Instead, the content of newspapers (commonly perceived as serious) is labeled as propaganda (8, 18, 24, 25), system or state journalism (1, 20, 27). According to the grouping, the media are controlled and censored (2, 23, 29). Today's newspapers are compared to the *Stürmer* (6), an anti-Semitic newspaper for propagandistic dissemination of the Holocaust during the National Socialist era (Langels, 2014). However, in this case, Querdenken sees themselves as victims of the press's defamation (4, 6). Ironically, media representatives are accused of misrepresenting Querdenken as violent, anti-Semitic (27), and radical (30). In general, reporting would tend to focus on right-wing extremism (29). Consequently, the demand is made that media representatives be

brought before the second Nuremberg court (5, 14). Members recommend that the group should not share articles and thus support them (5, 15).

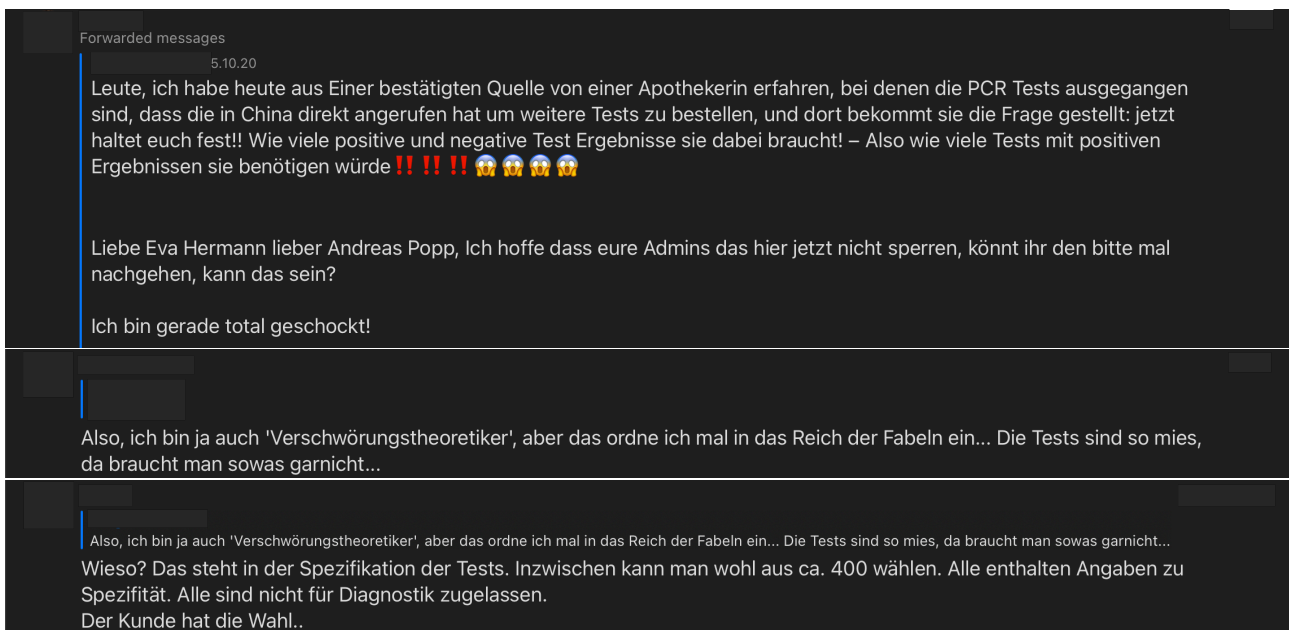
At the same time, however, there is uncertainty about the media's attitude. When critical reports about measures are published, Querdenken asks themselves whether the media have woken up or whether it is just a staging (8, 13, 15, 17). In their distrust of the media, they even question whether a civil war could be instigated here. This would be provoked by dividing the citizens through critical reporting on the government's reaction (2, 5, 8, 12, 18, 25, 26). On the one hand, media representatives are thus portrayed as a homogeneous group that belongs to the state. The state and the media would form an organized network of disinformation and opinion-mongering to distract the population from what is actually being played out. On the other hand, there is still a sense of uncertainty when, from the Querdenken point of view, information that the government is withholding is published in newspapers.

#### *5.4 Expression of Elements of Covid-19 Related Conspiracy Narratives*

The idea, that the Covid-19 pandemic was planned is referred to by the neologism *Plandemic* (1, 3, 4, 8, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 28, 29, 31). It is widely used among the Querdenken grouping. Polymerase Chain Reaction tests (PCR-tests) are used to test for infection with SARS-CoV-2. A narrative was construed that allegedly a pharmacist ran out of them called China directly to order more tests and was asked how many positive and negative test results she needs (5, 8, 9). This was genuinely discussed on the Querdenken groups on Telegram. An excerpt from the discussion is illustrated in figure 6. It was apparently first shared to Eva Herman's Telegram channel and then forwarded to the Querdenken group. One argument against it was that the test itself is so deficient that no manipulation is necessary. One participant replied that there were now 400 tests from which one could choose the most probable result. After all, the narrative certainly resonated.

## Figure 6

*Discussion about the Credibility of a Conspiracy Concerning the PCR-Tests.*



*Note.* Information that could be used to reveal the identity of group members has been redacted to protect their privacy.

Another attempt to prove that the pandemic was planned was presented in the group by the filing of a patent for a Covid-19 test in 2015 by A. Rothschild. This information was disseminated through a video made by Bodo Schiffmann, uploaded on his own channel, and shared within the groups. The forwarding of this message is illustrated in figure 7. The dissemination of this false narrative is anti-Semiticly motivated because of the name Rothschild, who is apparently “one of them” (4). Since it is tied into the narrative that the pandemic would have been planned, it contains elements of the Jewish world conspiracy myth.

The assertion that a Bavarian legislation on the Covid-19 pandemic was allegedly enacted as early as May 2019 is part of this narrative (12, 13, 14, 23). Both the patent and the legislation were met with outrage and circulated more widely. It turned out that they were renamed after the pandemic began, and both were eventually refuted (4, 13).

## Figure 7

Sharing of a Video by Bodo Schiffmann Attempting to Prove that the Pandemic was Planned.

Forwarded messages

Alles Ausser Mainstream 4:10:20

00:47

Espacenet

Suchergebnisse zu "Espacenet"

Suchen Sie nach:

Erweiterte Suche

Ergebnisse

TREFFERLISTE

Alle ausarbeiten (21) | Kategorien | Dr. Experimenten ( COVID-19 ) | Hervorheben | Drucken

Kurzinfos

1 Treffer wurde in der Volltextsuche gefunden. Gehen Sie zu [1](#) (20200279585) oder Verknüpfung mit Startseite

System zur Behandlung von Tumoren (US2020279585)

Erfinder	Anmelder	IPC	IPC	Suchfeld	Publiziert
ROTHSCHILD A	ROTHSCHILD A	G06F	G06F	2019-10-10	2020-02-10
ROTHSCHILD A	ROTHSCHILD A	G06F	G06F	2019-10-10	2020-02-10

Das glaubt man nicht - Selbst probieren, bevor es weg ist.

US-Patent: US2020279585

Wurde bereits im Jahr 2015 von Rothschild A. angemeldet.

Hier wußte schon sehr früh jemand, dass man ab 2019 Geld mit einer Erkrankung verdienen kann, die es erst 4 Jahre später geben soll...

Aber wir sind ja alle nur VErschwörungstheoretiker

Note. Information that could be used to reveal the identity of group members has been redacted to protect their privacy.

Part of the Plandemic narrative is that the virus is artificial. Both opinions are expressed that it is an out-of-control bio-experiment (12) and that it was deliberately spread by the pharmaceutical lobby (23). Furthermore, the pandemic could act instead of war seems conceivable to Querdenken supporters (16, 22).

Bill Gates personally is credited with the ability to have created and spread the virus as a bioweapon. Thus, he also has the power to end the pandemic (22), or cause a second wave or release a second virus on those who resist (4). According to the Querdenken movement, the purpose of the Plandemic is to reduce humanity (1, 13, 24) or kill older people (10). Bill Gates is commonly known as a philanthropist and one of the wealthiest people in the world (Forbes, 2021). Hence, from the Querdenken movement's perspective, this is a tiny, mighty elite that is solely responsible for the virus's outbreak. There are also attempts to defame companies like

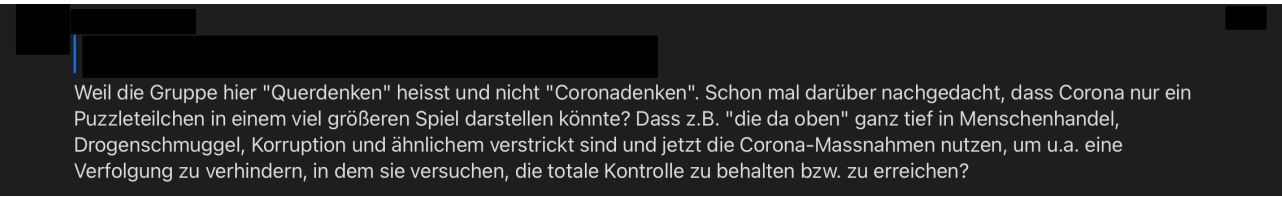
Amazon for profiting from the pandemic (6). China is also claimed to be deliberately profiting (9, 14).

Another narrative contradicting the Pandemic-narrative is, that the pandemic is a hoax (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 14, 19, 20, 22, 24, 31). Here the arguments range from the measures that would be much stricter if there were a pandemic (5, 14) to the claim that there would be no patients in intensive care units (24). Therefore, infection figures are falsified, and people whose relatives die are bribed to state Covid-19 as the cause of death (16, 23). The PCR-test is so unreliable that it caused fake hotspots or constructed the second wave completely (19, 21, 26, 30).

According to the Querdenken grouping, all this effort could serve as a distraction for several events (5, 6, 13, 19, 20, 22, 27, 28). The play (8) was allegedly staged to push through legislation (6, 22) and had been foreseeable for years (6), but it could also serve the elite to prevent their persecution, as illustrated in figure 8 (27). Also, the digital euro (5, 13) or a new currency (28) could be introduced without attracting much attention.

## Figure 8

*Covid-19 Pandemic as Concealment in Order not to be Persecuted and Maintain or Achieve Total Control.*



Weil die Gruppe hier "Querdenken" heisst und nicht "Coronadenken". Schon mal darüber nachgedacht, dass Corona nur ein Puzzleteilchen in einem viel größeren Spiel darstellen könnte? Dass z.B. "die da oben" ganz tief in Menschenhandel, Drogenschmuggel, Korruption und ähnlichem verstrickt sind und jetzt die Corona-Massnahmen nutzen, um u.a. eine Verfolgung zu verhindern, in dem sie versuchen, die totale Kontrolle zu behalten bzw. zu erreichen?

*Note.* Information that could be used to reveal the identity of group members has been redacted to protect their privacy.

This view is part of the myth of a world conspiracy. In keeping with this myth, other statements can be found, such as democracy would be feigned (3, 10), the debates in parliament would be phony (29), the police would be part of a private company and would be led either by Bill Gates (24) or an as yet unknown actor (25). As soon as

one found out who that was, one could turn the police around. The real police would have remonstrated long ago. There is also speculation that the Islamist attack in Paris against a teacher was tactically brought about. Allegedly, by those who let these people into the country and nurtured and courted them (29). Everything is allegedly connected. One person in the Telegram group described not noticing until May but taking much longer to understand the whole picture; another replied that he had known for ten years that something was fundamentally wrong (31). This indicates a belief in the World Conspiracy. Like the insinuation that the German chancellor, depicted as Satanist, is serving someone (29) and the reference to Covid-19 being the elite's symbol (14).

It is also claimed that PCR testing or vaccination is only a means to obtain genetic data (9, 12, 16, 18, 23), for example, by implementing a microchip (9, 13, 16, 28). Suspicion of being observed (3, 12, 28, 30, 31) manifests itself in various forms in the Telegram groups. For example, it is claimed that there is artificial intelligence in cameras that observes compliance (12), one member reported that his soccer club was asked to monitor him (28), and there was a fear that cell phones could be blocked before demonstrations (31).

Mouth-nose coverings are an ongoing issue within the Querdenken group. Not only do they feel that people who cannot wear masks for medical reasons are discriminated against, as mentioned above, but several more narratives exist about the mask requirement. Such a narrative is illustrated by a video shared in the group. It shows three people proudly proclaiming that today they are, thanks to a codeword, allowed to shop in a particular supermarket without a mask, just like VIP's. The persons further explain that masks are bacteria slingshots that could become life-threatening for them, and therefore no Covid-19 believer would be allowed in the supermarket today either. They do not reveal this supermarket's exact location due to the prevailing denunciation and immediately refer to the similarity of today's Germany with National Socialism. They comment being afraid that they will soon have to wear ribbons again

(4). This narrative thus deprives masks not only of their symbolic power but also of their actual protective health effect. Paradoxically, it reverses the impact of the masks and even assumes that they are hazardous to health. From the point of view of Querdenken supporters, this is, of course, outrageous. They are forced to expose themselves to health hazards for everyday errands, for their participation in daily life, which is already minimized during the restrictions. However, the discussion becomes even more emotionally charged when the concern is expressed that children could die from carbon dioxide poisoning caused by wearing a mouth-nose covering. According to Querdenken and again spread by Bodo Schiffmann, four children have already died due to wearing a mouth-nose covering (3, 4, 6, 9, 12, 16, 21). Children in the Czech Republic allegedly fall over in rows (14), and a report was distributed of a mother whose son ostensible nearly died from oxygen deprivation (18). Besides, someone reported that his neighbor had told him that a girl had collapsed due to the mask (22). Also, mouth-nose coverings are suspected to reduce the inhibition threshold (19), lead to lung fungal infection (1), and rotting teeth and gums (7). One video was shared, apparently targeting parents, with the following content (1, 2):

I am very sad. My friend Lisa has died. Lisa said: I have a headache; I feel dizzy at school ... The teacher said: You have to keep the mask on, or your grandparents will die. Now Lisa is dead because she kept the mask on. Death from lack of oxygen. Death from too much carbon dioxide. I charge you! All the adults who don't protect us children! We can't defend ourselves! Wearing a mask is child abuse. Why don't you protect us? Where are the parents who stand up for us? Do you want us here? Just because you are obedient to what you are told? Let us live! Let us be children! Now!

This video was accompanied by dramatic music and showed corresponding images of sad children with mouth-nose coverings and laughing children without. In place: "Do you want us here?" gravestones can be seen. In the end credits, there are addresses where one can seek support. Among others Klagepaten and Anwälte für Aufklärung are mentioned. Through the described staging of the video, the impression is created that it is intended to make parents feel guilty to attract them anew to the movement or strengthen their commitment to it.

The threat to children described here is inevitably reminiscent of the Q-anon narrative mentioned at the outset. As the video so aptly describes, children are a particularly vulnerable group and cannot defend themselves. At the same time, it is particularly honorable to stand up for the protection of children. Overall, the narrative's urgency is reinforced when it is not just about protecting the health of responsible adults but about protecting a group that is so in need of protection. Simultaneously, it enhances the viciousness of those willing to expose children to this risk knowingly. As a result, children themselves are encouraged to protest (19). Figure 9 shows a rally flyer for a healthy way to treat children in the pandemic.

### Figure 9

*Announcement for a Rally for a Healthy Way to treat Children in the Pandemic in Berlin.*



Note. This flyer was shared on October 19, 2020.



The flyer is in very bright colors and promises an offer for children consisting of soap bubbles and superhero mask making. Also announced are speeches by children and young people, as well as a specialist psychologist in emergency psychology. The flyer promises that balloons with children's wishes for the future will be released at the end. It seems to be targeting children as the audience and addresses compulsory mouth-nose coverings and homeschooling (19).

Also, according to some opinions in the Telegram channels, to be taken with extreme caution are vaccines against Covid-19. While not yet available at the time of data collection in October, these were already becoming an issue. Accordingly, it is being considered whether vaccination could lead to an infection with SARS-CoV-2 (8), sterility (5), microchip implantation (9, 21), or poisoning (22). It is claimed that several people have already died in the vaccine trials (22, 24). They are also called human experiments with the aim of killing (10). Besides, the thesis circulates whether the PCR test with a nasal swab is perhaps already the vaccination (13). At that early stage, the Querdenken group is already considering the consequences of introducing a vaccine. Without vaccination, one cannot travel, cannot get a daycare place, cannot get a job, etc. (28). On the subject of vaccination in general, rumors circulate that there is a link between the vaccination rate for influenza and deaths from the coronavirus, as allegedly happened in Bergamo (21). It is also claimed that vaccine injuries occur more frequently than illnesses from Covid-19 (29). One woman alleged that children were supposed to permanently hand in their vaccination certificates, and unvaccinated ones were expelled from school (22).

Since 2019, the fifth generation of broadband cellular network (5G) is being introduced in Germany for faster data transmission (Verbraucherzentrale, 2020). In the Telegram channels of Querdenken, this topic is also integrated for certain narratives (16, 22, 24, 28, 29). The occurrence of 5G and infection rates are allegedly linked, and it is supposedly not beneficial to health (16). Aside from that, it does not become entirely clear where the concern stems from exactly. Allegedly, 5G interacting with

the chip implemented by PCR testing causes Corona symptoms. However, this statement is met with opposition and the accusation of undermining the legitimate concern of Querdenken (16).

In the days following the death of politician Thomas Oppermann, who had called for a more open debate around pandemic response measures (Lehmann, 2020), there was much speculation within Querdenken's Telegram groups about the reason for his death (26, 27, 28, 29). Carbon dioxide poisoning is among the more innocuous speculations. Because of his criticism of the measures, it is spread that he fell in resistance to the Corona regime (27, 28).

### *5.5 Expression of Preexisting Conspiracy Narratives and Myths*

Querdenken's Telegram channels also serve as a platform for agents of other conspiracy narratives that existed before the emergence of SARS-CoV-2. Given the large number of such statements, it can be assumed that there is a certain overlap between members of Querdenken and people who already believe in other conspiracy narratives, presumably people with a conspiracist ideation.

Among these narratives, there are clearly adherents of Q-Anon (1, 8, 9, 15, 16, 23, 24, 25, 29), Reichsbürger (4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 16, 18, 19, 20, 23, 25, 26, 28, 29, 31), and lesser-known narratives, for example, that the Middle Ages are an invention (14). The NWO narrative is also being served. Indications can be found in references to the Great Reset (9, 10, 12, 16, 19, 27, 31). This is a proposal by the World Economic Forum (2021) to rebuild the global economy after the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the narrative, the main goals of the Great Reset representatives would be to take over global political and economic control. For this purpose, a totalitarian regime and the NWO should be introduced. Other indicators of the NWO narrative are phrases such as the elitist anti-humans (24), forces that have plotted to take over humanity (24), and satanic forces (24) that intend to enslave the people (24). Who is exactly referred to as this nebulous elite becomes not entirely apparent. It seems to be

distinctly understood within the group, however (24), and is a reoccurring motive in the Querdenken channel. Politicians would be hobby horses of the elites to stir up fear (23), the world would be dominated by a handful of satanic families (23), but also the advice to not let yourself be provoked by the elites can be found (25).

The conspiracy myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy also appears to have adherents within Querdenken. George Soros is, for example, stylized as the concept of the enemy (9, 31). Further, the rhombus that the Chancellor tends to form with her hands during speeches is referred to as the Rothschild rhombus (18) or the blood rhombus of horror (20). Also, the World Conspiracy is explicitly assigned a factual basis (26). Another phenomenon is the reference to or the forwarding of messages of people known for their conspiracist ideation and known for spreading narratives. Within the group, people like this seem to serve as opinion leaders. Daniele Ganser is, for example, known for his narratives about the attacks against the World Trade Center in September 2001 and several times referred to in den Telegram channel of Querdenken (8, 15, 17, 19, 20, 25, 26, 28). The same applies to Heiko Schrang, who also maintains his own Telegram channel where he spreads conspiracy narratives (1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 24, 25, 27, 29) and to Attila Hildmann who caused quite a public stir with this (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31). The large number of references to self-appointed reporters indicate a move toward an alternative to the mainstream press in the Querdenken movement, as described by the Bundesverband Mobile Beratung (2020a). To be found among them are the conspiracy ideologues Ken Jepsen (1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31), Miriam Hope (4, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 28, 30), and Eva Herman (1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29).

## *5.6 Communication in the Telegram Groups*

The high number of members in the group results in very heterogeneous communication. There are only a few who express themselves in the group every day. The communication is primarily between people who have apparently not previously communicated within the group. Most of the members have anonymized profiles. This led to the accusation in the group that the members are faceless, nameless, and therefore probably absolutely useless for the real freedom fights (1). Most members also seem to avoid expressing themselves completely. It can only be assumed that they are passively reading along. However, it is more likely that they just read the last few messages that accumulated since they were last online. Particularly salient are messages that do not participate in the least in the discourse in the group. Then, it seems as if individual people see the platform solely to make their opinion known. Other members also criticize such behavior as self-promotional (26).

Several hundred messages are sent per day in the group. This makes it challenging to have a consistent discussion. A much-criticized problem within the group is that the posts often consist of sharing newspaper articles and especially Youtube videos. This leads to the same information being shared more than once, which is also described as a roundabout (5). A purposeful discourse is usually prevented entirely. Suppose someone criticizes a particular statement or action of another member or even takes seriously the opinion of a virologist who differs from the group's view. In that case, they supposedly side with those who believe in the pandemic (12). Such critics are also accused of attempting to divide (28). When the claim that children had died was questioned, the person was called a troll. Furthermore, the claims were called insubstantial and aggressive (21). Suggestions for new Querdenken actions made in the group seem to lead to actual execution rarely. They are often entirely ignored or labeled as unfeasible (14). Hence the accusation that most of the people in the group are keyboard revolutionaries, while most of the demonstrations are

attended by the same (few) people (14, 24, 26). The small number of actions from within the group and thus the low impact is also criticized (6, 14, 20). In many cases, disagreements between group members escalate to insulting remarks. There are diverse reasons for such escalations, for example, the topics of migration (26) and racism (6). Another cause is the spreading of disinformation, sometimes followed by the accusation of deliberately discrediting the movement and, therefore, being a troll (13). Even a dissenting opinion on other topics, such as the German Emperor, can lead to being accused of being a troll (18). Although, according to their own representation, this group stands for freedom of opinion, there is a discussion about removal from the group in the event of dissenting opinions (18).

Targeted disinformation is widespread in the group. It can be assumed that most of it is disinformation in the interest of the movement, as in the case of children dying because of carbon dioxide poisoning. Other examples are the racist claim that there would be no curfew for Muslims (19), that there would allegedly be a connection between vaccination rate for influenza and Covid-19 deaths (21), or there would be sexual abuse at WHO (23). It can only be assumed that this is intended to incite anger and increase the motivation to become active in the movement. Some of it is undoubtedly shared to ridicule those who believe it. This could be the case with the claim that Querdenken has achieved abolishing the mask requirement in the classroom, even though this is not the case (19). However, it is not possible to find out what interest the person who shares such disinformation has. Reactions to it vary. Sometimes they are debunked (19), sometimes, they are ignored, and sometimes they provoke outraged reactions (02). In any case, they are usually shared more than once (14). The communication in the chat, apparently perceived as unsatisfactory, leads in rare instances to announced withdrawals (17). In most cases, however, members seem to leave without comment. In general, the number of members is steadily decreasing.

The bellicose rhetoric used by the chat members is salient. Thus, some statements describe the circumstances as war-like (1, 2), and Querdenken pictures themselves as involved as warring parties. A peaceful solution would be of no use (14). They had come to win (14) and were close to doing so (2). Consequently, their movement is portrayed as the active resistance that wages war (5, 14). The mouth-nose covering is used here as a metaphor, as they have supposedly always been used to dehumanize people in war, torture, and executions (2). The government's measures against Covid-19 are thus portrayed as a form of torture against their own country. One would wage war against children because they would have to wear mouth-nose coverings as a human experiment, become stupid by school closures, and be behaviorally disturbed by contact bans (5). Therefore, the measures are pictured as the government's weapons against the resistance and innocent children. Opposing voices, however, distance themselves from this violence-enabling rhetoric by making clear that the adversary is far superior and the only means left is, therefore, peacefulness (25).

The final conspicuous feature of the used rhetoric relates to the frequent insults of various external actors. Politicians are particularly affected, but so are media representatives and scientists. These range from anti-homosexual remarks to outright death threats (9). Reasons for such verbal attacks may be the need to humiliate these people to compensate for the oppression they experience due to the measures.

### *5.7 Self-Portrayal of the Querdenken Movement*

According to this analysis, the reasons for the participation in the Querdenken movement can be divided into three approaches. First, people join the movement because they are directed against what they perceive as exaggerated measures taken by the government. They range from the fear of losing their job (25, 29) to a more abstract view that the pandemic situation is no justification for letting the economy collapse (15). The disease is fatal only to the elderly, and they are of a reasonable age to die

(21). Besides, there is an aversion to mouth-nose coverings, as described above, because they would make people sick. Besides that, Covid-19 would be no more hazardous than annual influenza (2, 4, 6, 10, 27, 29).

Second, they are directed against the fear that, in their opinion, is too prevalent in society (5, 15, 19). They argue that the actual Covid-19 deaths are those whose lives are destroyed by hysteria (24). They want a society that is not controlled by fear (17). Third, people feel they are being lied to and argue that someone who knows the truth cannot overlook it, regardless of whether it affects him or not (6, 17). What exactly the truth is, however, differs individually. For some, Covid-19 is a Plandemic; for others, it is a hoax. Still others believe that the numbers are manipulated or the tests are inadequate.

In any case, the Querdenken members belong to the group of the enlightened. In general, they hold opposite or different opinions on several points of view. One can get the impression that the only thing that unites these people is their aversion to the policy and its measures regarding Covid-19. However, the members divide into those who explicitly express their receptiveness to conspiracy narratives (12, 14, 24, 26) and those who resist their dissemination from time to time (14, 23, 28). There is no consensus on whether to distinguish from open adherents of certain conspiracy narratives or not. They also differ in their political orientation and their differentiation from politically leftist or rightist (12, 28). There is the opinion that the movement is non-partisan and moves beyond politics (28, 31), and yet the AfD is conspicuously often referred to (25).

Further contradictions characterize the group. On the one hand, solidarity and help have an essential role. For example, some ask where they can get exemption certificates from the mask requirement and receive assistance (9, 12, 13, 15, 21, 22, 23, 25, 28). On the other hand, requests or questions are also followed by harsh answers, such as one should do the research oneself (22). The members portray themselves as lone warriors (15, 22). They do not see themselves as a collective but

explicitly point out that everyone should get personally engaged and organize their own actions (23, 25).

It is also an apparent contradiction that some in the movement describe themselves as unprejudiced (25), tolerant, non-violent (28), and peaceful (25, 27, 31). Simultaneously, there are racist (2, 4, 6, 9, 26, 27, 29, 31) and anti-homosexual (13, 14, 17, 19) statements in the group, most of which are not contradicted. Besides, a radical attitude can certainly be observed among some members. Violence and illegal acts are advocated (14, 20, 25, 29). The demand for the abolition of media houses can be described as anti-democratic (28). It seems as if those who otherwise explicitly emphasize the movement's peacefulness do not feel responsible for such statements.

The movement stylizes itself as a resistance movement comparable to the White Rose at the time of National Socialism (13, 19, 24, 26). They are democrats who do not let themselves be enslaved (9, 19). In contrast to the average population (19), they portray themselves as having a solid character (5) and show civil courage (9). Not wearing a mouth-nose covering is described as being mature (7, 14). Within the movement, participants convince each other of the effectiveness of their actions. In doing so, they exaggerate their impact on policies. Thus, they are convinced that politics would be one step further if Querdenken did not exist (16). They describe the demonstration in Berlin as probably the largest of the postwar period, which was only possible due to Michael Ballweg's financing (23). Such beliefs are challenging to disprove because they thrive on the narrative of having prevented an eventuality. It is impossible to refute that an event, such as a globally institutionalized vaccination campaign (8), did not occur thanks to their actions. They also believe that the tightened measures in November were prompted only because of Querdenken's actions (28, 30). A misconception, which can be refuted, is that they would have achieved the lifting of the mask requirement in elementary schools (20).



Repeatedly, the group members reinforce each other by emphasizing the high number (7, 8, 22, 23) of awakened people who have joined the movement (1, 5, 7, 8, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 31). The metaphor of the awakened often serves as a reference for those who were intelligent enough (18, 23) to understand the truth. Simultaneously, it clarifies that the Querdenken movement portrays itself in contrast to the sleeping normal population. The movement's members have gone through the crucial thought process to now be a part of the awakened. It is believed that every measure brings them new members (25, 28). Thus, they appropriately present themselves as experts on the subject of Covid-19. Therefore, self-made statistics are spread (23, 26, 28, 29), and medical advice is distributed, such as the symptoms of Covid-19 are a vitamin D deficiency (28), and the immune system itself is strong enough to counteract SARS-Cov-2 (4, 5, 12, 27).

In contrast to these self-aggrandizing assessments of the movement are self-doubt and disappointment. People who hold this view see the movement members as a minority in society (6, 12, 22, 23). They recognize that Querdenken exists in a bubble of self-promotion (28). Moreover, they are disappointed by the ineffectiveness of the movement's actions (14, 15, 23, 28).

The group's consensus is that Querdenken does not appeal to enough young people (13, 14). They wonder how they can be convinced, given the opinion that young people do not grasp the complexity of the issue (27) and their perception mentioned above of young people as uncritical, naïve, stupid, and cowardly. A strategy could be that everyone should mobilize their environment (29). However, this raises the issue of how the movement is perceived from the outside. The individual members report their social exclusion due to their opinion on Covid-19, which manifests itself in friendships that break up (9, 14), in contacts that block them (5), and neighbors who no longer speak to them (8). They experience hostility and defamation (5), of being dismissed as believers in conspiracies or right-wing radicals (9), of their children being bullied at school (15, 18), and of even their family not believing them (22). Even

another measure-critical association of artists and solo self-employed *Alarmstufe Rot* distances itself from the Querdenken movement (24, 29, 31). This preoccupies some members and leads to a lack of understanding.

Presumably, this social exclusion leads some to believe that Querdenken members have no rights (27) and are treated like Jews in the Third Reich (7, 10, 30). Consequently, some speak of splitting off from society and living independently among like-minded people (22, 23).

The experience of seceding and also the will to secede from normal society is also evident in their relationship to social media. They experience Youtube as a propaganda tool (29, 31), Facebook as a criminal (29), and Google Translator as manipulated (31). Even Telegram is viewed with suspicion. It is claimed that arrests are made because of statements made on the platform (31). They see no freedom of expression on the Internet (7, 16, 17, 27). As a result, they are considering setting up an alternative network (29).

Exclusivity, presumably a reaction to a combination of exclusion by society and the three reasons mentioned above: first, a lack of understanding of the measures, second, what they perceive as an exaggerated fear, and third, the feeling of being lied to, is also evident in other statements. For example, the requirement to write only in German excludes people who cannot speak or write German (8). Apart from the racist and anti-homosexual statements mentioned above, there is an indication of an outdated belief in traditional role models (15, 16). For example, one man asked a woman what her husband would say about her involvement in the movement, ostensibly out of concern for her family's burden (15). The intention not to forgive those who do not join their movement when it is all over (13) also shows the movement's delimitation. Besides, there is the desire of the members not to be considered normal (19). They portray themselves as enlightened and awake, setting themselves apart from the average population.

## 6 Discussion

Indeed, the results of the analysis of Querdenken's Telegram channels show several statements that clearly contain conspiracy narratives related to Covid-19 or other conspiracy narratives. Applying van Prooijen and van Vugt's (2018) proposed five critical components that qualify a belief as a conspiracy narrative to the results further reinforces this impression. The narratives described above weave around two main themes: the narrative of a Plandemic and the narrative that the pandemic is a hoax. Both meet all five criteria and can therefore be considered conspiracy narratives, according to van Prooijen and van Vugt, as shown in table 4.

Table 4. Van Prooijen and van Vugt's (2018) Five Critical Ingredients for Conspiracy Narratives Applied to the Narratives Spread in the Telegram Channels by Querdenken.

Theme	Plandemic	The Pandemic is a Hoax
<b>Patterns</b>	The pandemic was planned; A patent for Covid-19 test from 2015 and a legislation concerning Covid-19 in May 2019 serve as evidence.	The pandemic was foreseeable for years; Democracy is feigned, the general reporting is propaganda.
<b>Agency</b>	The virus is artificial; It is an obedience experiment of the surveillance state.	The state used it as a distraction to push through legislations; Prevent persecution of the elites; Introduction of digital euro or new currency.
<b>Coalitions</b>	Pharmaceutical lobby, Bill Gates, and the state serve as malevolent actors, SARS-Cov-2 was released instead of a war.	All states of the world, the pharma-industry, medical personnel, scientists related to this area.
<b>Threats</b>	The goal of the pandemic is to reduce mankind, or the killing of people; PCR-test or vaccination are means to obtain genetic data or implement microchips; mouth-nose coverings cause carbon Dioxide poisoning or are poisonous.	Degeneration of Democracy; PCR-test or vaccination are means to obtain genetic data or implement microchips; Mouth-nose coverings cause carbon Dioxide poisoning or are poisonous.
<b>Secrecy</b>	The population is being lied to. The official version is that the virus occurred naturally.	The population is being lied to. The official version is, that there is a threatening virus.

Note. The five critical ingredients as proposed by van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) referred to are the following: Patterns, or the chain of incidents that caused an event did not occur coincidentally; Agency, or the event was caused on purpose by intelligent actors; Coalitions, or multiple actors are involved; Threats, or the pursued goals are evil, selfish, or otherwise not in public interest; and Secrecy, or the coalition of people operates in secret.

Apart from the aspect that governments hide evidence of extraterrestrial contact, examples for the four remaining facets of a conspiracist ideation as described by Brotherton et al. (2013) can be found in the results. The government is accused of committing secret terrorist acts against its own citizens, for instance, in the form of Thomas Oppermann's death. Further, a small global elite personified by Bill Gates, the pharmaceutical lobby, or politicians controls important events. A disease, Covid-19, is spread, and mind-controlling technologies are allegedly implemented as microchips in the guise of testing or vaccinating for Covid-19. Lastly, organizations as the WHO and governments suppress information from the public.

In general, most of the conspiracy narratives found in the literature and summarized in table 2 could be retrieved in some form of the statements of members of Querdenken. Thus, according to the members, the dangerousness of SARS-Cov-2 is exaggerated and could be used as divisionary tactic. However, it could have been released as a bioweapon for population control or serve instead of war or been created by the pharma industry. The vaccination is harmful in any case, as well as the mouth-nose covering. In some way, 5G could also be related to Covid-19. Although it is not possible to delineate whether individual members believe only in aspects of these narratives or consider all of them possible, the phenomenon of mutually exclusive narratives can be observed for the whole group (Sutton & Douglas, 2014; Wood et al., 2012).

The psychological factors for believing in conspiracy narratives presented in chapter 2.1.2 might play a role among people who have joined the Querdenken movement. A pandemic can undoubtedly be seen as a terrible event which, according to Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), could have let these people to attribute the cause of the pandemic to someone's intention. The diffuse threat of an invisible virus could have led to the projection of this threat to an enemy as the government or a more concrete one as Bill Gates (Sullivan et al., 2010). The loss of control (van Prooijen & Acker, 2015) due to the pandemic regulations may have also increased the belief in a

conspiracy narrative and the power of those perceived to be guilty (Sullivan et al., 2010). Several authors noted that some individuals are more prone to find patterns, connections, or meaning in casually unrelated events as a reaction to complex events experienced under stressful conditions or anxiety (Balzan et al., 2012; Swami et al., 2016; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). This fits stunningly well with the statements that some of the members are only now beginning to see the whole picture.

The fact that so many representatives of other well-known conspiracy narratives are active in the group indicates that the strongest predictor of belief in one conspiracy narrative is the preexisting belief in another (Swami et al., 2010; 2011; 2013; 2017). The observed will among Querdenken members to be exceptional compared to the average population is also consistent with Lantian et al.'s (2017) finding that individuals with a high personal need for uniqueness are more likely to believe in conspiracy narratives.

It was found that movement participants feel disconnected from society, but it could not be shown whether individuals felt disconnected before they became members of Querdenken or after. It could be the case that they were critical of the measures and therefore joined the movement. Then, they might have felt excluded and even stigmatized by society and, for this reason, could be more likely to endorse conspiracy narratives as proposed by Rose (2017).

The social factors for the belief in conspiracy narratives are also applied to the examination of the group. Although it was not part of this analysis, one could speculate that one reason for some to become members of Querdenken was, as described by Hofstadter (1964), feelings of powerlessness in the political debate as policies concerning the pandemic were decided over their heads and against their will. This, in turn, may have reinforced their negative assumptions about the world of power. What could be observed was that participants felt rejected and discriminated by the out-group, the average population, politics, and media. In contrast, they felt strongly connected to their in-group, the other members of Querdenken, as suggested by van

Prooijen and van Lange (2014). The authors also suggested that the feeling that one's entire group is marginalized in the social context is likely to be a strong predictor of conspiracy belief. According to Cichocka et al. (2015), collective narcissism, as practiced by the movement in reiterating its grandeur and greatness while unable to confront or acknowledge extremist views and conspiracy narratives in the movement, seems to foster beliefs in conspiratorial intentions of the out-group.

Political factors certainly play a role in the grouping. As van Prooijen (2018) stated, the distrust in the government, which can lead to belief in conspiracy narratives, is quite evident and manifests itself in personal insults of individual politicians. The shift in the party preference of the Querdenken group and the emphasis on the AfD as the only electable party indicate a politically populist and extremist attitude. In this context, it is also important to mention that supporters of the AfD party are also the most likely to believe in conspiracy narratives compared to other parties (Roose, 2020, p. 19). The presence of adherents of the Reichsbürger narrative within the group, which as mentioned reject the Federal Republic of Germany's legitimacy and sovereignty and its existing legal system, is also clear evidence of this attitude (Jesse, 2013). It may be a reference to Silva et al.'s (2017) thesis that the worldviews of populists and conspiracy narratives are very similar.

A crippled epistemology (Hardin, 2002; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) is evident in the repeated and persistent dissemination of targeted misinformation. The media's extreme rejection also shows that the grouping receives and trusts information about political issues mainly from their in-group and ignores other sources of information. As even noted by one member of the Telegram channel, they formed an ideologically homogenous group, and though the same opinion is repeated without being questioned. According to Warner and Neville-Shepard (2014), this can lead to an increased belief in conspiracies.

Few announced departures from the Telegram group, and the declining number of its members give slight hints that the group is weeding out members with a less

extreme view and is thus moving in a more extreme direction (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). However, this is not provable. It can be observed that group members become suspicious of others' motives (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). For example, assuming that a new lockdown would be imposed only because of them, they overvalue the attention they receive. They believe that the measures directed at the Covid-19 pandemic are in effect intended to harm them (Kramer, 1994).

Since this group is private but not moderated, and dissenting opinions are labeled as trolls, there are no communication rules. Insults and disinformation are mostly ignored or met with approval. Dissent is rare because consensus is desired in the group. Therefore, an echo chamber may have been created within which people's expressions respond rationally to the group's content. However, when an outsider joins the group, the interplay of conspiracy narratives, extremist statements, and hostility is upsetting and repulsive (Wood, 2013).

The group uses strategies to deny the prevailing, scientifically confirmed view (Diethelm & McKee, 2009) that Covid-19 is a life-threatening, rapidly spreading disease that requires countermeasures. Despite overwhelming consensus among scientists, there are vocal commentators in the movement like Bodo Schiffmann. They reject this consensus and convince many people in the public that it is not based on sound science. People like Sucharit Bhakdi are presented as authority on the subject. He claims to be an expert in this field, but his views are entirely at odds with established knowledge. Querdenken uses single pieces of evidence, such as that hospitals would be empty or that children would die from mouth-nose coverings while discrediting all other evidence that contradicts their views.

One of the most concerning impacts of the Querdenken movement is the opposition to critical medical and health interventions. They oppose Covid-19 testing, mouth-nose coverings, and vaccinations, as has been described as a problem among conspiracy believers (Douglas et al., 2017; Jolley & Douglas, 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014).

It should be added that Querdenken cannot solely be seen as a homogeneous group. They are people who have come together for individual motives to fundamentally question the government's actions or even the government itself. However, it remains questionable whether such a heterogeneous movement that is unable to distinguish itself from conspiracy narratives can achieve a common goal. As a tactic to make the heterogeneity less visible, the group seems to have set itself to avoid discourse because a discussion would reveal the diversity of the members. It takes either a great deal of tolerance to accept all points of view or a great deal of ignorance. Despite all this, it has to be mentioned that certainly not everyone in this movement believes or spreads conspiracy narratives. Dentith's (2014) argument that groups like this contribute to the control of the powerful cannot be dismissed either. Indeed, one does not have to attribute the worst to those in power to control them. A protest movement can presumably distance itself from certain conspiracy narratives and still be critical. Nor should it be appropriate or tolerated in any form to express in a racist, homophobic, or in any way offensive or against minorities.

Besides, further aspects have emerged in the course of this work. As an immanently vulnerable group, children are brought forward by the movement to highlight its concern and emphasize its urgency. Children's special protectiveness is used to emphasize the maliciousness of the measures, especially of the mouth-nose coverings. Even though the group would like to portray it this way, children have no voice in the protest movement. They are used as actors by adult protagonists. During a time of crisis, parents should relieve their children's anxiety. Here, it seems that the movement is scaring children about the government and its actions. Hypocritically, the grouping worries about the fear that is spreading among the population due to the pandemic situation, and at the same time, reinforces it by conjuring up an even greater image of the enemy: the malignant, dictatorial state.

After this analysis, the answers to the research questions can be summarized as follows. The federal government's actions are portrayed as a means of oppressing



the population and, in particular, the Querdenken grouping. The population and the media are portrayed as the extended arm of malicious politics. The population cannot recognize what is being played out due to fear or stupidity. Their condition is portrayed as zombie-like and sometimes worse, as equally malicious by outlawing behavior that does not conform to the rules. The state and the media are portrayed as an organized network of disinformation and opinion-mongering. In this way, they distract the population from what is really at play. Unlike the state's role, the actions of the population and the media are not portrayed as entirely malicious. Eventually, the population could still be convinced of the truth. Despite this, there are remaining doubts about the mainstream media regarding whether it can be seen as utterly loyal to the regime. The conspiracy narratives associated with Covid-19 are numerous and weave around two main themes: the narrative of a pandemic and the narrative that the pandemic is a hoax. Since both meet all five criteria of van Prooijen and van Vugt's (2018) critical ingredients, they are considered conspiracy narratives. Other preexisting conspiracy narratives or myths are numerous and indicate a conspiracist ideation proposed by Brotherton et al. (2013). People join the movement primarily for three motives.

1. They are directed against the measures,
2. they are directed against spreading fear among the population,
3. they feel they are being lied to.

The group presents itself as contradictory in many ways: in whether or not they distance themselves from open adherents of certain conspiracy narratives, in their political orientation, whether or not they are tolerant, whether they want to achieve their goals in a community or as lone wolves, and whether they have a self-aggrandizing or self-doubting attitude. They portray themselves as enlightened and awake, setting themselves apart from the average population.

Two particularly noticeable aspects emerged from the analysis. Firstly, the constant comparison with National Socialism and the movement's stylization as resistance fighters in this context. Secondly, their experience with secession and also the will to secede from normal society.

The observation of the Querdenken Telegram groups conducted here offers implications for further quantitative work in the field. Research questions could focus on how many adherents to conspiracy narratives are in groups such as these. Are people being persuaded by conspiracy narratives here who did not previously believe in them? It also raises the question of what effect receiving information or disinformation from such groups can have on unaffected individuals. Of particular interest is the relationship between health-seeking behavior in a pandemic and information sources that people consider trustworthy.

This work also has limitations. It focused exclusively on Telegram, for example, which is the group's most used communication medium, but still not sufficient to obtain a comprehensive portrait of the movement. Due to the group's distrust of outside observations, some individuals may have behaved in a more socially desirable way. Observing the group in real life and at demonstrations and interviewing them would have contributed to the data quality but poses a certain risk of infection. Several data evaluators would come to a more objective conclusion than was possible here in this thesis. Further qualitative research could expand on this approach in terms of the time-span of observations, the diversity of examined mediums, and the number of investigators.

## 7 Conclusion

The threat mentioned in the introduction that conspiracy narratives lead to the rejection of health-preserving measures in the pandemic was confirmed during the observation for the Telegram groups of Querdenken. Particularly noteworthy is the risk of lack of vaccination willingness spread by the groups. The data collection took place in October, two months before the first vaccination of a person against Covid-19. Nevertheless, targeted disinformation about the vaccine was already being disseminated at that time. Querdenken's members are an absolute minority in society. Nevertheless, the slightest doubt created by disinformation about the vaccine's safety could be enough to hold back the vaccination decision of uninvolved people (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b). This small group's impact on public discourse already seems to make it larger than it is.

According to Bode and Vraga (2018), health information campaigns turn out to be successful and are effectively correct the distortions of conspiracy narratives. However, evidence against such an intervention comes from Carey et al.'s (2020) finding that approaches to correct conspiracy beliefs and disinformation about the Zika virus were ineffective or even counterproductive. This was true both for individuals who tended to agree with conspiracy narratives and for individuals who did not.

Though, the authors hypothesize that this risk is lower in situations where baseline knowledge is well established, which can be assumed for Covid-19. Still, it may be more effective to pursue alternative strategies that do not involve direct debunking, such as educational programs that encourage people to engage with public health information. This is consistent with Jolley and Douglas's (2014a) finding that arguments against conspiracy narratives increased vaccination intentions, but only when presented before conspiracy narratives.

Targeted educational campaigns and thus preventing the disinformation spread by movements as Querdenken can be essential to counteract conspiracy narratives.

Twitter functions as an opinion-forming and information-disseminating platform concerning health issues (Denecke et al., 2013). This could make it an ideal platform for such campaigns, as shown by Wood (2018). Telegram is already being used for this purpose. For example, the federal government has launched a channel ([https://t.me/corona\\_infokanal\\_bmg](https://t.me/corona_infokanal_bmg)) that disseminates reliable information about Covid-19 and has about 450,000 subscribers (as of March 1, 2021). However, it is not clear how successful it is to counter conspiracy narratives as spread by the Querdenken movement.

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