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A context-driven approach on coping with COVID-19: From hiding knowledge toward citizen engagement

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The current study sets out to investigate the relationships among three interconnected dimensions, that is hiding knowledge by the Government, the realized absorptive capacity (RACAP) and citizen engagement, giving way to a context-driven approach. Emphasis is laid on the effects engendered by the lack of official information transparency in the critical context of COVID-19 outbreak at the global level, through the lens of the Spanish example. The relationships among the variables are analyzed by means of an empirical study conducted with 151 Spanish subjects with a view to identify whether the impact of knowledge hiding by the Government on citizen engagement can be mitigated and to acknowledge how the presence of RACAP impacts citizens in limiting the spread of COVID-19 information disorders.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The outburst and spread of the SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 at the global level have triggered an unprecedented situation challenging individuals, communities, societies, economies and entire systems simultaneously. Confronted with similar daunting issues, Governments all over the world have struggled to identify time and context-sensitive solutions, but the lack of crisis experience and adequate planning have posed significant barriers in the way of feasible responses. In this front, Spain may emerge as an evocative real-life example in that the lack of anticipation with regard to SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 (Tiefenhäler, 2020; Tremlett, 2020) has determined the Spanish Prime Minister (PM) to hide his missteps by attacking other European partners for not wanting to pay for the coronavirus (Hofmeister & Friedek, 2020). In the absence of a straightforward approach of the critical ongoing situation, while Angela Merkel was self-isolating, the Spanish PM Pedro Sanchez and his deputy Pablo Iglesias both continued to attend cabinet meetings after their partners tested positive (Delfs & Donahue, 2020). Furthermore, so far, they have not assumed any responsibility or identified the individuals responsible for mistakes such as the purchase of 640,000 inadequate coronavirus test kits (Sevillano, 2020).

In the case of the Spanish Government's mismanagement of the overall setting (i.e., infancy in handling bad reactions, inappropriate responses or the proliferation of fake news), resorting to a knowledge

hiding approach to cope with COVID-19 has stemmed as a solution within reach. Hiding knowledge is defined as an intentional attempt to conceal or withhold knowledge that others have requested (Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). The failure in tailoring authentic public communication minimizes the chances “to counteract disinformation and support policy. The efficacy of these actions will depend on grounding them in open government principles, chiefly transparency, to build trust in public institutions” (OECD, 2020).

Consistent with Allcott, Gentzkow, and Yu (2019), there are different ways of hiding knowledge, the phenomenon covering—under the same umbrella—disinformation, that is, intentionally deceptive information and misinformation, that is, non-intentionally deceptive information. Tackling crises via a lack of critical information transparency springs as a definite counterproductive strategy in most of the cases as this approach nurtures the proliferation of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and false narratives. This mainly applied to the Spanish context and was conducive to obvious distrust in the government actors. According to Siddiqui et al. (2020), it is incumbent on us to fight this social misinformation epidemic, before it turns into another pandemic.

The case of Spain is evocative for the mismanagement of critical situations given the somehow monolithic perspective on COVID-19 outbreak, which boiled down to flattening the curve. In line with Yuan, Li, Lv, and Lu (2020), this approach encompasses self-isolation measures that keep the daily number of disease cases at a manageable