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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

level for medical care. Here, isolation may be deemed as an adequate measure to prevent citizens from infecting or getting infected with COVID-19, yet it does not directly imply engaging them with the government actions, a paramount factor for a positive overall outcome (Leung, Lam, & Cheng, 2020). Citizen engagement is of the essence as it simultaneously tackles two different pillars, that is, the assumption and commitment to following the established rules and protocols and the proper handling of relevant information versus misinformation or disinformation. Further, within the framework of the open government principles, official information disclosure should rely on accountability, transparency, integrity and citizen engagement, and participation (OECD, 2020) as a coherent strategy to discourage mis- and disinformation and enhance civic compliance.

Although apparently different, self-isolation has much in common with the realized absorptive capacity (RACAP). The former is intended to stop COVID-19 spreading, whereas the latter—which comprehends transformation and exploitation of external knowledge (Zahra & George, 2002)—is meant to prevent individuals from turning into counter-knowledge catalysts, as Cegarra-Navarro, Eldridge, and Wensley (2014) contended. Faced with problematic and conflicting information flooding the media ecosystem, citizens need further resources to resist and fight against the new “infodemic” (WHO, 2020) and here RACAP may provide the prerequisites of potentiating positive civic outcomes as opposed to harmful attitudes and behaviors.

Building upon the aforementioned directions, the current paper sets out to investigate whether RACAP facilitates a better civic discrimination between right information and other information disorders, further resulting in a higher citizen engagement to follow the recommended COVID-19 precautionary procedures. At a practical level, the study is intended to reveal the effects of hiding knowledge by the government authorities and to raise the awareness of decision-makers regarding the potential outcomes of their crisis management strategies. Subsequently, the theoretical and empirical endeavors underscore the effects of the lack of information transparency among Spanish citizens, which is conducive to a presumptive lesser engagement with the Government measures.

To achieve its argumentative objective, the paper was organized in five main sections: the first part covers the theoretical underpinnings, the second one introduces the materials and method, the third one presents the results, whereas the fourth advances the discussion of the findings. Finally, the conclusions, limitations, and future research directions are elaborated on.

2 | CONTEXTUAL AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

As in many other cases, COVID-19 crisis has taken the Spanish Government by surprise and without the necessary resources to combat it (Tiefenhäler, 2020). Consistent with the view of Tiefenhäler (2020), doctors and nurses lacked the necessary gowns, masks, and shields, which would have been indispensable resources for a suitable approach of the continuously growing number of COVID-19 cases in

intensive care units. The tardy and insufficient measures of the public authorities may be considered as a bad estimation of the virus magnitude and outburst, as Tremlett (2020) also posits. At the national level, some media outlets have been extremely critical of the Government, for instance, *El Mundo*, *ABC* or *Libertad Digital*, have reported mismanagement of the Government resulting from a little self-critical capacity, a lack of transparency, and refusal to provide information.

Nowadays, given the insufficiently tested vaccine and the lack of specific medication to treat COVID-19 alongside the limited testing in Spain, self-isolation has emerged as the only feasible way to flatten the curve. Self-isolation has been especially supported by the legislative and regulatory initiatives implemented by the government authorities, including here, among other, the suspension of the right to travel, banning cycling or outdoor sports during crisis.

From a bird's eye view, the actional choice of the Spanish Government was focused on a knowledge hiding approach regarding the actuality of COVID-19 in an effort to increase its crisis management strategies. Moreover, as Brennen, Simon, Howard, and Nielsen (2020) advance, governments have often fallen short to provide clear, useful, and trusted information, indispensable premises for properly addressing the rising public concerns. This led to the violation of a rule of thumb, which refers to authorities' duty of ensuring information transparency during critical contexts, as Edmondson (2020) states. Presumptively, the provision of detailed data on the crisis magnitude would have engendered a higher level of fake news and fostered a weaker alignment of citizens with the governmental protocols. Individuals would have been likely to experience very strong feelings as information transparency would have comprehended different types of knowledge, namely rational, emotional and spiritual knowledge, as operationalized by Bratianu and Bejinaru (2019, 2020) and Bratianu, Vătămănescu, Anagnoste, and Dominici (2020). The incidence of knowledge dynamics in an idiosyncratic crisis situation was considered undesirable and, in this sense, the cultivation of ignorance was advanced as a context-sensitive and resourceful strategy in order to avoid negative societal outcomes (i.e., individuals' fear of mistake, the installation of distress and panic, etc.) as different authors (Haynes, 2019; McGoey, 2012) have also implied.

Nevertheless, hiding knowledge by the Spanish Government may be seen as a two-edge sword. First, it may prove useful as argued above, but second, as contended by Peng, Wang, Dong, and Zhang (2018) and Taylor and Bright (2011), it may lead to the citizens' misrepresentation of facts and figures, to a greater effort to navigate the increasingly conflicting data, and consequently to a defective diagnosis of problems or to (self)harmful decision-making. Furthermore, prior studies (Černe, Nerstad, Dysvik, & Škerlavaj, 2014; Connelly & Zweig, 2015) urged that information distortion may inflict upon the public interest in that citizens fall short to properly adapt to the crisis situation in the absence of clear and consistent official communication. In this front, as Noonan (2007) pointed out, the lack of conveying substantive information (i.e., by the Government) may be conducive to generalized confusion as people may find it very difficult to discriminate real facts from fake news or fabricated stories.

According to Cegarra-Navarro, Córdoba-Pachón, and García-Pérez (2017), achieving citizen engagement should be a pivotal priority in many settings, all the more in a crisis situation where the government measures should directly address people's propensity to align with the established status quo. Citizen engagement is concerned with multifaceted construct encapsulating a variety of interrelated behaviors, such as volunteering, protesting, participating in political debates, and learning about issues confronting one's community (Porumbescu, Cucciniello, & Gil-García, 2020). Similarly, consistent with Edwards, Foley, and Putnam (2001), citizen engagement refers to the individuals' personal responsibility to assume their duties as members of a certain community and act accordingly. The different facets of citizen engagement, together, empower individuals to shape their own wellbeing, as well as that of their community (Carpini, 2000; Vătămănescu, Andrei, & Pinzaru, 2018). For this reason, leveraging public and true information disclosure to enhance citizen engagement in government goals establishes a foundation for accountable and responsive public service provision (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Kassen, 2013; Porumbescu et al., 2020).

Giving credit to previous works (e.g., Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2017) that approach citizen engagement as people participation in most of the Government decisions, it may be concluded that a clear attention from the Government in this direction would have ensured a better commitment of individuals to the imposed emergency procedures (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012), including here COVID-19 Health Protocols. In accordance with Warren, Sulaiman, and Jaafar (2014) and Wijnhoven, Ehrenhard, and Kuhn (2015), it is likely that a smoother civic alignment with the governmental restrictive measures would have progressively resulted if the citizens were correctly and timely informed of the actual situation. The strategic maintenance of transparent communication about the crisis actuality and the government action would avail the limitation of the infodemic (i.e., fake news, half-truths and other similar disorders) and further engage citizen compliance (Jiang, Hu, Wang, & Jiang, 2019; OECD, 2020; Wang, Law, Zhang, Li, & Liang, 2019). Conversely, the propelling of the knowledge hiding approach would negatively impact individuals' trust and participation in counteracting the virus spread. Based on these arguments, we thus infer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis H1. Hiding knowledge by the Government has a negative effect on citizen engagement.

The contradictory (potential) effects exerted by the knowledge hiding approach of the Spanish Government on the citizen engagement

entail the presence of another variable liable to tip the balance in favor of a stronger commitment to the established preventative, yet restraining measures. In this vein, RACAP encapsulates the individual's capacity to discern and better handle external information via a consistent process of transformation and exploitation (Zahra & George, 2002), dealing with the existing knowledge for the benefit of society. It supposes novel interpretations of existing knowledge, adding new knowledge to fill in the gaps, and deleting pieces of counter-knowledge (Escribano, Fosfuri, & Tribó, 2009). In its own right, within a knowledge dynamics framework as theorized by Bratianu et al. (2020), RACAP may be considered as the driving force of citizen engagement, surpassing the level of the mere acquisition and accumulation of the information available through various media and unveiling itself as a robust filter of unverified information and as a sound identifier of the missing pieces or information disorders. Consequently, we presume that:

Hypothesis H2. Hiding knowledge by the Government has a positive effect on the presence of realized absorptive capacity (RACAP).

Hypothesis H3. The realized absorptive capacity (RACAP) has a positive effect on citizen engagement.

Figure 1 integrates the three hypotheses, hence displaying the theoretical model. The upper path of the model represents the direct influence of hiding knowledge by the Government on citizen engagement, while the lower branch captures the view on RACAP as a mediator between the exogenous and endogenous variables.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Data collection

Convenience sampling was used, participation invitations being distributed in the second week of April 2020 to the distribution list of *Universidad Politécnica de Cartagena* (UPCT) including teachers, students, grant holders and researchers and administrative staff. Over 500 citizens were contacted and 155 finally filled in the questionnaire by beginning of May 2020. The database was then filtered on purpose to control the adequacy of the sample. Only Spanish residents were kept for further analysis. After filtering the collected data, 151 responses finally resulted. In terms of the sample, the majority of the respondents were male (60.9%) and the average age of citizens

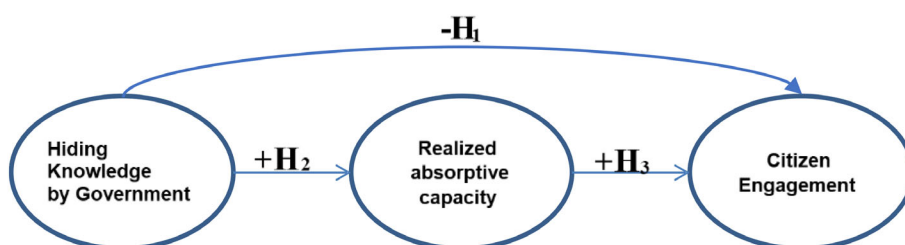


FIGURE 1 Theoretical model [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 1 Construct summary, confirmatory factor analysis, and scale reliability

Construct	VIF	Loading	
Hiding knowledge by the government			
EHK1: Agreed to help citizens take charge of their own health but never really intended to.	1.916	0.858 ^{***}	AVE = 0.694
EHK2: Agreed to help citizens but instead gave them information different from what they wanted.	2.353	0.869 ^{***}	SCR = 0.900
EHK3: Told citizens that it would help them out later but stalled as much as possible.	2.058	0.837 ^{***}	HTMT = 0.281
EHK4: Offered citizens some other information instead of what they really wanted.	1.779	0.763 ^{***}	
Realized absorptive capacity			
RACAP1: I regularly consider the consequences of sharing fake news in terms of bad influence on others.	1.580	0.781 ^{***}	AVE = 0.633
RACAP2: I regularly question the validity and value of newly acquired information.	1.574	0.859 ^{***}	SCR = 0.837
RACAP3: I quickly recognize the uselessness of fake news to solve real problems.	1.239	0.741 ^{***}	HTMT = 0.281
Citizen engagement			
CE1: I am following the recommendations I received from the government and civil society.	1.487	0.942 ^{***}	AVE = 0.587
CE2: I would be willing to participate in training tutorials about how to cope with COVID-19 isolation offered by the government and civil society.	1.646	0.803 ^{***}	SCR = 0.800
CE3: I am learning about how to use the self-service diagnosis of COVID-19 testing provided by the government.	1.341	0.481 ^{**}	HTMT = 0.181

Note: The fit statistics for the measurement model were: [SRMR = 0.082; SRMR₉₅ = 0.083; d_{ULS} = 0.373; d_{ULS_95} = 0.378; d_G = 0.147; d_{G_95} = 0.179].

Abbreviations: AVE, average variance extracted; HTMT, Heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations; SCR, scale composite reliability; VIF, variance inflation factor.

^{***}<0.01.

^{**}<0.05.

who participated in this study was 41.7 years. To minimize the data bias, a comparison of gender differences (1 = male and 2 = female) in terms of hiding knowledge, RACAP and citizen engagement was performed, the independent sample *t* test revealed no significant difference between the two groups ($p = .651$, $p = .747$, and $p = .169$ respectively). In such conditions, non-response bias was not an issue in this study (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

3.2 | Measures

The considered constructs were self-reported and operationalized with a rating scale from 1 = “high disagreement” to 5 “high agreement” (see Table 1 for a list of items). Knowledge hiding was assessed with a four-item scale developed by Connelly et al. (2012). The items asked participants to think about how the government has managed the COVID-19 crisis. Four items measured RACAP and assessed the extent to which citizens were able to facilitate recognition of information disorders and consequences of fake news for other citizens

(Zahra & George, 2002). The existence of citizen engagement consisted of four items from a scale designed by Cegarra-Navarro et al. (2017), these items were interwoven with issues related to how often citizens follow procedures and attend training tutorials on COVID-19 offered by from the government and the civil society.

4 | RESULTS

The proposed hypotheses were tested simultaneously using SmartPLS 3.2.9 (Richter, Cepeda, L, & CM, 2016). As shown in Table 1, the fit index of SRMR and all discrepancies suggest a good fit for the measurement model (Henseler et al., 2014). All constructs were specified as composite reflective constructs (mode A) given that there is a high level of correlation between indicators (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). The results provided in Table 1 show the validity of the composite constructs. All the variables attain discriminant validity, since all HTMT are below the value of 0.90 (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015).

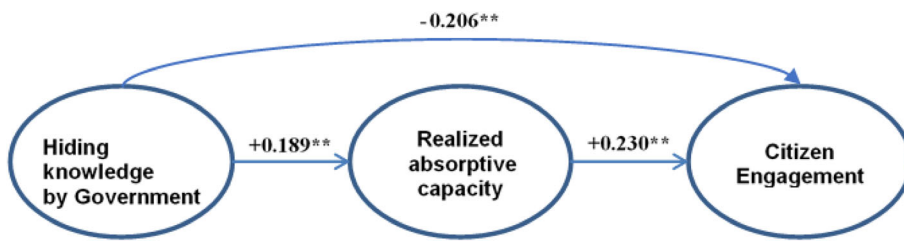


FIGURE 2 Structural equation model. Note: ** < 0.05 (based on a Student t (9999) distribution with one tail). $t(0.05, 9999) = 1.645$ [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Figure 2 shows the results of the three-competing links, the findings providing support for H_1 , H_2 , and H_3 .

5 | DISCUSSION

Hiding knowledge is a universal and widespread phenomenon, highly detrimental to cope with the new situation during the coronavirus epidemic. The findings of this research have identified how RACAP can mitigate the presence of hiding knowledge by the Government, along with exploring how it could foster citizen engagement in a sample of 151 Spanish citizens. In doing so, the study has made several contributions, which have both theoretical and managerial implications.

Around the world, citizens should understand that the deadly virus could only be controlled by committing to measures as case finding, contact tracing, and suspension of all public gatherings. This is important because the virus is still among us and citizen engagement is the only way to avoid uncivil behavior (e.g., not social distancing). Therefore, the first contribution of the present research is to put a value on citizen engagement as a way to cope with COVID-19. Engagement is itself a way of establishing a sense of citizenship, and the knowledge and sense of consciousness required to achieve it (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Porumbescu et al., 2020), which in turn can strengthen the practice and efficacy of government measures to flatten the curve. Besides, more conscious citizenship, coupled with stronger citizenship practices, can also help to contribute to a culture of accountability (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Porumbescu et al., 2020).

The second contribution of the research, which derives from the investigation of the hypotheses, is related to government studies and theoretical frameworks supporting the scrutiny of citizen engagement. The results of the data analysis support the hypothesis that hiding knowledge by the Government has a negative effect on citizen engagement (i.e., H_1). The relevance of this finding resides in its potential to deter governments from hiding knowledge, as underlined by Jiang et al. (2019), which stems as a barrier to thriving. This also confirms what authors such as Černe et al. (2014), Jiang et al. (2019) and Wang et al. (2019) say when they argue that knowledge hiding may be treated as a barrier toward knowledge transfer. Thus, government—beyond the implemented rules and norms—should also give importance to its own actions to discourage knowledge hiding and increase the knowledge sharing behavior.

This study is also relevant because it shows the important role being played by RACAP to mitigate potential negative effects of hidden knowledge (e.g., information disorders) on citizen engagement. The more

evasive, and opaque is the government communication strategy, the more useful is the presence of RACAP among citizens. Results of the data analysis support hypothesis H_2 , showing that RACAP mitigates and counteracts the negative implications of hiding knowledge on citizen commitment (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2014). In this respect, the effects of hiding knowledge by the Government could be countered by providing citizens tools for self-evaluation in order to avoid misinformation. Since evaluation may include citizen efforts to adopt the method of self-evaluation and other people's evaluation of multiple information sources to further contain misinformation, RACAP is more important than ever. In this vein, organizing training sessions, which can build trust and willingness in the healthcare professionals toward COVID-19 should be vital to any government (Imai, 2020).

With regard to the testing of the third hypothesis, this study indicates that RACAP has a positive influence on the citizen engagement. Citizens can provide other citizens right information to develop strategies of knowledge sharing, avoid misinformation, and not spread fake news. This highlight is important not only for the current framework but also for governments from a managerial perspective. The findings support the views of Wang and Noe (2010) who drew attention to the fact that an organization that promotes trust and encourages employees to learn new ideas is potentially able to positively enhance the willingness of knowledge holders to transfer knowledge.

From a practical perspective, this study provides several insights relating to the increase of the sense of citizen engagement in times of crisis. Subsequently, citizen engagement could contribute to support governments to increase public interest in their institutions and strategies. The hiding knowledge strategy does not seem be a good strategy if governments want to achieve the citizen engagement, especially in democratic governments. Avoiding hiding knowledge and citizen awareness could make a difference in how democratic institutions deliver (Porumbescu et al., 2020). It is important to highlight that change occurs with multiples types of citizen engagement, not only with formal proposal of governments. For example, in Spain, a different way to citizen engagement to show solidarity, co-operation and charity with the people most damaged by COVID-19 appeared, even before government took action. As noted above, RACAP mitigates the negative effects of hidden knowledge on citizen engagement by filtering, processing, and validating the information.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

The scrutiny of the media ecosystem is likely to reveal that the management of the coronavirus crisis has been especially seasoned

with good doses of propaganda and misinformation. In the case of Spain, we have seen how the Spanish Prime Minister answered only pre-filtered media questions in press conferences, so that nobody could be against him. Social networks have also been subjected to considerable surveillance and coercion in a bid to avoid half-truths. Under this framework, it seems reasonable to think that some individuals were consciously prone to think that the Government has been trying to hide information from them (e.g., the acquisition of sanitary equipment, advice on the use of masks or the real COVID-19 death toll, just to name a few).

The problem is that Government representatives from around the world and from Spain in particular have not understood that the fight against coronavirus was only possible from the perspective of self-criticism and with generosity and farsightedness. In fact, the enemy is a virus against which propaganda or misinformation does not serve. That is why the management of the crisis has been slow, irresponsible, and ineffective in many Western countries. Perhaps the most important lesson taken from this crisis has been the importance of developing explicit goals to which citizens could engage with the government measures to flatten the curve and develop resilience. In this front, the study investigated how RACAP can mitigate the presence of hiding knowledge, along with exploring how it could foster citizen engagement.

The results revealed that RACAP plays an important role between negative information disorders and citizen engagement, and this variable helps citizens to perceive information gaps on COVID-19, it forms self-recognition with others based on their experience or work environment. From the perspective of KM, RACAP can be part of the solution if citizens are given self-control and adjustment ability to fight COVID-19; in this way, they will be able to overcome information disorders.

In conclusion, since citizens can provide other citizens with the right information to stimulate knowledge sharing, they are primarily accountable for the degree in which information is verified and exchanged among their own contacts. This means that citizens must channel and ascertain unverified information before sharing with others in order to boost communication within their own network.

The current study, as any other, presents some limitations. We only focus on one institution from one country, which makes it difficult to generalize results. Further studies are needed to extrapolate the results from a local, context-driven level to a wider level. Future research could also identify different degrees of citizen engagement, various ways of hiding knowledge and distinctive drivers of RACAP.

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