

PREVENTING RADICALIZATIONS OF COVID-19 DENIERS?

A THEORETICAL DISCUSSION OF COMMUNITIES AS PCVE RESOURCES

By Sophia Fehrenbach

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Supervisor: Nikolas Sitter

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I, the undersigned Sophia Fehrenbach hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where proper acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language. This is a true copy of the thesis, including final revisions.

Date: 17 June 2022

Name: Sophia Fehrenbach

Signature: 

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 deniers challenge the foundations of democratic societies because they are openly antisemitic, have violent potential, are denouncing societies' underlying (scientific) facts, have proven to radicalize people from all strands in life and are likely to stay after the end of the pandemic. This thesis therefore aims to understand how radicalizations of further Covid-19 deniers can be prevented. Specifically, it explores how communities who are thought to be effective yet largely underutilized resources in Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (PCVE) can best get involved in these prevention efforts. Because of the novelty of the topic, there is little available research on Covid-19 deniers. Through twelve semi-structured interviews and a thorough literature review, this thesis nevertheless identifies large-scale mistrust, belief in Conspiracy Theories (CTs) and support for (scientific) populism as the Covid-19 deniers' three main characteristics and *Emotional Resilience*, *Education* and *Political Participation* as the three best community PCVE tools. It discusses how these tools respond to the three characteristics and finds that *Emotional Resilience* and *Education* succeed to respond to mistrust and CTs, whereas *Political Participation* can prevent the support for (scientific) populism. Communities should thus employ all three tools together to prevent radicalizations of further Covid-19 deniers.

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1 INTRODUCTION

“They have radicalized during the pandemic. In the pandemic they have found together [...]. And even if the pandemic passes – and the pandemic will eventually pass – these groups will not disappear. Instead, they will find new targets. Just as the Russian invasion of Ukraine has already become the new number one issue in these groups. And even when the war will be over, the climate crisis will be the next issue where we will face the same challenges as a society. Conspiracy beliefs and conspiracist groups will remain a challenge, and even a danger to our society.” [Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022]

During the Covid-19 pandemic, media reported an increasing radicalization of so-called Covid-19 deniers (Spiegel 2021).¹ Around the globe, Covid-19 deniers have taken the streets to protest against Covid-19-related health measures, against mandatory vaccinations or simply to denounce Covid-19 as a “hoax” (Imhoff & Lamberty 2020). People who attended these Covid-19 demonstrations have come from all strands in life and for various reasons. They are united in their opposition against Covid-19 measures.

Covid-19 deniers have not only become a threat to public health systems because they oppose vaccinations and are thus more likely to be hospitalized (Berkeley 2021), but to the very foundations of pluralistic democratic societies. Covid-19 deniers are problematic because they (a) deny the scientific facts and values that our societies rest on (Eberl et al. 2021), (b) have (in some cases) militant and violent potential (FAZ 2021; Gaigg & Sulzbacher 2021), (c) have proven to radicalize people from all strands of life (Spiegel 2021), and most problematically and as referred to in the above-cited quotation, they (d) are likely to stay long after Covid-19 measures are ended (Zauner 2022).

¹ This thesis follows mainstream (media, academic and public) discussions that termed the weekly protests against the Covid-19 restrictions as “Covid-19 protests” and its demonstrators as “Covid-19 deniers”. For example, see (Gaigg & Sulzbacher 2021).

Due to the novelty of the Covid-19 deniers' emergence, in-depth research on the group's dynamics and prevention efforts are (still) missing. To overcome this gap, this research conducted twelve semi-structured in-depth expert interviews.² Thanks to these interviews, this thesis could identify the three main characteristics of the Covid-19 deniers. It argues that Covid-19 deniers show large-scale mistrust towards mainstream institutions (government, academia, media, etc.), strong belief in Conspiracy Theories (CTs)³, and support for (scientific) populism. Moreover, the experts that were interviewed for the purpose of this research independently proposed to group the Covid-19 deniers into a "hardcore group" and a "follower group" (Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022; Schäfer, Interview, 10.03.2022).

Accordingly, the "hardcore group" would have radicalized to such an extent that fact-based discussions became impossible, and interviewees say that "we have lost them" (Schäfer, Interview, 10.03.2022). Experts discuss whether the "hardcore group" radicalized during the Covid-19 pandemic or whether they were already radical (right-wing extremists for example) that strategically used the Covid-19 pandemic as a recruitment and visibility motor (Schiesser, Interview, 08.03.2022). On the other hand, the "follower group" would be those that are responsive or cognitively open to the propaganda of Covid-19 deniers (ibid). They are not only those that publicly demonstrate on the streets, but also those who read Covid-19 denier propaganda online and follow them silently. As for the "hardcore group", experts discuss whether the "follower group" only arose during the Covid-19 pandemic or whether they have always existed but only received a stage now (Ruf, Interview, 29.03.2022; Schatto-Eckrodt,

² For a detailed overview of the experts interviewed, please consult the annex.

³ This thesis recognizes that the term "Conspiracy Theories" is controversially discussed (especially in the German literature). Some propose to use "Conspiracy narratives" or "myths" instead. Yet, the following uses CTs because it wants to place this thesis in the overall literature on CTs and thus follows the latter's terminology (Schatto-Eckrodt, Interview, 09.03.2022).

Interview, 09.03.2022). It is impossible to measure how many people belong to each group and when they radicalized.

Nevertheless, because Covid-19 deniers challenge the values of our democratic societies, because they have proven to be able to radicalize people from all strands in life, and because of the recent evidence that they are topic-flexible and thus likely to remain organized after the end of the pandemic,⁴ academics, politicians and experts around the world ask how radicalization of further (“hardcore”) Covid-19 deniers can be prevented (Spiegel 2021). This thesis approaches this problem by exploring how communities who are thought to be effective yet largely underutilized resources in Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (PCVE) (Mirahmadi 2016), can best get involved to prevent radicalizations of further Covid-19 deniers. It thereby attempts to find theoretical answers to the main research question which reads: “How can communities best get involved in preventing radicalizations of further Covid-19 deniers?”

To find answers to this question, I conducted a thorough literature review which is presented in the consecutive **Second Chapter**. The literature review is divided into two parts, a first which presents theoretical explanations why people radicalize, and a second which introduces community prevention as a PCVE effort. The second part bridges the counterterrorism, prevention, radicalization, and populism scholarships to identify *Emotional Resilience*, *Education*, and *Political Participation* as the three best community prevention tools. It finishes with a discussion on the limitations of community PCVE efforts. The **Third Chapter** presents

⁴ CTs, different to other political ideologies do not have a clear goal. That means that Conspiracists are topic flexible: As soon as the relevance of one topic wanes, a new topic emerges. This was already witnessed with the Covid-19 deniers themselves. Before the Russian invasion in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, they were demonstrating against the Covid-19 restrictions. Since 25 February 2022, they publicly support Putin’s war against Ukraine (Hoisl 2022; Zauner 2022). Even though the topic changed, the group’s dynamics, conspiracy narratives, and convictions remain similar.

the research methodology, discusses the limitations of this project, and provides an outlook for future research. The **Fourth Chapter** begins with a discussion of the findings by outlining the background to the Covid-19 protests in Vienna and describing the characteristics of the demonstrators. It is important to emphasize that this thesis aims to find theoretical answers to the main research question. The developments in Vienna are thus only described to exemplify the findings and because – except for minor local specificities – they can be seen as representative for the developments of Covid-19 protests in many other (European) cities.

This thesis follows this unique structure, in which the context of the Covid-19 protests only comes this late in the paper to signal that the background information constitutes part of the research findings. I used news sources, two publications on Covid-19 deniers in Vienna (ACPP 2020-2022; Brunner et al 2021), and twelve expert interviews to argue that the Covid-19 denier group can be characterized by large-scale mistrust, belief in CTs, and support for (scientific) populism. The three consecutive findings chapters discuss to what extent the three previously identified community PCVE tools respond to these three Covid-19 deniers' characteristics and thereby provide theoretical answers to the main research question. The **Fifth Chapter** thus discusses to what extent *Emotional Resilience* responds to large-scale mistrust, strong conspiracy thinking and tendencies of (scientific) populism. The **Sixth Chapter** discusses *Education* as the second community PCVE tool and the **Seventh Chapter** discusses *Political Participation* as the third and last identified community PCVE tool. The **Eighth Chapter** concludes this thesis with an assessment to what extent the three community PCVE tools are successful in preventing further radicalizations of Covid-19 deniers.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

1. What is radicalization and why is it a problem?

Radicalization and radicalism are understood to be the “central characteristics of our global political crisis” today (Abay Gasper 2018). Yet, the term’s repetitive deployment deceives from the fact that there is no scholarly consensus on how to define radicalization. This thesis aims to study radicalization holistically – which means to not exclusively focus on “radicalization into violence”, but to equally include research on “radicalization of violence” and “radicalization without violence” – and therefore adopts the definition of Abay Gasper and colleagues (2018) who define radicalization as “[t]he increasing questioning of the legitimacy of a normative order and/or the increasing willingness to fight the institutional structures of that order” (1).

When questioning to what extent radicalization is problematic, it is important to underline that radicalization is not to be equated with terrorism, because one might be radical without acting radically while another can act radically without being radical (Abay Gasper et al. 2018). The pursuit of violence is thus no prerequisite for radicalization. Nor shall radicalization be equated with extremism. Because radicalization can be thought of as questioning the normative order independently of the political regime (ibid). Whereas extremism is defined as the rejection of a democratic state, its basic values, and rules of conduct (Kailitz 2004; Wiktorowicz 2005). This difference is important to underline because radicalization can be legitimate in pluralistic democracies (Abay Gaspar 2020).

Despite a large – and continuously growing – scholarship on radicalization, there are no definite answers to why people radicalize. Scholars use theories on micro, meso, and macro levels to explain people’s radicalizations. Several psychologists and social scientists have tested various

assumptions trying to explain micro level explanations to why people radicalize (c.f. Gøtzsche-Astrup 2018; Meloy & Pollard 2017; Saimeh 2017). While psychologists mostly agree that “most terrorists are clinically normal despite the immorality of their acts” (Pisoiu et al. 2020, 2), there is disagreement whether certain personality types which are below the threshold of pathology are likely to be associated with one’s involvement in extremism.⁵ Some social scientists find the *transformative learning theory* convincing in explaining why individuals radicalize. According to the latter, individuals would develop new identities and interpretive structures when former identities become incapable of reacting to crises (Wilner & Dubouloz 2011). Others find the *quest for significance theory* persuasive, according to which individuals are on a “quest to find and maintain that which they believe to be important” (Kruglanski 2017, 73-74). However, there is no general agreement by scholars whether these – or other theories – hold sufficient evidence to be able to explain radicalization of individuals.

When looking at the meso level, researchers have established that individuals never radicalize in isolation (Pisoiu et al. 2020). Pisoiu (2012) established a model which brings together the interdependencies between individual and socio-psychological approaches. By building on a so-called *rational choice approach* and combining it with *framing theory* from social movement literature, she argues that reward, reputation, and recognition are influential for *interpretative frameworks* to come into being (Pisoiu 2012). She analyzes how these *interpretative framings* become more and more exclusive eventually contributing to an individual’s justification for violent action (Pisoiu et al. 2020).

⁵ Some personality types that have been tested and found to positively correlate with one’s involvement in extremism are narrow worldviews (Saimeh 2017: 219), impulsive traits (Meloy & Pollard, 2017: 1644), heightened anxiety (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018: 96), narcissistic personality (Grabska, 2017: 179), dissocial personality (Bhui et al., 2016) or authoritarian personality styles. For an extensive overview, see Pisoiu et al. 2020.

Another approach, which has become increasingly popular in recent years, explains radicalization by looking at *social identities* which would be defined by and would act in relation to groups. A process of differentiation with the outgroup at the same time as an identification with the ingroup would serve to “boost the positive feeling of distinctiveness” which would lead to a self-valorization of the group and its members (Walther 2014, 395). The *uncertainty model* explains that if a person’s resources are insufficient in overcoming their uncertainty, then extremists’ propaganda can be an attractive source for providing a “clear, radical understanding of what is right” (Pisoiu et al. 2020, 6).

Several authors have developed different, yet similar, radicalization models.⁶ All models describe a non-linear yet gradual process of radicalization, where at its beginning, an individual is cognitively open for the influence of a peer group. Through the feedback of the individual’s environment, increasingly exclusive *interpretative framings* and the manipulative power of the extremist group, the individual grows increasingly radical. Figure 1 exemplifies such a radicalization process which happen(ed) dominantly online and thus reflects the reality of many radicalizations of Covid-19 deniers.

⁶ Among others, see Borum 2011a, 2011b; McCauley & Moskaleiko 2017; Moghaddam 2005; Silber & Bhatt 2007; or Wiktorowicz 2005.

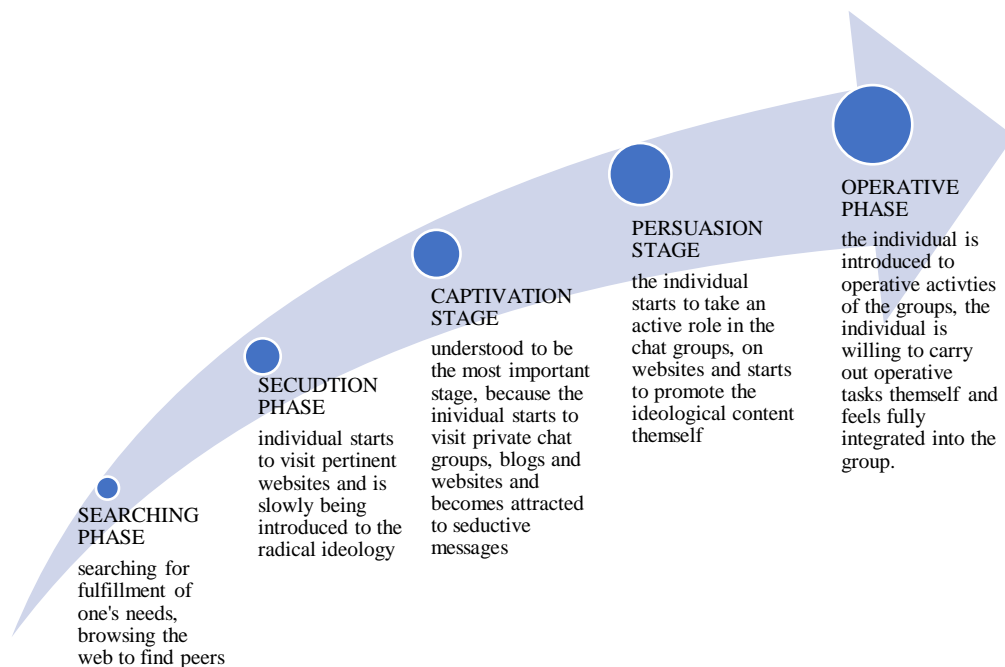


Figure 1 Stages of Radicalization, based on Weimann & von Knop (2008, 890)

Some scholars contest these simplified models as ignoring any radicalizations that are non-violent or non-gradual (c.f. Borum 2011a). Moreover, some argue that we should not overlook the “radicalization of violence”. Since this thesis is concerned with those that are cognitively open to CTs and the extremist propaganda of the “hardcore Covid-19 denier group”, it does not go into detail on the scarce research on “radicalization of violence”. Since many Covid-19 deniers are likely to radicalize non-violently, it is important to note that research on nonviolent radicalization exists yet is still in its infancy because it is difficult to study this phenomenon without stigmatizing the groups through research (Abar Gaspey et al. 2018). There are also attempts to explain radicalization through socialization processes on macro level. Given the limited scope of this thesis, there is however no room to discuss these further.

The first part of this literature review thus shows that the scholarship on radicalization draws no clear picture why people radicalize. The second part of this Chapter continues with a brief introduction to community prevention as a PCVE effort. It outlines the three best community PCVE tools in the counterterrorism, prevention, radicalization, and populism literature which make up the core conceptual framework of this thesis.

2. Community Prevention as a PCVE tool

There are many ways to define a community. For this thesis and for Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (PCVE) more generally, it is relevant to consider “what binds people to a community, and which type of relation is most dominant and relevant” (RAN 2018, 2). This understanding allows us to analyze who is represented in a community and which group we want to reach. Moreover, it overcomes the easily stigmatizing approach of only considering “ethnic/migrant” communities as vulnerable to radicalization (c.f. Awan 2012; Breen-Smyth 2014). Instead, it approaches the term more openly. Since the learnings of this thesis are exemplified along the developments of the protests in Vienna, and since communities in Austria do not have the same grassroots or autonomous character as they do in Anglo-Saxon traditions, this thesis follows previous research when using institutionalized communities – such as clubs, organizations, associations – as proxies for studying how communities can be involved to prevent the radicalization of further Covid-19 deniers (Hacker et al. 2021).

Communities are understood to be the “long-term solution to terrorism” (Lakhani 2012, 190). Especially during times of curfews and state-wide lockdowns, family and community members are the “first respondents to extremism” (Wurlod 2020). That is because communities are the places where (vulnerable) individuals spend most of their time, where they meet their peers, where they meet their role models and over which individuals identify (RAN 2021). Communities are therefore said to be ideal for identifying those vulnerable to radicalization and closest to mobilize resources if radicalization happens (Mirahmadi 2016). According to Wimelius and colleagues (2020) communities would succeed by “[giving] voice to grievances, [promoting] political accountability, [producing] trust and [facilitating] dialogue between public actors and citizens” (127). Communities would therefore function as effective PCVE

measures, because even though they are locally rooted and are aware of local contexts, they could easily organize regionally and internationally (OSCE 2018, 26). Through their “hands in the field”, they could work as early warning systems and could identify pathways forward (OSCE 2018, 26).

Despite these positive outlooks, community PCVE remains an underutilized resource (Mirahmadi 2016). Especially, for the recent radicalizations of Covid-19 deniers, communities as PCVE efforts have not (yet) been a matter of public or academic debate. This thesis addresses this gap by outlining how community resources can be used to prevent the radicalizations of Covid-19 deniers. To do so, the following examines the relevant literature from counterterrorism, conspiracy theory, populism, and radicalization studies. It summarizes three tools that have found resonance in each of these scholarships to involve communities as PCVE efforts: a. *Emotional Resilience*, b. *Education* and c. *Political Participation*. The following outlines the theoretical debate of each of these tools. The findings chapters later discuss their feasibility for preventing the radicalization of Covid-19 deniers.

a. Emotional Resilience as a community PCVE tool

Resilience is “notoriously difficult to define” (Wimelius et al. 2018, 2). It is a “fuzzy concept” “that lacks[s] [a] clear definition, [is] difficult to operationalize, and lack[s] clear evidence” (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020, 144). The term comes from physics to describe a material “that bounces back” independent of its displacement (Norris et al. 2008, 128). It has since been applied to describe the adaptive capacities of individuals (ibid). This thesis follows the often-cited definition by Norris and colleagues (2008) according to whom resilience is a “process linking a set of networked adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation” (131). It can either be applied retro-actively or preventively (Stephens &

Sieckelinck 2020). Since this thesis studies prevention of radicalization, the focus is on the latter.

Emotional Resilience builds on the idea that social connections in a community create a sense of belonging, a shared identity, and the vital trust that make members less likely to fall into the traps of radicalization of extremist groups (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020). According to the *social control theory*, this is because “strong bonds to family, community and society are fundamental to violence prevention in that they both provide a conduit for conveying social norms and expectations in addition to the motivation to abide by those norms” (Ellis & Abdi 2017, 290). The idea of *Emotional Resilience* is thus straightforward: an individual needs to enjoy social connections within a community which create norms and motivations for that individual to abide by these norms. Moreover, social connections also provide emotional support in times of crises which creates a sense of trust that makes it easier for other community members to approach an individual with sensitive issues (such as a potential radicalization) (Wimelius et al. 2020, 127).

b. Education as a community PCVE tool

In this second PCVE tool, educators should teach those vulnerable to radicalization so that they become resilient to propaganda, extreme ideologies, extremist messaging, or extremist narratives (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020). The idea is that political education, critical media literacy, critical thinking, and democracy awareness help individuals build internal shields against extremist influences, because not only can educated individuals detect extremist propaganda, but they are also taught on how to respond to it (ibid). Political education should therefore enable its respondents to think critically, be aware about complex societal developments and feel empowered to act politically (bpb 2022).

Many PCVE policies argue for “building resilience through education” without defining what is meant or how practitioners should implement it in practice (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020, 147). The European Commission for example called for an increasing “democratic resilience” (ibid). However, it does not explicate what is meant by the term (ibid). Moreover, critics further attest that while the detection of extremist narratives is an essential skill, it should not blind from the fact that mainstream media also deploys certain narratives. It is as important to identify the latter as it is to learn how to detect the former (Stephens and Sieckelinck 2020).

More generally, Stephens and Sieckelinck (2020) worryingly note, that most community PCVE programs today seem to overly support the current social order without gauging a critical eye to mainstream approaches (151). However, building social resilience should not equate creating assimilation strategies. Instead, and as will become more evident in the findings chapters, only when we approach our current social order, mainstream and extremist narratives critically, then we can unravel the conditions on which extremism are built (ibid). For that, the normative values that are embedded in current resilience strategies must be discussed critically. Moreover, grievances that are interwoven in many extremist narratives need to be taken seriously and analyzed. Instead of mere rejections, open debates should uncover why certain extremist narratives seem to offer solutions for those vulnerable to radicalization (ibid).

c. Political Participation as a community PCVE tool

A third community PCVE tool whose importance is often underlined in the literature, yet rarely ever further explicated is *Political Participation*. Many scholars argue along the lines that “the agenda now commonly referred to as Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE)

has grown into a global phenomenon that hinges on the **participation** of communities in the promotion and enactment of their own security” (Mesok 2022, 1, emphasis added).

Despite repetitive calls for *Political Participation* and research reasoning its effectiveness, the (academic) literature does not outline how *Political Participation* should look like in practice. It is only argued that a lack thereof— especially of the youth – would be “a threat to the very foundation of democracy” (Bečević & Dahlstedt 2022, 362). Yet, “[p]articipation is an under-analyzed abstraction[,]’ an ‘empty vessel which can be filled with almost anything, which is one of the reasons why it has enjoyed such widespread popularity’” (ibid, 363). It is therefore often left to the communities to decide how to fill this void. The consecutive paragraph closes the literature review by outlining some of the limitations of community PCVE as identified in the literature.

d. Limitations of community PCVE

While there are many advantages of community PCVE efforts, policymakers need to be aware of the following limitations. Previous experiences have shown that community PCVE can lead to the stigmatization of communities (c.f. Said & Fouad 2018; Saly-Virk 2020; Wimelius et al. 2020). For example, the UK’s community based PREVENT program is probably the most often discussed community PCVE program (ibid). It has been criticized for having led to the creation of Muslim communities as “suspect communities” who have henceforth become stigmatized, marginalized, under constant suspicion and surveillance of state authorities (Kundnani 2012).⁷ Because of this stigmatization and ‘othering’, community prevention strategies would have

⁷ For more research on this, see (Awan 2012; Breen-Smyth 2014; Cherney & Murphey 2016; Pantazis & Pemberton 2009).

achieved the opposite from what they were initially designed for (c.f. Cherney & Murphey 2016; Pantazis & Pemberton 2009).

More generally, community PCVE approaches are criticized for shifting the attention and responsibilities of the state to the communities (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020). Given the complexities of the task, sufficient funding, resources, and trainings need to be provided to the communities (Mirahmadi 2016). Furthermore, community PCVE policies should not depoliticize violent extremism. Instead, as Stephens and Sieckelinck (2020) point out, avenues for open dialogue on how PCVE measures are to be conducted need to be discussed to acknowledge the agency of the so-called “vulnerable” and their grievances need to be taken seriously. Else, one risks feeding those conditions to which “extremist discourses [...] appear to offer solution[s]” (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020, 158).

The counterterrorism, conspiracy theory, populism, and radicalization literature all – to varying degrees – agree that communities are essential in PCVE. More specifically, they find that 1. *Emotional Resilience*, 2. *Education* and 3. *Political Participations* are three best tools how communities can get involved in preventing their members from radicalizing. While the above has established the justifications for each tool, it has equally outlined some of its limitations. Yet, the major limitation of the community PCVE literature is its lack of application to relevant cases. This thesis therefore posits itself in the PCVE literature and addresses this gap by applying the above-outlined tools to Covid-19 deniers. It therefore poses the question: How can communities get involved in preventing radicalizations of further Covid-19 deniers? More specifically it answers how 1. *Emotional Resilience*, 2. *Education* and 3. *Political Participation* respond to the characteristics of the Covid-19 deniers. The consecutive chapter outlines how this research was conducted.

3 A DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

I use a qualitative and emancipatory research to explore how communities can best get involved to prevent radicalizations of further Covid-19 deniers. Through my interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm, I acknowledge that “reality is socially constructed” (Mertens 2005, 12). Moreover, I am interested in “the world of human experience” (Cohen & Manion 1994, 36). I take an emic epistemological approach in which I recognize the effects of my personal experiences on this research. These experiences are fed through my previous knowledge on PCVE as well as my acknowledgement that reality is a finite subjective experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) which is embedded in my larger relativist ontological assumptions. Moreover, I use an abductive research style which is “a form of reasoning used in situations of uncertainty, when we need an understanding or explanation of something that happens” (Brinkmann, 2014, 722).⁸

As outlined previously, I chose to exemplify the findings of this research by outlining the developments of the Covid-19 protests in Vienna. This choice was made to make this complex theoretical discussion more accessible to the reader. However, I do not intend to limit the spatial scope of this research findings to applications in Vienna. Instead, I underline the theoretical value of this research more generally by emphasizing that the protests in Vienna can be seen as representative to similar developments in other (European) cities. I chose Vienna because of my proximity and network in the city. Since this research was mostly conducted between February-April 2022, it only analyzes the developments prior to the research period.

⁸ Since I conducted this research at the same time and in the same style as the research for my *Applied Policy Project* named “The Search for Transformative Justice of Yazidi respondents of the Special Quota Project”, much of this section is similar to the methodology section of the APP. For more, see Barakeh & Fehrenbach, 2022: 10-11.

2. Methods for Data Collection and Analysis

For my data acquisition, I conducted twelve semi-structured expert interviews that leaned towards a “reflexive interview style” where I - as the researcher - informed my participants about my previous experiences in the field, where my idea originates from and how I got interested in the topic (Berner-Rodoreda et al. 2020, 295). My interviews therefore “contain elements more closely associated with epistemic interviews [rather than with doxastic interviews]” (ibid). Especially, when discussing possibilities of community PCVE, the interviews were “not primarily about the experience of the interviewee but [...] instead about constructing knowledge between interviewer and interviewee through an exchange of ideas” (ibid). I chose this interview style, because I knew that my interviewees would not come with “ready-made-answers” on how communities should get involved in preventing radicalizations of Covid-19 deniers due to the novelty and complexity of the topic. Instead, I invited my interviewees to co-construct knowledge.

The interviews were each about 60 minutes of length. Each interview was conducted online over Zoom, recorded, and transcribed with the transcription software *Trinit*. Since all my interviewed experts were German native speakers, I conducted all interviews in German, my mother tongue. When I used direct quotations, I translated them into English and confirmed the translation of each quotation with my interviewees. I tried to respect a gender and professional balance when choosing my interview partners.⁹ I conducted four interviews with academics, four interviews with practitioners with practical experiences from and in Vienna, and four interviews with practitioners who made PCVE experiences outside of Vienna.

⁹ A detailed description of my interview partners, their responsibilities, and the reason for choosing to interview them is outlined in the Annex.

The semi-structured interview questionnaire contained questions on the interviewees' knowledge on the background of the Covid-19 protests, their knowledge, and experiences of CTs, mobilization and radicalization of CTs, as well as on their propositions for prevention tools more generally and community prevention tools more specifically. Due to my semi-structured approach, I did not ask my interviewees to only respond to the three tools that I had identified in the literature. Instead, I asked them on community PCVE more openly. Yet, as soon as an interviewee mentioned one aspect of the three tools, I asked more in-depth questions about their understanding of the feasibility of application of these tools in the Covid-19 context.

Since so little research on the Covid-19 protests exists, I heavily relied on the research findings of the *Austrian Corona Panel Project* (2020-2022),¹⁰ the analysis by Brunner and colleagues (2021) and the (photographic) documentation of the *Presseservice Wien*¹¹ to get background information on the Covid-19 protests in Vienna. The background on the protests thus constitutes the first chapter of the findings section which is introduced hereafter.

I further want to emphasize my acknowledgement of the limitations of this research. Most prominently, that the findings have theoretical value only. Future research needs to test these assumptions and provide evidence to discuss whether the theoretical propositions hold or whether they should be amended/further developed. Moreover, the three community PCVE tools discussed here only work in those communities, where most community members oppose Covid-19 deniers' views. Future research needs to discuss whether and how community PCVE efforts can be successful in communities where most community members are Covid-19

¹⁰ The Austrian Corona Panel Project (2020-2022) used representative panel polls of 1500 respondents who until July 2020 were asked weekly, and since then monthly to test moods, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledgeability of the Austrian population during the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹¹The *Presseservice Wien* is an independent journalist collective which documents right-wing, extreme right-wing and Neo-Nazi events photographically.

deniers. Future research should further attempt to understand how the German-speaking mobilization of Covid-19 deniers works,¹² what explains Covid-19 deniers' rapid loss of trust in (mainstream) institutions, and whether the existing radicalization literature still succeeds to explain large-scale group radicalizations such as the radicalization of Covid-19 deniers.

¹² Previous research on the mobilization of Covid-19 deniers showed, that only **twelve** English-speaking Covid-19 deniers were responsible for 65% of the anti-vax content online. For more, see ("The Disinformation Dozen Why Platforms Must Act on Twelve Leading Online Anti-Vaxxers" 2021, emphasis added).

4 PROTESTS AND DEMONSTRATORS’ CHARACTERISTICS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FINDINGS

1. Background to the Covid-19 Protests in Vienna

The first demonstration against the Covid-19 restrictions was held on 24 April 2020 in Vienna and was initiated by the group *Initiative für evidenzbasierten Corona-Informationen* (“Initiative for evidence-based Covid-19 Information”). It counted around 30 participants who were mobilized through a Facebook group (Presseservice Wien 2020d). A month later, Austria’s right-wing party, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (FPÖ)*, “Freedom Party Austria”) held a rally against the Covid-19 measures that also mobilized 500 participants. Among the participants were the right-wing extremist group *Identitäre Bewegung Österreich* (“Identitarian Movement Austria”). Journalists reported first aggressions and attempts to restrict journalists’ movements on the rally (Presseservice Wien 2020c).

Brunner et al. (2021) observed that the dynamics of the protests changed from January 2021. Because the protests were prohibited by the police, protestors marched in so-called “walks” to manifest their “civil disobedience” (ibid, 5). This would have led to stronger confrontations with the executive (ibid). In March 2021, the Viennese Covid-19 denier movement gathered 20.000 participants. Journalists reported open signs of antisemitism, relativization of the holocaust and aggressions against journalists (Presseservice Wien 2020a). Among the protestors were football hooligans, known right-wing extremists, and Christian fundamentalists (ibid). On 20 November 2021, the until-then largest demonstration with 40.000 participants was held in Vienna. The organizers were *Fairdenken* (“Fair thinking”), *Corona Widerstand* (“Corona Resistance”), and the *FPÖ*. Similar to previous demonstrations, journalists worryingly noted antisemitic signs (such as wearing a star of David with “unvaccinated” on

their breasts), aggressions against journalists, and the distribution of a list with full names and pictures of so-termed “undesirable journalists” among the participants (Presseservice Wien 2020b).

Since Russia’s invasion in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the Covid-19 demonstrators have signaled support for Putin’s war, spreading pro-Russian propaganda, while still protesting against Covid-19 related health measures and vaccinations (Presseservice Wien 2022). With the weakening of many of the Covid-19 related restrictions since Spring 2022 and the shift of the public’s focus to the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 denier group has become smaller and less prominent in mainstream media. However, they still succeed to quickly mobilize people and are expected to grow again if Covid-19 measures would need to be tightened later in the year.

2. Characteristics of the Covid-19 Demonstrators

As mentioned previously and as independently argued by my interviewees, the Covid-19 demonstrators can be grouped in two: the “hardcore group” and the “follower group”. While it is unclear who and how many belong to each group, the interviewees estimated that the former gathered between 10-15% of the demonstrators and were heavily infiltrated by right-wing extremists. The rest of the demonstrators would therefore make up the “follower group”. It is unclear – and difficult, if not impossible – to research how many were radicalized in each group. However, as one of the interviewed academics said:

“I think that we have to distinguish between those who, in my opinion, are already lost because they have already radicalized to such an extent that they cannot be saved. And unfortunately, they do exist and we have to be so honest and acknowledge this. The fact that that's the case doesn't mean that you don't do anything anymore. But there is a part

of the population that we are not going to get back. It's just the way it is. However, there is a part within these groups that is certainly still reachable. Either because they are in the initial phase of this radicalization or because they have not yet slid into radicalization completely.” [Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022].

For the “hardcore group” prevention efforts thus come too late. This is why this thesis focuses on preventing radicalizations of those who are cognitively open to Covid-19 denier propaganda and those already belonging to the “follower group”. To better understand how radicalizations of this latter group can be prevented, the group’s characteristics are outlined below. I argue that mistrust, belief in CTs and support for (scientific) populism are the Covid-19 denier (“follower”) group’s main characteristic. I base this analysis on twelve in-depth expert interviews and those findings of Brunner et al (2021) that could be cross-checked with the analyses of the *Austrian Corona Panel Project (ACPP)*.¹³

a. Mistrust

Several ACPP surveys tested the trust in mainstream institutions (government, experts, doctors, religious leaders) to show that supporters of the demonstrations are more likely to distrust the government and health experts than those who oppose the demonstrations (difference of 3.4 scale points and difference 3.9 scale points respectively) (Eberl & Prainsack 2022). The reasons for why people lose trust in these institutions are manifold. Previous research shows that mistrust can be a precondition for believing in CTs and populist rhetoric (Jennings et al 2021). At the same time, believing in CTs and supporting populism can fuel further mistrust. Previous research has therefore already established the vicious circle that exists between mistrust, CTs, and populism (Sawyer 2022).

¹³ Next to the ACPP, Brunner et al (2021) published the most comprehensive analysis of the Covid-19 protests in Vienna. However, one of my interviewees underlined that their findings are likely not to be representative, because they used Telegram surveys and could not control against manipulation or repeated entry (Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022). Therefore, the analysis below only mentions those findings that can be cross-checked with other sources (ACPP or my interviews).

One of the interviewed communication scientists stated that while in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, we experienced an increase of trust in the executive of many countries, this trust rapidly declined with the evolvement of the pandemic (Schäfer, Interview, 10 March 2022). This point is important to underline because it shows that this structural mistrust goes deeper than PCVE efforts can regain. As mentioned by my interviewees, mainstream institutions need to rethink their political communication strategies, political leadership, and questions of transparency if they seriously want to overcome this crisis of mistrust (Schäfer, Interview, 10.03.2022; Sinabell, Interview, 23.02.2022).

b. Conspiracy Theories

The most remarkable characteristic of the Covid-19 denier group is probably their tendency to believe in and publicly promote Conspiracy Theories (CTs). Human history is full of conspiracies and believers stating that “things are not as they seem” (Farinelli 2021, 5). CTs are thus neither a recent phenomenon nor something Covid-19 specific. The European Commission defines CTs as “[t]he belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent” (European Commission, cited in Farinelli 2021, 6). While many CTs exist, “they are especially prevalent in relation to terrorist incidents” (Farinelli 2021, 6). While not all CTs are conditions to carry out violent acts (there are also peaceful groups believing in CTs), many crisis narratives that are used by extremists include conspiracies (ibid). Consequently, “conspiracy theories constitute a powerful recruitment tool for extremist ideologues and, conversely, extremist ideologies can be conducive to conspiracy theories” (Cassam 2019, cited in Farinelli 2021, 6). Therefore, CTs often serve as a “radicalizing multiplier” (Bartlett & Miller 2010, 4).

Similar as to why people radicalize, there is no scholarly consensus to why some people believe in CTs whereas others do not. One can distinguish between push and pull factors of radicalization of CTs. General push factors might be that antisemitic CTs are manifested in our cultures. Schiesser, an interviewed psychologist working for the “Counseling center for sectarian issues”, underlined that roughly 20-30% of the general population would have a conspiracist mentality or would be open to conspiracist thinking (Interview, 08.03.2022). Thus, it would have not been surprising to see an increase of people believing in CTs during a global pandemic, given the general population’s tendencies to conspiracist thinking and the fact that CTs flourish during crisis, something that previous research already firmly established (ibid).¹⁴

Another stream of scholars argues that personality traits would support why some have a “conspiracy mentality” whereas others do not (Krouwel et al 2018, 64). Yet another explanation for why people believe in CTs is that conspiracy-mindedness would be an ideology rather than a personality trait (Cassam 2018). Accordingly, people would believe in CTs because it would fit their “broader political and ideological commitments” (ibid, 48). Several interviewees further observed that social media can be push factors for radicalizations. According to the psychologist Schiesser, people would be more likely to click on absurd headlines because it would stimulate human curiosity. Through “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” they would see such headlines more repetitively which would make a belief in them more likely (Interview, 08.03.2022). Ruf, a counsellor of the German *Violence Prevention Network* further argued that next to general push factors, everyone has individual push factors.

¹⁴ A study reviewing letters that US citizens had sent to the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times* between 1890 and 2010 showed that in times of crisis, more CTs tend to flourish (van Prooijen, 2018: 40). This corresponds to the findings of my interviews in which experts suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic has not “created” more Conspiracists, but instead that the latter have gotten a larger stage and have thereby become more prominent in public debates (Schiesser, Interview, 08.03.2022).

For some that would mean that the uncertainties of a pandemic would cause them to search simplified answers in CTs (Interview, 29.03.2022).

Just as any other ideology, radicalizations of CTs also functions with pull factors. Conspiracists actively mobilize others by spreading their propaganda, and especially by convincing people that all others are “sleep sheep” that have not yet understood something that the Conspiracists would have. As Ruf, Schiesser and the communication scientist Schatto-Eckrodt pointed out, this type of spearhead mentality would feed peoples’ narcissistic urge of superiority and would thus explain why CTs are so attractive for some (Interviews, 29.03.2022; 08.03.2022; 09.03.2022). Moreover, a counsellor working with (former) extremists argued, that the Covid-19 denier group would – like any other extremist group – use ingroup dynamics such as feelings of belonging to attract those vulnerable to it (Interview, 06.04.2022).

c. (Scientific) populism

A third characteristic of the Covid-19 deniers is that large numbers of demonstrators show anti-science attitudes or tendencies of scientific populism (Lebernegg & Eberl 2021). According to the ACPD survey, 54% of demonstrators agreed to the statement that “we should rely more on common sense and less on scientific studies” (ibid). This corresponds to the findings by Brunner and colleagues (2021) who indicate that 67.9% of the surveyed participants indicated that the human’s “natural self-healing power would suffice to combat the Covid virus” (29).

According to Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017) “populism is one of the main political buzzwords of the 21st century. [...] It is an essentially contested concept” (1). Jäger and Boriello (2020) distinguish between four categories to study populism: The first category concerns *strategic scholarship*, according to whom populism is a “political tactic deployed by leaders to rally a

disorganized populace” (51-52). Populist leaders would mobilize people through “personalistic linkage to voters, circumventing parties and other forms of institutional mediation” (ibid). In the second category, scholars argue that populism would be an *ideology* (ibid). Mudde, as one of the most influential writers of this category, argued that populism would divide the “population into two opposing camps: the people and the elite, both taken as homogeneous by the populists, while state policy is supposed to enact “the will of the people” (ibid). However, populism would not be an ideology by itself but would instead be a “host ideology” that could hinge onto other ideologies (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). The third, the *discursive category* would view “populism as a rhetorical means of shaping popular subjects, creating a “people” out of diffuse groups and subjects” (Jäger & Boriello 2020, 53). Scholars of the fourth and last category, the *institutional category*, emphasize the need to look at the institutionalist preconditions for populist successes (ibid). Factors would be the democratic party decline due to decreasing numbers of party membership and the consequent “mediatization of politics” (ibid, 58)

There are thus manifold foci on how to study populism. For this thesis, it is important to underline that there is populism that goes beyond the political and targets other “elites” such as academia. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, media and academics observed an increase in scientific populism (Eberl et al 2021). Scientific populism can be understood “as a set of ideas suggesting an antagonism between an (allegedly) virtuous ordinary people and an (allegedly) unvirtuous academic elite—an antagonism that is due to the elite illegitimately claiming and the people legitimately demanding science-related decision-making sovereignty and truth-speaking sovereignty” (Mede & Schäfer 2020, 484). The Covid-19 deniers’ tendency to scientific populism is not only problematic because they oppose Covid-19 related health

measures, but also because they deny the (scientific) facts that our societies are built on, making discussions and compromises difficult if not impossible (Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022).

3. Bridging characteristics and analysis

As introduced above, mistrust, CTs and populism influence one another. Large-scale mistrust can be the reason why people search answers in CTs or populism. However, CTs and populism also fuel further mistrust (Jennings et al 2021). CTs and populism work very similarly: they both attempt to provide easy answers to complex societal phenomena, they both divide the world in binary schemes, and “discursively creat[e] an external threat to the inner group” (Bergmann 2018, 170). CTs are often built into the populist message or are “a form of radical populist discourse” (ibid). Both provide oversimplified answers, yet CTs go further by pointing out/imagining the complex power relations that would be behind a certain conspiracy (ibid). As discussed in this chapter, this vicious relationship could be observed with the Covid-19 pandemic. The consecutive three chapters each introduces one of the three community PCVE tools identified earlier (1. *Emotional Resilience*, 2. *Education* and 3. *Political Participation*) and discusses how it responds to (a) mistrust, (b) belief in CTs and (c) spread of (scientific) populism as the main three characteristics of the Covid-19 deniers. It starts with the discussion of *Emotional Resilience* as a community PCVE tool.

5 EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE AS A COMMUNITY PCVE TOOL: A DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Emotional Resilience builds on the idea that social connections in a community create a sense of belonging, a shared identity, and the vital trust that make members less likely to fall into the traps of radicalization of extremist groups (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020, 147). Communities can achieve this *Emotional Resilience* through two forms. Primarily through individual contacts, where community members reach out to a vulnerable individual (someone belonging to the “follower group” of the Covid-19 deniers) and attempts to maintain or reestablish emotional connections. To do that, the community representative should be aware of an “Emotional Resilience toolbox” which provides a summary of experts’ propositions on interactions with Conspiracists. Moreover, communities can also employ *Emotional Resilience* on a community-engagement level.

1. The “Emotional Resilience Toolbox”

For an outreach to be successful, the multiplier should primarily be aware that one should not discuss the content of a CT with a Conspiracist. As the interviewed psychologist pointedly summarized:

“It's about an ideology, it's about the fact that they want to have a stage, they want to proselytize, they want to express their anger or their fear. It's important to understand that there are parallels between religious fundamentalism and extremism. Just as you cannot discuss with a Jehovah's Witness whether Jehovah exists or not, you cannot discuss the content of a Conspiracy Theory with a Conspiracist” [Schiesser, Interview, 08.03.2022]

Secondly, one should never repeat the content of CTs. Even if one only does it to debunk them, CTs are likely to stick with those that are cognitively open to them. Thirdly, it is important to remain in touch with the person and try not to demonize them. Covid-19 deniers just like other

Conspiracists and extremists otherwise benefit from the dehumanization of a created “enemy group”. Moreover, it can be beneficial to remember that one should not talk about CTs all the time, but to focus on those aspects that unite one another. The “othering” and “cornering” that might arise otherwise are likely to increase the *feeling of superiority* that Conspiracists use to make radicalizations more likely. Fourthly, when discussing with Conspiracists, it often proves helpful to understand what the underlying reasons for someone’s belief in Conspiracies is. Often it is a feeling of insecurity or fear that attracts people to simplified answers. As explained by the psychologist Schiesser, Conspiracists would succeed in transforming “diffuse fears” into “concrete fears” by demonizing “the other” and constructing an “enemy group” (Interview, 08.03.2022). Contact persons should therefore try to understand where the fears and needs come from, to discuss how they could be met differently. This “Emotional Resilience Toolbox” should be complemented by *Emotional Resilience* on community-level.

2. Emotional Resilience through community-level engagement

Next to individual approaches, *Emotional Resilience* can also be applied on a community level. Communities should come together to think about ways how they can create a feeling of belonging for their members. One interviewed counsellor working with (former) extremists said that one of the most successful community PCVE approaches he knows are initiatives such as “*Grätzl* projects” (residential district projects) in Vienna (Interview, 06.04.2022). The main aim of these projects would be to create open spaces for dialogue and a common task (such as community gardening). These and other projects would give people a *feeling of belonging* in their communities and meets their *quest for significance* which they would thus be less likely to search in extremist groups.

Moreover, the counsellor further emphasized the positive influence of *Role Model* approaches, which build on the idea that role models – such as the musicians *Haftbefehl* or *Xavier Naidoo* who were themselves Covid-19 deniers – warn of the dangers associated with CTs (ibid).¹⁵ These role models can thereby provide sources of identification for vulnerable individuals. The interviewed psychologist Schiesser argued that communities would need to further provide public spaces for people to discuss their fears, doubts and needs openly (Interview, 08.03.2022). Community members would need to feel that they are not left alone in times of crises, such as a global pandemic, because if individuals do not have the resources to overcome the crisis-endured uncertainties, they are more open to extremist groups providing them with simplified answers of what is right and wrong (Pisoiu 2020). In this vein, Schiesser further argued that communities would need to increase the publicities of those organizations and counselling centers that already exist (Interview, 08.03.2022).

The following section now turns to a discusses to what extent *Emotional Resilience* as a PCVE tool can help undermine a. mistrust, b. belief in CTs and c. support for (scientific) populism by reference to the literature review.

a. Emotional Resilience as a tool to overcome mistrust

Emotional Resilience and long-term applications of the “Emotional Resilience Toolbox” can restore a Covid-19 deniers’ interpersonal trust because it builds emotional connections between community multiplier and Covid-19 denier. This interpersonal approach can succeed in making vulnerable individuals less likely to form their *social identity* along extremist’s identity

¹⁵ Xavier Naidoo recently apologized in a YouTube video for being a Covid-19 denier and warned of the dangers associated with Conspiracy Theories. It remains discussed to what extent this was convincing, however this can serve as one example of a *Role Model* approach. For more, see (Xavier Naidoo 2022).

propositions. That is because if *Emotional Resilience* succeeds in keeping the individual “socially busy” with contacts outside the extremist group, then a total engagement of the individual with that group can be avoided. Interactions with the mainstream community are thereby likely to increase, lowering a person’s mistrust towards that latter group.

The pedagogical leader of Vienna’s youth centers, Werner Prinzjakowitsch, further attested that *Emotional Resilience* as a community PCVE tool might succeed in establishing long-term relations between a vulnerable individual and a non-governmental representative (Interview, 05.04.2022). For example, if social outreach work succeeds, then a vulnerable individual would be more likely to engage in long-term connections and build trust to a non-governmental officer which might not only increase trust towards the officer’s institution but might even increase trust towards other mainstream institutions in the long run as well (ibid).

However, it must be assumed that *Emotional Resilience* is not likely to drastically change a Covid-19 denier’s sense of mistrust, because throughout the pandemic we have witnessed Covid-19 deniers who did not believe in the severity of the virus despite having family members (or themselves) fall sick. Moreover, Sinabell and Schäfer among several other interviewees argued, that Covid-19 deniers’ sense of mistrust goes deeper than the interpersonal level that *Emotional Resilience* can restore (Interviews, 23.02.2022; 10.03.2022). Due to miscommunication, lack of transparency and void political leadership, Covid-19 deniers mistrust the mainstream institutions more generally. *Emotional Resilience* as a PCVE tool that targets interpersonal relationships is unlikely to restore this structural level of mistrust.

b. Emotional Resilience as a tool to prevent the belief in Conspiracy

Theories

Emotional Resilience seems most promising in responding to peoples' belief in CTs. That is because firstly, if *Emotional Resilience* attempts succeed, then the community can provide the individual with a *sense of belonging* that they might have otherwise yearned for in extremist groups (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020). The latter's ingroup dynamics thus appear less attractive if the search for them is already met in mainstream communities. Secondly, the *transformative learning theory* established that an individual seeks new identity formations after a rupture (life crisis) if the old identity no longer seems capable of reacting to that crisis (Wilner & Dubouloz 2011). If *Emotional Resilience* provides a successful *Role Model* approach, then the community can offer alternative role models to help the individual cope with the rupture. According to the interviewed counsellor who works with (former) extremists, such role models can offer a sense of direction to vulnerable individuals, making them less prone to believe in the black and white schemes offered by CTs (Interview, 06.04.2022).

Thirdly, when communities succeed in offering community interactions as proposed by the psychologist, then they can also succeed in feeding someone's search for a *sense of purpose*, which is another way to prevent radicalizations (Schiesser, Interview, 08.03.2022). Fourthly, and coming back to the Rational Choice and "Framing Theory" introduced by PISOIU (2012) who argued that an environment's feedback is essential in avoiding radicalization, *Emotional Resilience* can provide the individuals with positive (emotional) reward inside the community, making it less likely that individuals search it in an extremist/Conspiracist group.

Fifthly, if *Emotional Resilience* as a PCVE tool succeeds, it can also serve as a mean to overcome someone's uncertainty, making that individual less prone to accept the differentiation treatment of the outgroup for which the extremist group pushes (PISOIU et al

2020). Lastly, the established *quest for significance theory* according to which people “find and maintain which they believe to be important” (Kruglanski 2017, 73-74) also assumes that *Emotional Resilience* can succeed in preventing peoples’ belief in CTs, because if a vulnerable individual profits from emotional interactions with a multiplier more than from the interaction of the Covid-19 denier ingroup, then the individual is likely to maintain emotional contacts with the mainstream group. Increased emotional interaction can also decrease someone’s fear of being left alone, making CTs again less appealing (based on Hövel, Interview, 21.02.2022 and explicated further in the next section).

c. Emotional Resilience as a tool to withstand the power of (scientific) populism

Emotional Resilience by itself is unlikely to prevent someone from being convinced by (scientific) populism. That is because (scientific) populism can rarely ever be countered through individual interactions since the latter cannot influence what academics or politicians do on a global scale. Only if “humanized approaches” in which politicians, journalists, scientists, and other (Covid-19 deniers’) created “enemy groups” succeed in establishing a positive emotional connection to a Covid-19 denier, then the ideology category of populism studies can be countered, because emotional connections to Covid-19 deniers will decrease their perception of the multiplier as the “evil elite”.

Moreover, *Emotional Resilience* can succeed in establishing emotional bonds which meet peoples’ *quest for significance*, making them less prone to populists’ rhetoric. Moreover, similarly as to the discussions on responses to mistrust, *Emotional Resilience* is likely to succeed to positively influence the outcomes of the *social control theory* meaning that if all community members denounce (scientific) populism, a vulnerable individual is also less likely

to be convinced by the latter. However, a difficulty which will be relevant for all tools discussed here is the question how we should approach those communities, where belief in CTs has become consensus. Put differently, how do we do community PCVE work when most community members are Covid-19 deniers?

d. Interim Conclusion

The above discussion showed that *Emotional Resilience* as a PCVE tool can succeed in restoring interpersonal trust by keeping individuals “socially busy” in the mainstream community, thereby preventing individuals’ total engagement with the extremist group, and making “frame alignments” along extremist content and thus general mistrust less likely (Pisoiu et al. 2020). Moreover, successful, and long-term *Emotional Resilience* approaches on structural level might increase the individual’s sense of trust towards mainstream institutions more generally. As Figure 2 further underlines, *Emotional Resilience* approaches succeed in providing an individual with a *sense of belonging*, a *sense of purpose*, a positive (emotional) *reward* and meets their *quest for significance* thus making a radicalization and a belief in CTs less likely. However, *Emotional Resilience* is unlikely to counter (scientific) populism on a large scale. If “humanized approaches” are used to build emotional connections to Covid-19 deniers’ created enemy groups, then populism in its ideology category might be countered.


As a response to	<i>Emotional Resilience</i> as a PCVE tool generally	Most responsive
a. mistrust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through reestablishment of interpersonal trust on individual and institutional level 	
b. belief in Conspiracy Theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through provision of sense of purpose, feeling of belonging, positive reward, and for meeting quest for significance 	
c. overcome (scientific) populism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through “humanized approaches” can only counter populism as an ideology 	
		Least responsive

Figure 2 The responses of *Emotional Resilience* as a PCVE tool generally

To discuss to what extent *Emotional Resilience* succeeds to respond to the Covid-19 case specificities (see Figure 3), it should be noted that the *Emotional Resilience’s Role Model* approach seems promising as a tool to prevent people from believing in CTs. Because the pandemic created large-scale uncertainties, many people experienced ruptures. A convincing *role model* approach can help individuals in their identity formation outside of extremist groups (Counsellor, Interview, 06.04.2022). Moreover, given these pandemic-incurred uncertainties, the long lockdowns and the impossibility of face-to-face interactions, people’s *quest for significance* became even stronger. If *Emotional Resilience* approaches are applied consequently and on a large-scale, they can succeed in meeting peoples’ heightened *quest for significance* which might make a belief in CTs less likely.

As a response to	<i>Emotional Resilience</i> as a PCVE tool to respond to the Covid-19 case	Most responsive
a. mistrust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through “humanized approaches” can establish interpersonal trust, fails to meet institutional mistrust 	
b. belief in Conspiracy Theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through successful role model approaches and meeting quest for significance can help in identity formation 	
c. overcome (scientific) populism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through social control theory in non-Covid-19 majority communities 	
		Least responsive

Figure 3 The Responses of *Emotional Resilience* as a PCVE tool to the Covid-19 case

One other feature that is Covid-19 specific is peoples’ large-scale mistrust towards mainstream institutions. Because of strong actions of the executive, increased use of emergency powers (Kremp 2021), and large-scale uncertainty about the information on the Covid-19 virus itself, the general population’s and follower groups’ mistrust goes deeper than *Emotional Resilience* approaches can restore (Schäfer, Interview, 10.03.2022; Sinabell, Interview, 23.02.2022). This cannot be solved by (community) PCVE approaches alone, but also need a serious rethinking of science communication, political communication, political leadership, and institutional transparency (ibid).

6 EDUCATION AS A COMMUNITY PCVE TOOL: A DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Education as a PCVE tool means to teach individuals political education, critical media literacy, critical thinking, and democracy awareness to help them build internal shields against extremist influences. Individuals are thereby expected not only to learn how to detect extremist propaganda but also on how to respond to it (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020).

1. Education through community-level engagement

All experts that were interviewed for the purpose of this research argued that to prevent more people from radicalizing into “hardcore” Covid-19 deniers, more *Educative approaches* would be needed. Even though the interviewees as well as academics more generally agree on the importance of teaching critical media literacy, democracy awareness, and critical thinking skills, it is difficult to find precise implementation recommendations.

The education officer Hövel proposed to use a “humanized approach” according to which journalists would teach critical media literacy, and politicians would teach critical democracy awareness (Interview, 21.02.2022). As described above, such an approach would humanize the Covid-19 denier’s created enemy group and Covid-19 deniers would thus be less likely to believe that the person in front of them is actively lying to them. One of the counsellors working with (former) extremists further proposed to again make use of the influential *role model* approach, where role models would be used for educative purposes (Interview, 06.04.2022). Schäfer further proposed to introduce the “debunking system” according to which respondents would be taught how CTs are theoretically constructed, how they function and how

Conspiracists mobilize, so that community members can identify and deconstruct CTs when they see them (Schäfer, Interview, 10.03.2022).

2. Education through institutional-level engagement

Next to these community level methods, communities should also use the institutional level to develop more critical media literacy, democracy awareness, and political education of their members. In that regard, communities should primarily invest more in existing institutions such as social outreach work or community educative initiatives to reach a larger quantity of community members (Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022; Schiesser, Interview, 08.03.2022). Through existing institutions, teenagers are relatively easily reached. However, most Covid-19 deniers are 35 years or older (Brunner et al 2021), and it is therefore difficult to find ways how to educate them and provide them with the necessary critical media literacy and political education skills.

The counsellors of *RadarAdvies* therefore proposed to use more initiatives such as the “*Business Council for Democracy*” (#BC4D) which is a German program that teaches workers at their workspaces about critical media literacy, the dangers of CTs and democracy awareness (Interview, 05.04.2022). To prevent further people from radicalizing into Covid-19 deniers, community *Educative Approaches* therefore need to think of new structures and initiatives to reach the older target group. Especially because manifested mistrust of adults is likely to go deeper than that of teenagers, simply because older people are less flexible in changing their behavior and attitudes (Counsellor, Interview, 06.04.2022). The next section therefore discusses to what extent *Education* - which has been one of the central community PCVE approaches in preventing other forms of extremism - can respond to the Covid-19 denier group’s characteristics.

a. Education as a tool to overcome mistrust

The answer to what extent *Education* can succeed as a tool to overcome mistrust depends to a large part on the educator's ability to uncover what the underlying reasons for someone's mistrust towards mainstream institutions are. Only if underlying fears and doubts can be uncovered, *Education* can provide successful responses (Schiesser, Interview, 08.03.2022). However, more generally and as discussed earlier, the "humanization approach" in *Education* seems promising to increase Covid-19 deniers' trust in processes and institutions more generally (Hövel, Interview, 21.02.22). However, for that to succeed, the educator needs to take doubts and fears of Covid-19 deniers seriously (Stephens & Sieckelinck 2020). Moreover, individuals are expected to learn critical thinking skills through which they can more successfully dismantle extremists' propaganda and are therefore less likely to align their (identity) frames (Pisoiu et al 2020). This is expected to lead to a heightened trust towards mainstream groups and a lowering of trust towards extremist groups.

b. Education as a tool to prevent the belief in Conspiracy Theories

The interviewed experts agreed that *Education* seems to be the most promising PCVE tool to prevent the belief in CTs. Previous research has proven that education and belief in CTs are negatively correlated (Wang & Kim 2021). Yet, this does not mean that highly educated people cannot believe in CTs, because experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic show that they do (Schernhammer et al 2022). However, it seems apparent that if one knows more about how complex democratic political processes work, or if one knows how scientific methods are developed, one is less likely to believe the CTs attempting to explain "alternative truths".

Interviewees further stressed that individuals should be made aware about the existing antisemitic biases that exist in our cultures as this could also help individuals become aware about the antisemitism that is ingrained in almost all CTs (Ruf, Interview, 29.03.2022). Next to that, if people are educated about the way social media profits from the spread of CTs,¹⁶ if they are made aware how algorithms work or how difficult it is to delete harmful content online without limiting freedom of expression, they might be less likely to consult these platforms as information sources (Schatto-Eckrodt, Interview, 09.03.2022). Moreover, and coming back to the social identity formation theory discussed earlier, *Educative approaches* might also combat coherence of group members (Walther 2014). Because for an extremist group to succeed in having someone adopt a new identity, the extremist group must succeed in getting that person's total engagement which means to exclusively follow the group's ideas (ibid). If *Educative approaches* are successful, then that individual might question the group's coherence (and their underlying values) and distance themselves from the homogenous group.

c. Education as a tool to withstand the power of (scientific) populism

Education lays an important groundwork to prevent people in supporting (scientific) populism. It cannot overcome (scientific) populism at large, yet especially the often-mentioned “humanized *Educative approaches*” are likely to be successful. When going back to the literature review and applying *Education* to the four categories of populism, it becomes apparent that if populism is understood in its strategic category, then democracy awareness can help make people aware of populists' attempts to rally an unorganized mass (Jäger & Boriello, 2020). When populism is understood in its ideology category, then *Educative approaches* and especially critical media literacy and critical thinking classes might help individuals recognize

¹⁶ Even though social media has come under pressure in recent years to delete such contents, previous research shows that they financially profit from CTs generally and CTs surrounding Covid-19 more specifically. For more, see (“The Anti-Vaxx Industry How Big Tech Powers and Profits from Vaccine Misinformation” 2020).

populists' black-and-white schemes (ibid). When understood in its discursive category, critical media literacy can be successful in dismantling populist rhetoric (ibid). *Educative approaches* are especially important for the latter category, because the Covid-19 pandemic has led to strong governments that limited peoples' freedoms (by assigning lockdowns for example) by executive decisions (thus without voters' consent) (Kremp 2021). This is likely to be used by populist who argue that the "elite" is manipulating the people (Moniz 2020). *Educative approaches* must therefore lay a special focus to explain political processes (especially in times of crises) to counter populists in this institutional category (Jäger & Boriello 2020). The interviewed experts thus suggested that *Education* is an important tool to prevent (scientific) populism yet is unlikely to succeed by itself.

d. Interim Conclusion

As in the interim conclusion on *Emotional Resilience*, this section discusses to what extent *Education* as a community PCVE tool succeeds in responding to mistrust, belief in CTs and (scientific) populism (see Figure 4). As to how it responds to mistrust more generally, *Educative approaches* can succeed in helping individuals dismantle extremist propaganda, making a total engagement and thus a frame alignment with the group less likely (Pisoiu et al 2020). Moreover, *Educative approaches* that teach how social media works, how antisemitism is ingrained in our cultures, how complex democratic political processes work, make it less likely for their respondents to belief in simplified CTs (Ruf, Interview, 29.03.2022). Moreover, the last section showed that *Education* can succeed in responding to all four categories of the populism scholarship (Jäger & Boriello 2020).


As a response to	<i>Education as a PCVE tool generally</i>	Most responsive
a. mistrust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through critical thinking, extremist propaganda can get dismantled, “frames” less likely to get aligned, but fails to regain large-scale mistrust 	
b. belief in Conspiracy Theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through education on social media, ingrained antisemitism, and democratic processes, belief in simplified CTs less likely Educative approaches can help challenge ingroup coherence 	
c. overcome (scientific) populism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through critical media literacy/critical thinking skills, critical media literacy and democracy awareness can help overcome all four categories of populism 	

Figure 4 The Responses of *Education* as a PCVE tool generally

To discuss to what extent the *Educative Approaches* succeed in responding to the Covid-19 context more specifically (see Figure 5), it needs to be outlined that the “humanized *Educative Approaches*” seems promising, because due to the pandemic there was a heightened sense of uncertainty that needs to be countered by individual humanized approaches which are expected to succeed in creating interpersonal trust to individual educators (such as journalists, politicians and scientists) (Hövel, Interview, 21.02.2022). The Covid-19 deniers’ created enemy groups thereby become humanized which likely increases trust in them.

Moreover, because of the “information pandemic” that arose due to the Covid-19 pandemic, *Educative approaches* seem ever more important to prevent peoples’ belief in CTs (Kearsley & Duffy 2020). The above showed that *Education* as a community PCVE approach can succeed, however needs to be complemented by better science communication, transparency, and political communication (Schäfer, Interview, 10.03.2022; Sinabell, Interview, 23.02.2022).

As a response to	<i>Education</i> as a PCVE tool to respond to the Covid-19 case	Most responsive
a. mistrust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through “humanized educative approaches” increase trust towards single persons of created enemy group, • Yet need for large-scale improvement of science communication in environment of uncertainty and false information 	
b. belief in Conspiracy Theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Covid-19-incurred environment of uncertainty, info about virus and vaccines makes belief in CTs less likely, • Difficulty of reaching target group (35 years +) 	
c. overcome (scientific) populism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through democracy awareness counter populists’ attempt to denounce emergency/executive powers as “manipulation by elite” 	
		Least responsive

Figure 5 The Responses of *Education* as a PCVE tool to the Covid-19 case

Lastly, populists already have and will continue to use the governments’ heightened deployment of emergency and executive powers throughout the pandemic to argue that this is an example how the “elite is manipulating the people” (Moniz 2020). To counter this populist rhetoric, *Educative Approaches* such as democracy awareness and learning about democratic processes are fundamental. However, the above has also shown that since Covid-19 deniers are often 35 years or older, educators and PCVE experts need to find alternative structures in which the older target group can be reached with *Educative* programs. While this is not impossible, it poses a central challenge and thus needs some time to become operational.

7 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AS A COMMUNITY PCVE TOOL: A DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Political Participation is used as a PCVE tool because it gives people the feeling of purpose, a feeling of having the power to influence their own reality and to actively participate in the mainstream political system, making a dropout of the latter less likely (Ruf, Interview, 29.03.2022). One of the interviewed counsellors working with (former) extremists said:

“[...] not only from theory, but also from experience in our practice we know that the more people believe in conspiracy narratives and have this toxic distrust against institutions, the more the thought arises: 'why should I still participate, if everything here is controlled by the elites? If everything here is managed by some corporations and I have no chance anyway' [...] It can thus be very successful to give people a sense of achievement in this regard, also in the sense of political participation.” [Counsellor, Interview, 06.04.2022]

1. Political Participation through community-level engagement

As mentioned in the literature review, the academic literature does not detail how such *Political Participation* programs shall look like. However, one interviewed academic argued that one central feature of the populism literature is for people to understand that they have a voice in their democratic, pluralistic societies that goes beyond voting (Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022). Meaning that people understand that they can get involved politically. There are different methods that can achieve such an understanding.

Max Ruf, who works for the *Violence Prevention Network* in Germany proposed Citizen Councils as one method of *Political Participation* as a PCVE tool. He said:

“I think that such citizen council can be quite interesting, because people get the feeling that they can really contribute something, that they can really make a difference, and through these prevention approaches you can create such a feeling that there are overarching common goals that people can work towards. That gives people a little bit of [a] desire, motivation, and incentive to contribute to the community as well. And ideally, that's an extremely local effort with a participatory process. But for that to happen, it has to be clear that people have one common goal.” [Ruf, Interview, 29.03.2022]

Thus, Citizen Councils should be long-term, seriously meant efforts where citizens get the feeling of being heard, meeting their *quest for significance*, and receiving the feeling of belonging to the community. The purpose of these Councils does not necessarily have to be to reach a consensus, but instead to provide – the previously mentioned – needed room to voice angers, concerns, and fears of the community members (Schiesser, Interview, 08.03.2022)

2. Political Participation through institutional-level engagement

However, the establishment of Citizen Councils presupposes the existence of local community networks, because building them from scratch is a difficult and long-term endeavor (Ruf, Interview, 29.03.2022). Ruf and the psychologist Schiesser therefore underlined, that if local networks are not yet well established, easy community interactions should be facilitated (Interviews 29.03.2022; 08.03.2022). This means that community interactions should not be securitized and framed as PCVE approaches but should be initiated on a true interest in dialogue (ibid). From that, general interactions and long-term PCVE approaches can emerge. The following section now turns to the discussion to what extent *Political Participation* can succeed to respond to a. mistrust, b. belief in CTs, and c. (scientific) populism.

a. Political Participation as a tool to overcome mistrust

Involving people politically in the mainstream political system is likely to decrease their mistrust towards that system, because being part of it means to actively shape it and to understand the complexities of a democratic political decision-making process which makes people less likely to drop out of it (Ruf, Interview, 29.03.2022; Counsellor, Interview 06.04.2022). However, for that to succeed, the *Political Participation* process must be beneficial for those participating in it, because else a Covid-19 denier would not be interested in politically participating in a system which they do not trust. For the latter to succeed, *Emotional Resilience* and *Education* as PCVE tools should already be well established. Because *Political Participation* by itself is not likely to overcome the manifested mistrust of Covid-19 deniers towards mainstream institutions.

b. Political Participation as tool to prevent the belief in Conspiracy Theories

The radicalization literature has shown that peoples' *quest for significance* is likely to be a motivating factor for vulnerable individuals to join extremist groups (Kruglanski 2017). This *quest for significance* can be met through *Political Participation*, because if *Political Participation* such as Citizen Councils are taken seriously, and their decisions reach political goals, people participating in them can feel this significance by seeing the change they helped achieve. They are thus less likely to need CTs to meet their *quest for significance* (Ruf, Interview, 29.03.2022).

Moreover, the literature also established that a *feeling of superiority* attracts people to believe in CTs because they lure individuals in believing that Conspiracists have understood something that all other "sleep sheep" have not (Schiesser, Interview, 08.03.2022). Again, when successful, *political participation* might be able to meet this *feeling of superiority*. That is

because having the power to influence political outcomes can give people this feeling of being powerful enough to shape their own realities and gives less credibility to these voices that claim that our realities are manipulated by elites (Counsellor, Interview, 06.04.2022).

c. Political Participation as a tool to withstand the power of (scientific) populism

Political Participation is likely to be the most effective community PCVE tool to withstand the power of (scientific) populism. Going back to the theoretical introduction of (scientific) populism, one understands that *Political Participation* succeeds in helping withstand populism if understood in its strategic category (Jäger & Borellio 2020). That is because in the latter populists are understood to try to circumvent parties to get political influence. However, if people themselves participate politically (e.g., through Citizen Councils), they are unlikely to accept populists' attempts in circumventing their own sphere of influence.

Moreover, *Political Participation* can also succeed in responding to populism if understood in its ideology category, because the claim that the “elite” is manipulating “us” becomes less convincing if people are themselves in the seats of power (ibid). *Political Participation* by itself is unlikely to counter populist rhetoric but needs *Educative* PCVE approaches to respond to populism understood in its discursive category (Hövel, Interview, 21.02.2022). However, *Political Participation* as a PCVE tool is also likely to be successful if populism is understood in its institutional category because people are less likely to be convinced by populists' claim that “the elite” is not representing “the people” if they are themselves representatives of “the people”. Even though *Political Participation* efforts take place in small local contexts and their large-scale influence to withstand populist forces more generally is thus limited, *Political Participation* can serve as a convincing starting point to counter (scientific) populism.

However, one difficulty regarding the facilitation of *Political Participation* as a PCVE tool was mentioned by Eberl who said:

“We have debates where I can empirically show that this is a white rectangle and then people come to tell you no, this is a black circle. And that is then the discussion that takes place. [...]. If the black circle group doesn't want to see that I have used scientific methods that can show you quite clearly that this is a white rectangle and if we can't agree on basic facts, whether in scientific or political contexts, then it's going to be difficult. That doesn't mean it's impossible, and it still doesn't mean it's not important. But it's going to be an incredibly difficult process.” [Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022]

To overcome being stuck in “white rectangle against black circle” discussions, the psychologist Schiesser argued that strict ground rules need to be established (Interview, 08.03.2022). Accordingly, we cannot allow *Political Participation* processes to rediscuss values that are integral to our societies. For example, there should never be room to discuss xenophobic statements. However, establishing conversation rules can already be difficult when Covid-19 deniers (and Conspiracists more generally) deny the facts that we see as integral to the functioning of our societies (ibid).

d. Interim Conclusion

Political Participation as a PCVE tool works differently than *Emotional Resilience* and *Educative approaches* because it needs the conscious involvement of the vulnerable individual to take effect. When discussing its effectiveness in overcoming mistrust, it must therefore be noted that *Political Participation* can only work as a PCVE tool if *Emotional Resilience* and *Education* have already borne fruit, else someone mistrusting the political system is unlikely to want to get involved in it (see Figure 6). However, when *Political Participation* is agreed to, it is likely to be effective because *Political Participation* is likely to meet individuals' *quest*

for *significance* and *feeling of superiority* which might have otherwise been fed by involvements in Conspiracist groups (Kruglanski 2017). Moreover, as discussed in the previous section, *Political Participation* can succeed in responding to populism understood in its strategic, ideology, and institutional categories (Jäger & Boriello 2020).

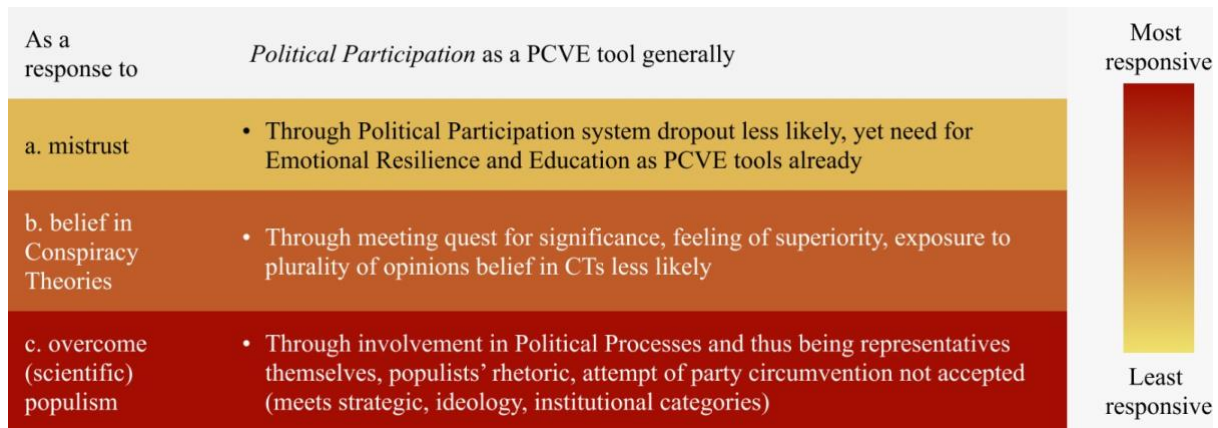


Figure 6 The Responses of *Political Participation* as a PCVE tool generally

To discuss the tool's effectiveness regarding the Covid-19 context more specifically (see Figure 7), it must be noted that overcoming an individual's mistrust through *Political Participation* might even be more difficult in the context of a pandemic, because Citizen Councils (and the like) would likely have to be held online. If a person is unlikely to trust *Political Participation* processes more generally, they will be even less likely to attend if it is an online event (Prinzjakowitsch, Interview, 05.04.2022). Another difficulty that is likely to emerge in the Covid-19 context, is Covid-19 deniers' strong identification with CTs and anti-science beliefs. Several interviewees stated that because of this strong identification, Conspiracists might be unable to give in on their opinion because it would seem like personal treason of one's convictions and ideals (Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022). This precludes the chance of reaching compromises, something that our democratic pluralistic societies depend on.

As a response to	<i>Political Participation</i> as a PCVE tool to respond to the Covid-19 case	Most responsive
a. mistrust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> through online formats political participation processes more unlikely 	
b. belief in Conspiracy Theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through meeting quest for significance, feeling of superiority, exposure to plurality of opinions belief in CTs less likely Yet, “white rectangle against black circle” discussions might cause deadlock if ground rules not established 	
c. overcome (scientific) populism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> See Figure 7, special focus on institutional category 	
		Least responsive

Figure 7 The Responses of *Political Participation* as a PCVE tool to the Covid-19 case

8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Covid-19 deniers who have taken the streets globally to protest against Covid-19-related health measures, (mandatory) vaccinations or simply to denounce the Covid-19 pandemic as a “hoax” are posing a central challenge to our democratic pluralistic societies (Imhoff & Lamberty 2020). My interviewees confirmed that Covid-19 deniers are openly antisemitic, are sidelining the core values of our democratic societies, have demonstrated violent potential, have proven to radicalize people from all strands in life and have shown (as exemplified with Putin-supportive protests) that they are likely to stay long after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has led experts, academics, and politicians alike to question how we can prevent further radicalizations of Covid-19 deniers (Spiegel 2020). Previous PCVE experiences made clear, that communities – which can be understood through proxies such as clubs, associations, or organizations – are an effective yet largely underutilized PCVE resource (Mirahmadi 2016). To address these two gaps in the literature (first, how we can prevent further radicalizations of Covid-19 deniers and second, how do we engage communities as underutilized PCVE resources), this thesis provides theoretical answers to the main research question “How can communities get involved to prevent the radicalization of further Covid-19 deniers?”

Through twelve in-depth semi-structured expert interviews and a thorough literature review of the counterterrorism, prevention, radicalization, and populism scholarships, this thesis identified three main characteristics of the Covid-19 denier group and three corresponding tools how communities can get involved to prevent further radicalizations. While acknowledging the limitations of this research, it contributes to the academic literature by primarily characterizing the Covid-19 deniers along large-scale mistrust, belief in Conspiracy Theories and support for (scientific) populism. Secondly, it used a thorough literature review to identify *Emotional*

Resilience, Education and Political Participation as the three best community PCVE tools. And lastly, this thesis is the first to discuss which of these three tools responds best to the Covid-19 deniers' characteristics, thereby providing a discussion on the success of community PCVE tools more generally and theoretical answers on prevention of radicalizations of Covid-19 deniers more specifically.

When discussing which of the community PCVE tools is most successful in the Covid-19 context, this thesis concludes that *Emotional Resilience* and *Educative Approaches* both prove successful in establishing interpersonal trust. *Emotional Resilience* does this by establishing emotional bonds, whereas *Educative Approaches* succeed when they adopt "humanized educative approaches" through which respondents can start trusting individuals of the Covid-19 deniers' created "enemy group". *Political Participation* on the other hand can only succeed in establishing long-term trust in democratic processes, if the other two tools have already borne fruits. However, the discussion has equally made clear that the Covid-19 deniers' mistrust goes deeper than PCVE efforts can (re)establish. The latter therefore needs to be complemented by structural change in political and science communication and increased transparency.

Probably the most remarkable characteristic of the Covid-19 deniers is the group's tendency to believe in CTs. The discussion above shows that all three of the proposed community PCVE tools can respond to peoples' belief in CTs. Yet, *Emotional Resilience* works relatively best, not only because it provides a sense of purpose, feelings of belonging and positive rewards all of which make radicalization less likely. But also, because successful role model approaches can meet the uncertainties, and ruptures that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about and thereby social identity formations along extremist narratives can be avoided (Counsellor,

Interview, 06.04.2022). Moreover, because of the Covid-19 induced lockdowns, some have lost jobs, and many have lost hobbies and the like, leading to a heightened quest for significance. *Emotional Resilience* as a PCVE tool can meet this quest by establishing emotional bonds and a secure emotional environment.

Yet, also *Educative Approaches* have proven successful in preventing further people from believing in CTs by making them aware of the antisemitic biases that exist in our cultures, and by dismantling Covid-19 propaganda through critical thinking strategies (Ruf, Interview, 29.03.2022). However, and as Figure 8 shows, *Education* by itself is insufficient in preventing people from believing in CTs, because the pandemic has shown that also highly educated individuals still believe in CTs. Moreover, since Covid-19 deniers are older than target groups of other PCVE approaches, educators and experts are challenged to find ways how to reach those this new target group (Brunner et al 2020). While it is not impossible, *Educative Approaches* will thus need time to become operational. *Political Participation* by itself is also insufficient in preventing people from believing in CTs, because if a belief in CTs is already established, people are unlikely to participate and because without firm ground rules, *Political Participation* processes might remain stuck in “white rectangle against black circle” discussions (Eberl, Interview, 04.03.2022).

Experts have further worryingly noted the Covid-19 deniers’ tendency to support (scientific) populism. Consequently, Covid-19 deniers have denied (scientific) facts at the core of our societies and oppose regular health measurements which threatens our public health systems (Berkeley 2021). *Political Participation* has proven to respond comparably best to this characteristic by opposing populists’ attempt to circumvent parties (strategic category), by denouncing mainstream decisions as having been manipulated by “the elite” (ideology

category), and most importantly by countering declining party membership through increased political participation (institutional category) (Jäger & Boriello 2020). *Educative approaches* also succeed in responding to the four categories of populism whereas *Emotional Resilience* can only hope for the positive effects of the *social control theory* in communities where the majority of people denounce Covid-19 deniers' views (Ellis & Abdi 2017).

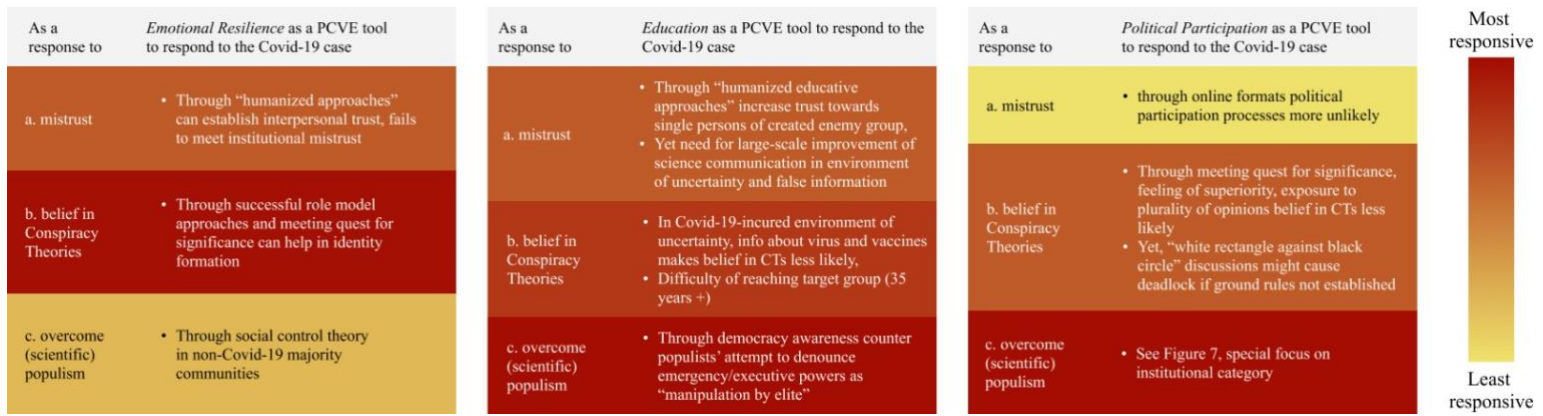


Figure 8 Comparison of PCVE tools as a response to the Covid-19 case

As the shading of Figure 8 exemplifies, even though each of the community PCVE tools works differently well for each of the described characteristics, they work best when they are implemented together. Only then a section which is bright yellow can be supported by a tool whose section is dark red. Therefore, to answer the main research question, communities should employ *Emotional Resilience*, *Education* and *Political Participation* together to prevent radicalizations of further Covid-19 deniers.

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10 ANNEX: Information on Interviewees

Name of Interviewee	Profession	Interviewed on
Dr Jakob-Moritz Eberl	Senior Scientist at the Department of Communication at University of Vienna, “Research focus on media and democracy, influences of media discourses and media bias on public opinion and political behavior. In addition, as a member of the ACPP (Austrian Corona Panel Project), he is concerned with the social impact and dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria.”	4 March 2022
Dr Karin Liebhart	Senior Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of Vienna. Her research focus is on “Visual Political Communication; Discursive and Visual Representations of the Political; Right-Wing Populism and Right-Wing Extremism; Gender Studies; Politics of Memory and Cultures of Memory; Qualitative Methods”.	5 March 2022
Tim Schatto-Eckrodt	Research Assistant at Westphalian Wilhelms University Münster at the Institute for Communication Science. His research focus is on “Cyber-propaganda, Digital publics, Conspiracy theories and Spread of misinformation online”.	9 March 2022
Prof Dr Mike Schäfer	Professor of Science Communication at University of Zurich. His research focus is on “Science communication, environmental and climate change communication, Public perceptions of science and technology, Science-related populism and conspiracy theories, Online and social media communication and Communication theory”.	10 March 2022
Werner Prinzjakowitsch	Educational Director of Association of Viennese Youth Centres (36 Units, 300 employees), Educational supervisor for 10 units (8 youth centres, 2 units of detached youth work), Responsible for Association of Viennese Youth Centres Educational Programme. He is “specialised in political education, Intercultural Learning, Diversity and International Relations”.	5 April 2022
Counsellor at <i>boJA Wien</i>	Counsellor at the “nationwide network for open youth work” (“Bundesweites Netzwerk Offene Jugendarbeit” (boJA)), a Counseling Center for Extremism, he is a trained social	6 April 2022

	worker and social pedagogue, specialized in exit and distancing work as well as prevention work in the context of right-wing extremism.	
Nikolaus Tsekas	leader of <i>NEUSTART Wien</i> which is a social center focused on “prevention (Online counseling, school social work, Addiction prevention), victim assistance (Offence mediation, Process support) and Probation assistance (Mediation of community service, Probation Services, Electronically supervised house arrest, Prison release assistance, Work training, Residential support).” Tsekas is the leader of the center in Vienna and is a trained social worker.	6 April 2022
Ulrike Schiesser	Psychologist at the Federal Office for Sectarian Issues in Vienna (“Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen in Wien”) and deals with issues in the field of worldviews and spirituality, in particular abuse and manipulation of spiritual needs, destructive group dynamics and authoritarian personality cults.	8 March 2022
Christoph Hövel	Education Officer at “#KopfEinschalten-kritisch gegen Verschwörungsdenken” (“#Head On – critical against conspiracy thinking”) which teaches students (from 8 th . 13 th grade) on “Deconstruction of conspiracy theories, Differentiation of political positioning of established media in contrast to politically constructed so-called "alternative facts, Emphasis on societal ambivalences in their relation to democracy, Promotion of tolerance of ambiguity, Education about the connection between conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism”.	21 February 2022
Johannes Sinabell	Theologian and Consultant for worldview and sectarian issues in the Archdiocese of Vienna with 20 years of working experience in the field.	23 February 2022
Esther Zuiderveld and Fenna Keijzer	Both consultants at <i>RadarAdvies</i> focused on “advise in youth, participation, radicalization and democracy and conducting research on behalf of municipalities, audit offices, healthcare providers, social organisations, the national government and the European Commission.”	5 April 2022
Max Ruf	Is an Islamic and social scientist. He is the deputy head of the science department at the <i>Violence Prevention Network (VPN)</i> . “His current work focuses on researching processes of individual deradicalization, closer	29 March 2022

	integration of science and practice in extremism prevention, and European networking, the latter including as a team member of RAN Practitioners. In addition to his work for VPN, he is also a Research Fellow at modus zad.”	
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(All information provided by interviewees)