



Mapping COVID-19 disinformation in Brazil

An analysis of disinformation consumption
and demand for fact-checking

March 2021



Introduction

Moonshot is a social enterprise specialising in countering online harms such as disinformation and violent extremism. We design new methodologies and technologies to enhance the capacity of our partners to respond effectively to the threats posed by these online harms. Our work in disinformation includes analysis of conspiracy theories and hate speech on social media and search engines, and media literacy programmes.

Moonshot has been tracking developments in the online space related to the COVID-19 pandemic across several key areas: we have analysed the impact of COVID-19 on [Canadian search traffic](#) for extremist content; [conspiracy theories, hate speech and incitement to violence](#) related to COVID-19 on Twitter; the impact of COVID-19 on searches for [domestic violence support](#); and the [impact of social distancing](#) on searches for violent extremist content in the United States.

The current piece of analysis maps the appetite for COVID-19 disinformation and fact checking in Brazil.

COVID-19 disinformation in Brazil

COVID-19 related disinformation is globally accessible and has been a feature of the pandemic since the first infections. COVID-19 related disinformation is often shared online by the general public through social media or messaging apps, and in some instances world leaders and political officials have adopted and shared disinformation related to the virus.

Brazil has been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing the rapid spread of the virus alongside a severe economic crisis and intense political polarisation between President Bolsonaro's far right government and left wing political and social movements. In this context, COVID-19 disinformation and fake news have spread widely, with a resulting uptick in the appetite for fact checkers.

Over a five week period in June - July 2020, Moonshot gathered data on Portuguese-language Google searches that indicated interest in COVID-19 related disinformation and fake news, and fact checking services, across all 26 states of Brazil. The results of our research are below.



Methodology

The current analysis is based on five weeks of Google search data across the 26 states of Brazil and the Distrito Federal. Moonshot created a database of hundreds of unique indicators of Brazilian disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This database was created through open source research, interviews with subject matter experts on Brazilian disinformation, and interviews with Brazilian fact-checking organisations.

These indicators were organised in different types of search intentions:

- ▶ **Searches for general credulity or veracity of disinformation**
This includes more generic searches for fact-checking services or queries about the reliability of news found on social media, as well as searches that specifically question the veracity of COVID-19 disinformation myths.
Example terms: "fact check chloroquine covid treatment", "is news on facebook real"
- ▶ **Searches for COVID-19 anti-social distancing**
This includes searches that are tied to claims that social distancing should be abandoned as a practice, stemming from disinformation campaigns which proclaimed that social distancing was ineffective, and that the WHO was actually discouraging social isolation.
Example terms: "WHO against social isolation", "social distancing fake news"
- ▶ **Searches for COVID-19 data inflation**
This includes searches for disinformation about the COVID-19 infection rate and death toll. Many disinformation myths were tied to the idea that local governments were trying to inflate casualty numbers to induce public panic, including the myth that empty coffins were being buried in COVID-19 graveyards.
Example terms: "Amazonas empty graves", "death toll covid fake"
- ▶ **Searches for COVID-19 miracle cures**
This includes searches for disinformation around various touted pharmaceutical, medicinal, or herbal 'miracle cures' for COVID-19.
Example terms: "garlic sulphur cures coronavirus", "hydroxychloroquine COVID cure"
- ▶ **Searches for COVID-19 plandemic**
This includes searches for disinformation myths tied to the Plandemic videos produced by Mikki Willis. These myths include the narrative that the COVID-19 pandemic was planned.
Example terms: "Germany sent money to China for covid 19", "official german report pandemic fake"
- ▶ **Searches for COVID-19 related personal attacks**
This includes searches that are tied to COVID-19 related to political smear campaigns against public figures.
Example terms: "Luiz Henrique Mandetta traitor", "Joice Hasselmann coward"



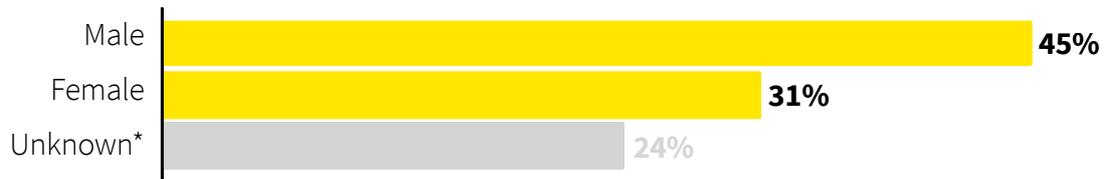
Findings

Moonshot gathered a total of 19,870 Portuguese-language searches during this five-week period, 89% of which indicated an appetite for general credulity or veracity of disinformation and fake news in Brazil. Most of these searches were made by users either looking for tips on how to identify fake news or for websites that could help them check the credibility of fake news, for example “how to identify fake news”, “how to check fake news”, or “chloroquine fake news”.

That these searches constitute the vast majority of our results indicates that people in Brazil primarily use Google to verify suspected fake news, as opposed to searching disinformation for consumption purposes. While search engines are an important provider of media literacy resources and fact-checking services, social media platforms continue to be the primary vehicle for consumption of COVID-19 related disinformation.

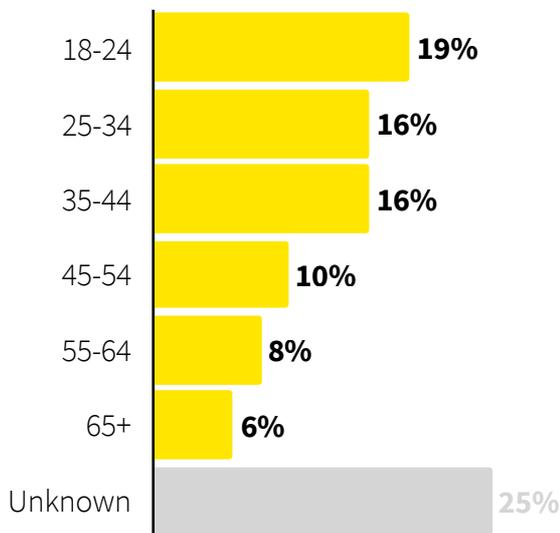
Our technology also gathered information about the demographics of the audience engaging with disinformation and fake news on Google, and mapped activity across all 26 states and the Distrito Federal. Where demographics could be recorded, 45% of the searches we collected were made by male users and 51% by people between 18-44 years old. The areas with the highest number of searches being recorded in the period of analysis were São Paulo and the Distrito Federal.

Gender data



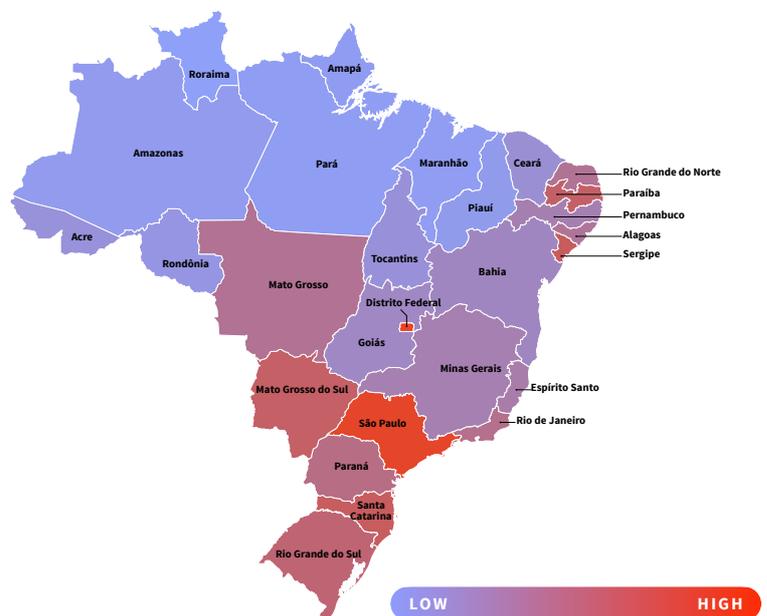
* data could not be gathered about the gender of these users

Age data



* data could not be gathered about the age groups of these users

Searches by area





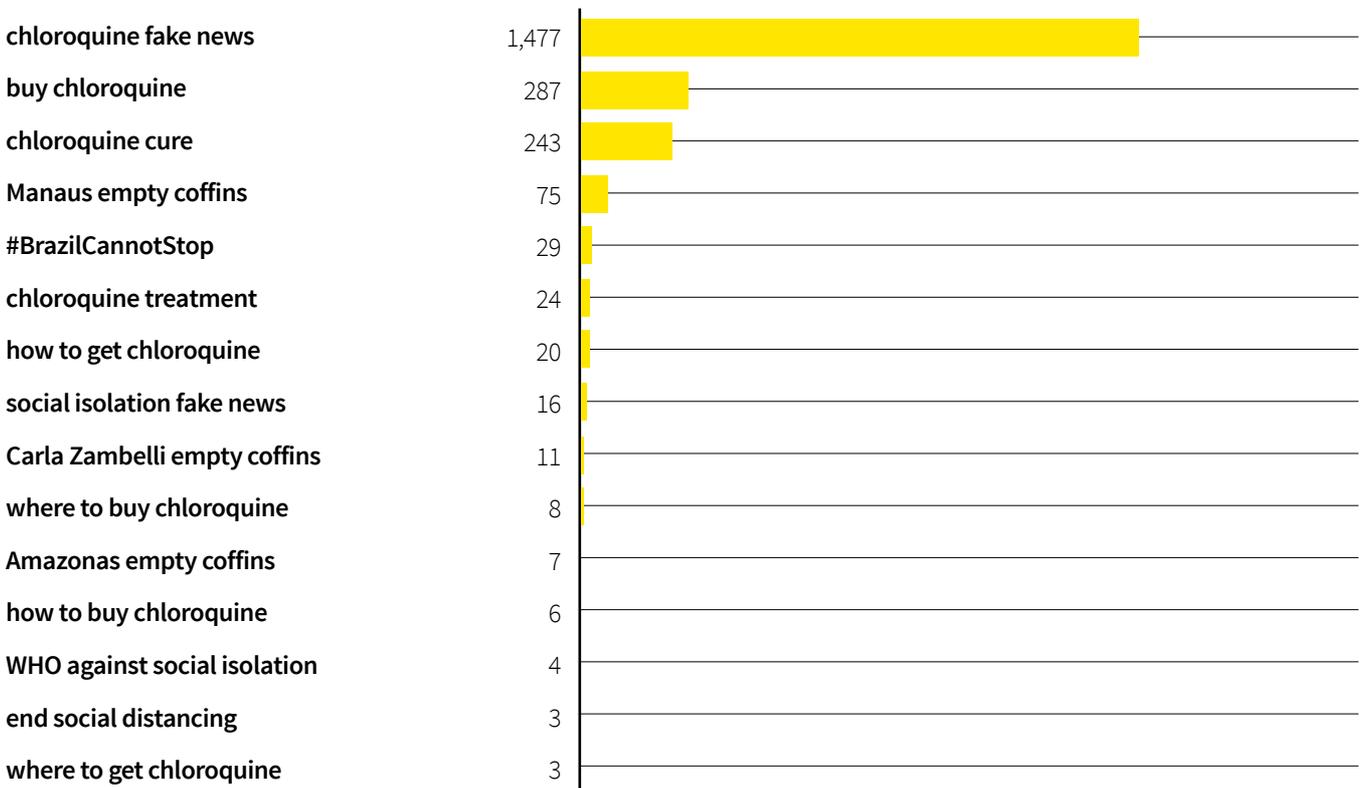
Covid-19 specific searches

Of the nearly 20,000 disinformation-related searches gathered, over 11% (2,200 searches) indicated an appetite for specific COVID-19 related disinformation. The thematic breakdown of these searches was as follows:



A staggering 93.4% of the searches for coronavirus-related disinformation were for so-called 'miracle cures' such as chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine. Information about these 'COVID-19 cures' as well as places to purchase these drugs were among the topics searched. A smaller percentage of searches (4.3%) were made by users looking for information about COVID-19 death figures being inflated through the burial of empty coffins, and an even smaller amount (2.3%) of searches indicated engagement with disinformation myths about the efficacy of social distancing.

Top searches related to COVID-19 disinformation



* Searches were recorded in Portuguese.



Recommendations for future research and programming

1 / Disinformation monitoring and analysis

As a result of this pilot, Google appears to be an important platform to identify and analyse the main disinformation narratives in Brazil, and the audiences at risk of consuming such narratives. This information enables fact checking and media literacy services to tailor their content to respond to their audiences' needs.

2 / Digital campaigns

The data Moonshot gathered over this time period clearly indicated an interest in fact checking services and media literacy resources. As such, Google appears to be a powerful vehicle to distribute credible fact checking and media literacy resources to users at risk of consuming disinformation. Micro-targeted digital campaigns can use online advertising services to provide users at risk of consuming disinformation with credible resources that are specific to their needs.

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