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News Avoidance during the COVID-19 Pandemic：Focusing on China News Users

LIYALIN

Doctor, Department of Media and Communication, Korea University, Korea
2017240130@korea.ac.kr

Abstract

Today, news avoidance has become an inevitable trend, particularly exacerbated since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. To delve deeper into the shifting tendencies of news consumers towards news avoidance and unveil the motivations behind this avoidance, this study recruited 500 Chinese news consumers aged between 20 and 60 years old, employing survey questionnaires as the research method. Through an in-depth examination of their news consumption behavior at different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, we discovered that individuals' risk perceptions and efficacy beliefs significantly influence their patterns of news consumption. Furthermore, we identified negative emotions, information overload, and media distrust as the primary reasons for news avoidance among Chinese news consumers during the COVID-19 crisis. These findings Not only provide crucial insights into understanding the dynamics of news consumption behavior but also offer valuable reference points for the news industry to better fulfill its role and value during crises in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, News Avoidance, News Consumption, China News Users

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the internet and information technology has brought about new challenges and transformations to the news industry. The close integration of traditional and new media has expanded the avenues through which audiences access news [1], providing a broader range of media choices and an infinite array of information options [2]. However, with the continuous expansion of audience choice, news avoidance has emerged as a burgeoning trend. Avoiding news may exert adverse effects on democracy and civic engagement [3, 4], thereby posing challenges to the development of the news industry .

The outbreak of COVID-19 has significantly increased the duration of mobile phone usage among the populace[5], while concurrently intensifying the public's inclination to avoid news content. Studies indicate that from April to May 2020, the proportion of individuals intentionally avoiding news in the UK increased from 15% to 25% [6]. During the same period, there was a rapid rise in the number of individuals in the Netherlands seeking to temporarily distance themselves from the news, resulting in an overall increase in the

avoidance rate by 10% [7]. In extraordinary circumstances, news plays a vital role in preserving the stability and fostering the development of social life and production [8]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, abstaining from news had adverse repercussions on both epidemic management and social cohesion. Consequently, this study seeks to analyze alterations in news consumption among the Chinese populace amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and delve into the rationales behind news avoidance among this demographic, aiming to garner profound insights into the role and significance of the news industry during crises.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

2.1 Definition of News Avoidance

News avoidance behavior predates the emergence of the internet and social media platforms. In the era of traditional media, individuals deliberately limited their news consumption owing to factors like time constraints and personal preferences. However, with the arrival of the social media age, the total Volume of media content has rapidly expanded, leading to increased selectivity in news consumption among individuals [9]. Consequently, individuals are more inclined to invest their time and energy in news content that aligns with their interests.

In recent years, news avoidance has garnered increasing attention from scholars. Nevertheless, a clear definition of news avoidance is currently lacking in academic discourse [10]. News avoidance behavior can be characterized as a phase of diminished news consumption arising from either a distaste for news or a preference for alternative content. To better understand and define news avoidance, researchers proposed categorizing it into intentional news avoidance and unintentional news avoidance[4]. Intentional news avoidance refers to the avoidance of news due to dislike, often stemming from distrust of news, information overload, and negative news [4, 11]. Conversely, unintentional news avoidance refers to situations where news is avoided due to algorithmic recommendations or being drawn to other content [12, 13].

2.2 News Consumption during COVID-19

Communication studies commonly classify news content into two categories: hard news and soft news, through the delineation and categorization of distinct news types. These two types of news exhibit significant differences in political relevance, reporting style, focus, and tone. Hard news emphasizes political relevance, adopts a thematic reporting style, focuses on the societal consequences of events, and strives to maintain objective, impersonal, and Non-emotional characteristics in reporting. Soft news tends to be more personalized and emotive, utilizing a narrative reporting method, concentrating on personal outcomes of events, with diminished emphasis on political significance [14]. Previous studies have shown that in news dissemination, soft news is more likely to trigger audience avoidance in comparison to hard news [15].

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, thrusting humanity into unparalleled levels of uncertainty and fear. The uncertainty and fear stemming from this global crisis profoundly impact individuals' daily lives and directly shape their news consumption behavior. According to a survey conducted during the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic in the UK, from mid-April to mid-May 2020, the percentage of the population actively and regularly avoiding news increased from 15% to 25%. Furthermore, an extra 30% of the population admitted to occasionally avoiding news. In a total of 55% of the population avoiding news during that period [16]. The trend of news avoidance during the COVID-19 crisis was Not confined to the United Kingdom; it was also observed in other nations, such as the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, over the initial four months of the outbreak (April-July 2020), there was a Notable surge in individuals feeling compelled to "take a break

from" the news, resulting in a nearly 10% increase in news avoidance across all age demographics [7].

On the other hand, there exists a significant demand for information amidst the COVID-19 crisis. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report examined news consumption and avoidance across six European countries amid the COVID-19 crisis. The report highlights a Notable upsurge in news consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Specifically, there was a marked increase in utilizing television and the Internet as primary sources of news [17]. This phenomenon can be attributed to the general populace's limited understanding of the disease and their urgent requirement for information to mitigate the anxiety and fear stemming from the uncertain circumstances they encountered.

Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, individuals grappled with ambivalence regarding information access. On one hand, individuals harbored a strong inclination to steer clear of news potentially detrimental to their mood and well-being. This inclination to shield themselves from distressing information stemmed from the necessity to preserve emotional well-being amid an already daunting period.

Conversely, individuals ackNowledged the significance of acquiring information to mitigate uncertainty and effectively combat the threat posed by the disease. Comprehending the eVolving situation, adhering to safety guidelines, and staying updated on the pandemic were imperative for individuals to make informed decisions and undertake suitable measures for self-protection. With this context, we pose the following research question.

How did the public's news consumption and avoidance eVolve during the COVID-19 crisis?

2.3 News Consumption during COVID-19 Motivations for News Avoidance

Indeed, the causes of news avoidance are complex and intertwined. In recent years, public trust in the news has been steadily declining, which has become a significant factor contributing to news avoidance. Prior research suggests that individuals may opt to avoid news due to their lack of trust in the content propagated by news outlets [18]. Intentional news avoidance in Austria surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, attributed to distrust in COVID-19 news [19].

Negative emotions triggered by news consumption constitute another influential factor in news avoidance behavior [20]. Emotional polarization in news reporting is on the rise, characterized by reports featuring evident conflicts and hostility, resulting in individuals experiencing negative emotions like anxiety post-news consumption . Additionally, News media typically focus on attention-grabbing, conflict-ridden, and dramatic events. These events are often negative. Negative news amplify the public's distress and feelings of helplessness, leading to their adoption of news avoidance behavior [21].

The proliferation of media platforms has vastly expanded the Volume of content accessible to consumers, offering them nearly limitless choices. Nonetheless, extended exposure to news topics can result in issue fatigue, prompting psychological resistance among audiences reluctant to further engage with the news [22] . Based on this, this study asks the following question.

What were the reasons for people's news avoidance behaviour during the COVID-19 crisis? Are there varying rationales for avoidance across different news categories?

2.4 Perceived Risk and Efficacy Beliefs as Motivators of News Avoidance

Risk perception involves estimating and preparing for the potential adverse outcomes of an event[23]. Risk perception influences how individuals respond to adverse events[24]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this novel coronavirus posed a significant threat to human health, yet public perceptions of its danger and severity varied. These perceptual differences likely influenced people's information-seeking behavior. Specifically, when individuals perceived COVID-19 as a greater threat, they tended to search more actively for news and information related to the pandemic to understand how to effectively prevent and cope with the virus. Conversely, if individuals perceived the virus as less risky, their attention to related news diminished, thereby affecting the likelihood of them taking preventative measures through media channels.

This study utilizes the Risk Perception Attitude (RPA) framework, a conceptual model used to understand how individuals perceive and respond to risks in various contexts, to examine individuals' perceived risk during the COVID-19 crisis. By exploring how people perceive and evaluate the risks of COVID-19 crisis, we can gain insights into their information-seeking behavior and news consumption patterns.

As shown in Figure 1, the RPA framework that categorizes individuals into one of four attitudinal groups: responsive (high risk, high efficacy), avoidance (high risk, low efficacy), proactive (low risk, high efficacy), and indifference (low risk, low efficacy). This study hopes to explore whether these four types of groups will behave differently in terms of information seeking during COVID-19. Lastly, the following question is posed for this study.
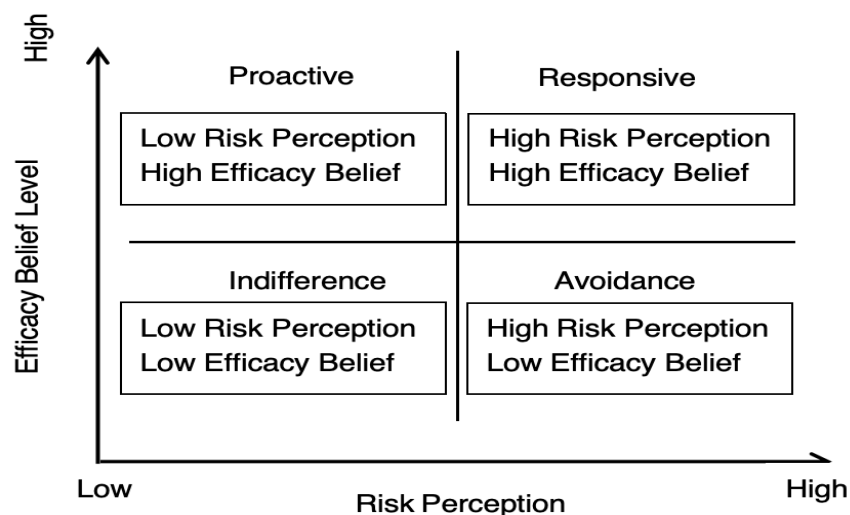

Figure 1. The RPA framework

According to the RPA framework, how did risk perception and efficacy belief influence people's news avoidance behaviour during COVID-19?

3. Method

3.1 Data Sampling and Operatonal Definitions

The study employed a quantitative research approach and utilized online platforms for random sampling to achieve an adequate sample size. A total of 500 Chinese news users aged between 20 and 60 were recruited

during the research period from March 30 to April 10, 2023. Participants who completed the experiment received compensation either in cash or an equivalent voucher valued at 5000 South Korean won. Initially, 577 participants were recruited through online platforms, and after eliminating invalid responses, 500 cases remained for data analysis.

As shown in Table 1, males made up 51.8% of participants, while females accounted for 48.2%, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution. Most participants were aged 31-40（33.8%）and 41-50（33.6%）, with the smallest group being 51-60 years old（15.2%）. Undergraduate students formed the largest demographic, comprising 55% of the sample. In terms of income, the largest group（35.7%）reported a monthly income of 5000-8000. Additionally, the majority of participants（50.9%）get their news from social media platforms.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the sample（ N=500)

Variable	Category	N	Percentage
Sex	Male	218	51.8%
	Female	227	48.2%
Age	20-30	87	17.4%
	31-40	169	33.8%
	41-50	168	33.6%
	51-60	76	15.2%
Qualifications	High school graduate or less	124	24.8%
	Some college to bachelor's degree	278	55.6%
	More than a bachelor's degree	98	19.6%
Income	Less than 3000 RMB	125	28%
	3000RMB—5000RMB	129	29%
	5000RMB—8000RMB	159	35.7%
	Over 8,000 RMB	32	7.3%
Access to news	Newspapers	11	2.2%
	Radio	21	4.2%
	TV	213	42.6%
	Social media	255	51.0%

The study focuses on the news avoidance behaviour of Chinese news consumers during the COVID-19 crisis. Relying on the social system and media system, China adopted a very strict regulatory policy from the early stages of COVID-19 and during the global outbreak, and the policy was continuously adjusted as the outbreak developed. At the same time, the news consumption of the Chinese public has continued to change.

To compare the consumption patterns of various types of news during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study categorized the news into three distinct categories: hard news, soft news, and news specifically related to the COVID-19 epidemic. The progression of the COVID-19 outbreak in China can be divided into three distinct phases: the initial stage（December 2019 to January 23, 2020）, the relatively stable period（January 24, 2020, to December 6th 2022）, and the Normalized phase（December 7th, 2022 - April 2023）. In the early stages of

the pandemic, the virus was primarily concentrated in Wuhan. People were largely igNorant and uninformed about the disease. However, on January 23, 2020, the Chinese government declared a "national emergency" in response to the rapidly spreading outbreak. Since that time, China has implemented stringent measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. It wasn't until December 7, 2022, when new measures were enacted, that China officially entered the Normalized phase of the pandemic.

This study utilized previously validated scales to measure respondents' risk perception, efficacy belief , news avoidance behavior [25-27] . Table 2 shows the details of the measurement scales.

Table 2. Measurements for variables

Variables	Measurement item
Negative emotions	During COVID-19crisis, watching the news creates a sense of anger, so I don't watch the news.
	During COVID-19 crisis, watching the news creates a sense of horror, so I don't watch the news.
	During COVID-19crisis, watching the news creates a sense of disgust, so I don't watch the news.
	During the COVID-19 crisis, watching the news created a sense of unhappiness, so I don't watch the news.
Reliability	I don't want to watch the news during the COVID-19 crisis because there are too few trustworthy sources available.
	I don't want to watch the news during the COVID-19 crisis because I distrust the individuals featured in the news reports.
Information overload	During the COVID-19 crisis, I don't want to watch the news due to the overwhelming surplus of irrelevant information.
	There was so much news during COVID-19 crisis that I didn't kNow what news to watch so I chose Not to watch the news.
	The COVID-19 crisis has made the news content too much, and processing that information stresses me out. So I don't want to watch the news.
Quality of news	Due to the low quality of news during the COVID-19 crisis, I don't want to watch the news.
	COVID-19 crisis when there are too many similar news so I don't want to read the news.
	During COVID-19 crisis, there were other more engaging content that appealed to me compared to the news, so I don't want to read the news.

In this study, the Cronbach's coefficient exceeded 0.8 ($p < .01$), while the coefficient of KMO and Bartlett's test was greater than 0.75 ($p < .01$).

3.2 Data Analysis

This study utilized SPSS 26.0 for data analysis and description, primarily employing descriptive statistical analysis and regression analysis. These analytical methods can better assist us in understanding individuals

who avoided news during the COVID-19 pandemic and the reasons behind their news avoidance.

Result

4.1 News Consumption during COVID-19

As shown in Figure 2, the COVID-19 outbreak significantly changed news consumption patterns. Initially, 79.1% of people increased hard news consumption, and 56.8% did the same for soft news, while only 6% avoided pandemic-related news. However, as the epidemic stabilized in China, news avoidance behaviors grew; 58.6% avoided hard news and 50.3% soft news, although 52.4% seldom avoided COVID-19 news. By December 2022, as China eased restrictions and treated COVID-19 as endemic, avoidance of COVID-19-related news peaked at 69.6%, and hard news at 61.8%, while soft news avoidance fell to 42.3%.
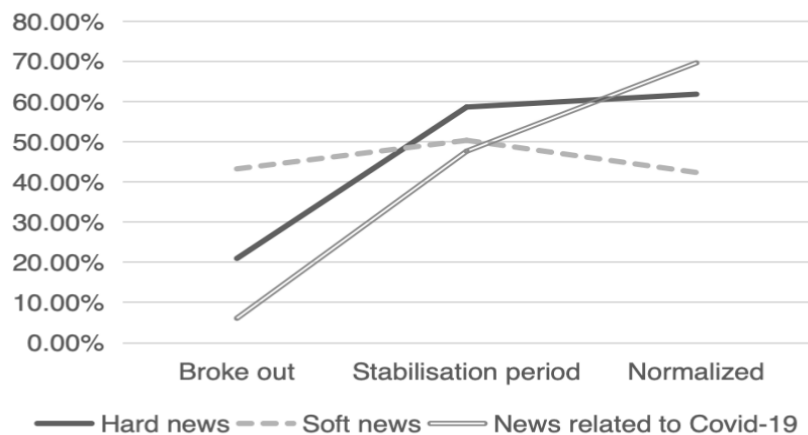

Figure 2. New avoidance（% agree）

4.2 Factors Influencing News Avoidance

The study utilized the RPA theory to categorize participants into four groups to investigate news avoidance behaviors among different populations. As shown in Table 3, the grouping results are based on the RPA framework. Survey results indicate that a substantial proportion of participants（51.6%）belong to the Responsive group within the RPA framework. This suggests that the majority of participants exhibit high levels of risk awareness and are willing to comply closely with epidemic prevention policies.

Table 3. Results of data based on the RPA framework

Variable	N	Percentage
High risk perception, high precaution	258	51.6%
High risk perception, low precaution	27	5.4%
Low risk perception, high precaution	156	31.92%
Low risk perception, low precaution	59	11.8%

Note. N=500

The study underscores the significant impact of individuals' risk perception and efficacy beliefs on their news consumption behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, when contrasted with the

"Responsive" group characterized by high risk perception and efficacy belief, the "Indifference" group with low risk perception and efficacy belief demonstrated even slighter alterations in news consumption behavior amid the COVID-19 pandemic (p < .001). However, No significant disparity in news consumption behavior was discerned between the "Proactive" (low risk perception and high efficacy belief) and "Avoidance" (high risk perception and low efficacy belief) groups in contrast to the Responsive group (p > .05). Furthermore, our study found No disparities in news consumption between the Proactive and Indifference groups, Nor within the Avoidance group (p > 0.05). Similarly, No Noteworthy distinctions were detected in news consumption amid the COVID-19 pandemic between the Avoidance and Indifference groups (p > 0.05). These findings are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The RPA framework and news consumption

Variable	B(SE)	Beta
High risk perception, high precaution	0	
High risk perception, low precaution	.48(.21)	-.10
Low risk perception, high precaution	-.81(.42)	-.82
Low risk perception, low precaution	-2.79(.30)	-4.1***

*Note. N=500; *p<.05;**p<.01;***p<.001*

As shown in Table 5, the study also examined demographic factors in news avoidance, revealing that women are more likely to avoid news compared to men. Additionally, lower-income groups and younger individuals tend to avoid news more frequently. Among educational levels, undergraduates showed a higher propensity for avoiding news compared to those with other qualifications. It is important to Note, however, that these effects are miNor and that these background characteristics play a very limited role in explaining variations in news avoidance behavior.

Table 5. Explaining news avoidance

Variable	B(SE)	Beta
Female	.10(.04)	.15**
Income	-.06(.02)	-.13***
Bachelor's degree	.61(.21)	.14**
Age(20-30)	.26(.10)	.12**
R squared	.15	

*Note. N=500; *p<.05;**p<.01;***p<.001*

The study highlights that information overload is a major reason people avoid hard news during the COVID-19 pandemic (p < .05). The rapid advancement of online techNology contributes to this overload, bombarding individuals with vast amounts of often redundant information, causing stress and leading to news avoidance. Additionally, the attractiveness of more engaging content also significantly influences the shift from hard news (p < .001). Hard news, with its ideological depth, is losing ground to culturally rich and entertaining content provided by various media platforms, drawing more viewer attention and interest.This shift in consumer preference is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Understanding hard news avoidance

Variable	B(SE)	Beta
Information overload	.22(.10)	.12*
Interesting content	.46(.08)	.24***
R squared	.50	

*Note. N=500; *p<.05;**p<.01;***p<.001*

The study indicates that information overload significantly contributes to the avoidance of soft news during the COVID-19 pandemic, more so than hard news (p < .001). Moreover, as shown in Table 7, aNother prominent factor is low trust in media (p < .01). Soft news, often focusing on human-interest stories and aiming primarily to entertain, tends to rely on personal anecdotes and unverified sources, which complicates the verification of authenticity and accuracy. This reliance on emotional appeal and potential for misinformation significantly reduces its credibility and drives people to avoid soft news.

Table 7. Understanding soft news avoidance

Variable	B(SE)	Beta
Information overload	.39(.12)	.19***
Media trust	.46(.19)	.21**
R squared	.40	

*Note. N=500; *p<.05;**p<.01;***p<.001*

As shown in Table 8, the research findings identify negative emotions and news homogenization as significant factors behind the avoidance of COVID-19 pandemic-related news (p<.05 for both). The pandemic often provokes anxiety and fear through news reports, causing individuals overwhelmed by such negative emotions to disengage from consuming this content to protect their mental health. Additionally, the lack of diversity and originality in reporting on the virus led to news fatigue, diminishing public interest and engagement, and ultimately fostering avoidance of pandemic news.

Table 8. Understanding news avoidance in relation to COVID-19

Variable	B(SE)	Beta
Emotionally charged	.31(.12)	.16*
Homogenization of news content	.16(.08)	.09*
R squared	.54	

*Note. N=500; *p<.05;**p<.01;***p<.001*

4. Conclusion

At the initial outbreak of COVID-19, there was indeed a Notable surge in news consumption, particularly of hard news and updates related to COVID-19. However, as the pandemic progressively stabilized and strategies to contain its spread evolved, an increasing number of individuals began to avoid consuming news. We observed that during the ravages of COVID-19, an individual's risk perception and efficacy belief in their

own capabilities significantly influenced their news consumption habits. This is due to the close interconnection between risk perception and emotional responses[28]. Additionally, we found that negative emotions, information overload, and credibility were key factors affecting news consumption behavior during COVID-19. These findings are consistent with previous research, which indicates that news avoidance behavior is typically driven by both cognitive and emotional factors[29]. Our study also revealed that the reasons individuals avoided different types of news varied throughout the pandemic.

Our study aims to provide insights that will assist the news industry in more effectively managing public crises. However, the study has limitations, mainly due to reliance on audience recall and self-reported data, which could impact accuracy. Future research should gather real-time data for greater reliability and incorporate observed data to better understand news avoidance behaviors.As techNology disrupts the news industry and audiences decline, it is crucial for journalists to improve their skills and produce necessary, emotionally considerate news that builds trust and engages the public.

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