One Year Later, Why Are People Still Avoiding COVID-19 News?: Understanding Predictors of News Avoidance in Indonesia

YEARRY PANJI SETIANTO
Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, Indonesia

PUSPITA ASRI PRACEKA
Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The global effect of COVID-19 pandemic has continued for almost two consecutive years. Indonesia is also among the countries most impacted by the SARS-CoV2 virus under this period. Consequently, certain challenges tend to occur as regards public interest in accessing or deterring recent information associated with the disease. While there are increasing interests among media and communication scholars in understanding why people are avoiding news, little attention has been given to this audience behaviour during a global crisis like coronavirus outbreak. Using news avoidance as the main concept, this research is aimed at examining the critical factors that influence news avoidance in low-choice media environments, particularly in the Global South like Indonesia. Employing a face-to-face survey with 1,000 participants in Banten Province, Indonesia, this study found that younger people with lesser interest in COVID-19 related issues appear more prone to avoid this news, in addition to their level of news overload. Nevertheless, we also found that gender and the level of education factors did not influence whether people distanced themselves with negative coverage of coronavirus news in the country during the first year of the pandemic. Furthermore, the perception of information overload and minimal trust in news sources greatly contributed to the avoidance situation.

Keywords: *Audience, COVID-19, news avoidance, news trust, news consumption.*

INTRODUCTION

The shifting patterns of COVID-19 news consumption have undergone significant transformations within the current pandemic landscape. This phenomenon holds global relevance, spanning across both developed and developing nations (Newman et al., 2021). As the digital age enables easy information access, news streams inundate individuals without requiring explicit searches (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). This inundation, however, often leads to information overload, sparking a surge in news avoidance, particularly amid recurrent and negative circumstances (Azari & Setianto, 2021; Kalogeropoulos, 2017; Schumann, 2018; Schrøder, 2016; Song et al., 2017).

Until now, research has predominantly delved into the political realm to dissect the reasons behind news avoidance. Numerous studies have scrutinized the tendency to dodge political news as a setback (Fishkin, 2016; Goyanes et al., 2023; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Consequently, reduced news consumption has been linked to a dearth of political awareness, potentially impairing a nation's democratic fabric in the long run (Blekesaune et al., 2012). However, with the prevalence of heightened avoidance, particularly regarding political news, the question emerges whether a comparable phenomenon unfolds when vigilant attention is crucial, as exemplified by the evolving COVID-19 case landscape.

The ongoing pandemic has undeniably spurred increased information consumption, especially during its initial outbreak in early 2020 across diverse nations (Nielsen et al., 2020). Yet, when grappling with uncertainty—especially in pandemic times—reliance on news media intensifies naturally. The pandemic seems to trigger a Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) state (Hayran & Anik, 2021), making it challenging to overlook the latest updates on disease spread, new variants, and vaccination progress. Conversely, the influx of pandemic-related news steeped in a negative narrative raises concerns about the adverse psychological impact of such extensive consumption (Neill et al., 2021). This avalanche of information also births unreliable and misleading sources, often propagating through social media platforms, giving rise to the so-called 'infodemic' (Zaracostas, 2020), which may fuel scepticism toward COVID-19 news.

Several prior studies have delved into a comprehensive portrayal of news avoidance, examining influencing factors like political interest, information overload, and trust issues (e.g., Edgerly, 2022; Goyanes et al., 2023; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Furthermore, Karlsen et al. (2020) illuminated that demographic factors such as gender and education also shape news consumption levels and avoidance tendencies. However, there is a concern whether the political news avoidance replicable in another context like health communication, especially during the pandemic, where to some extent, evading these negative news reports about COVID-19 became essential, considering their impact on the mental well-being of certain individuals (de Bruin et al., 2021).

This study directs its focus toward news avoidance in Indonesia, a developing nation in the Global South. This emphasis arises due to the paucity of analogous research conducted beyond Western and developed nations (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2022; Mihelj et al., 2021; Tandoc Jr & Kim, 2023). Developing countries like Indonesia often grapple with limited media accessibility, the absence of public media outlets, waning trust in news sources, and the growing politicization of pandemic management (Warburton, 2022). Given these unique challenges, this research aims to bridge these gaps by highlighting the empirical aspects of pandemic news avoidance. While there are some previous studies on the increasing presence of news avoiders in Indonesia (e.g., Azari & Setianto, 2021), there is little explanation on factors contributing to such behavior during the pandemic. This endeavor gains paramount significance, particularly considering the one-year aftermath of the initial virus outbreak and the emergence of the Delta variant's second phase. Additionally, Indonesia has experienced severe COVID-19 impacts, as evident from the surge in cases up until December 1, 2021 (Mathieu et al., 2020). Hence, an in-depth exploration of the determinants of news avoidance within Indonesian society in the context of COVID-19 reports becomes imperative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

News Consumption During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Considering that COVID-19 has become a global pandemic, the majority of news reports in most countries have also extensively covered this crisis (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). More than two years has elapsed since the initial outbreak of the virus in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, yet various Coronavirus-related news continue to trend on multiple platforms. Ng et al. (2021) examined the global narrative of news coverage regarding the pandemic within various phases. They observed that at the early phase of the pandemic (i.e., early 2020) news media were mainly focusing on two major concerns: emerging cases and transmission characteristics, while during the peak phase (i.e., mid-2020) the issues covered were moving

to the numbers of testing and death, societal risk and lockdown, as well as economic turmoil. After more than a year, the main concerns had shifted towards the 'hope' and 'opening up the economy' (Ng et al., 2021). These changes do not, in any manner, degrade the importance of COVID-19 news consumption, especially since we are now seeing newer Coronavirus variants like Delta and Omicron, as they are spreading to many countries in 2021.

Also, based on the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), people tend to rely greatly on media in a crisis situation, particularly in terms of reducing anxiety. Several previous studies also reported that people actively search for latest related information during crisis, such as in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and not to avoid the news (Boyle et al., 2004). Similarly, Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020, also described an increase in news consumption during COVID-19 pandemic (Newman et al., 2020). The high level of consumption of news is also associated with the notion that the public feels the need to constantly monitor the development of this uncertain situation during the pandemic (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020).

However, an abundance of information becomes easily accessible using various media eventually leads to information overload. The overwhelming numbers of news content from varying sources, might also affect a poor news selection (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Moreover, if we are also considering the increasing presence of 'fake news' during the pandemic (Fernández-Torres et al., 2021; Montesi, 2021) it will provide additional challenge for citizens to navigate their news behavior. Indeed, Edgerly (2018) found that people, especially younger audiences, with a lack of confidence in their skill in identifying credible information tend to distance themselves with news. Therefore, news self-efficacy should be considered as another important factor in understanding audience's behavior toward news (Edgerly, 2021), including why they disconnect with COVID-19 reports.

Furthermore, various attempts were made to better explain the relationship between media consumption and individual well-being during a pandemic (de Bruin et al., 2021). For instance, Granow et al. (2018) observed that binge-watching entertainment contents contribute positively to human welfare. Several research doubted the occurrence of similar effect with media consumption, let alone continuous engagement and in large quantities (Newman et al., 2019), whereas some people tend to be more selective in news consumption (Karlsen et al., 2020) and might reject certain news they found less interesting (Edgerly, 2022). Moreover, under a crisis, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, the majority of the news appears negative. Therefore, it is difficult to understand if news consumption during the current pandemic could help the audience to stay informed regarding the situation (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021), or probably in contrary it increases psychological burdens to the audience (Lades et al., 2020; Nekliudov et al., 2020).

For these reasons, understanding the audience's news behavior during a pandemic appears relatively complex. The uncertainty requires the public to be constantly updated, automatically leading to excess news consumption. Conversely, unfavorable psychological effects on society, ranging from information overload to news fatigue, tend to occur under surplus news conditions. Some people eventually choose to avoid the news for the purpose of maintaining sound mental health (de Bruin et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to further examine the possible factors driving the news avoidance during this pandemic.

Current Status of News Avoidance Research

In the digital age, news consumption has become an integral part of daily life. However, a growing body of literature has illuminated the phenomenon of news avoidance, where individuals actively choose to disengage from news content. One important context that persuades audience to distance themselves from the news is the increasing news availability (Strömbäck et al., 2013). The extensive use of mobile phones and social media enhances easy access to news at anytime and anywhere (Villi et al., 2022). In addition to the increasing number of available contents in the current digital era, platform and media options for public access are becoming more diverse. As a consequence, news avoidance is often considered a condition that generally occurs in an environment with multiple media choices (high-choice media environment). Moreover, Karlsen et al. (2020) explained that in several Western democratic countries, diverse choices unfortunately promote news avoidance, particularly among audiences with little interest in politics.

Previous studies have also reported an increase in news avoidance across various countries in recent years (Newman et al., 2021; Villi et al., 2022). For instance, the population of people admitting to avoiding news increases steadily every year in Norway (Karlsen et al., 2020). This phenomenon does not only occur in Western countries, but also in some Asia countries with relatively massive media infrastructure, such as South Korea and Japan (Park, 2019; Villi et al., 2022). However, despite few studies, we only have little knowledge on the extent of news avoidance in the Global South like Indonesia.

News avoidance has been interpreted in various ways by different researchers. Some studies have defined it as an act of 'resisting' news, such as by consuming news less often than the general population, such as once in a month or even once in a week (Newman et al., 2019; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). Others have defined it as a complete disinterest in news (Edgerly, 2017; Strömback, 2017). Still others have considered people who self-report that they "sometimes" or "often" avoid news as news avoiders, even if they do not necessarily consume news less often than the general population (Kalogeropoulos, 2017).

Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) further categorized news avoidance into two types: intentional and unintentional. Intentional news avoidance is a conscious decision to avoid news. This may occur when there is a large amount of information to consume, or when the news is perceived as negative or depressing. Unintentional news avoidance is when people are not exposed to news because they are not actively seeking it out. This can happen when people are using social media or news sites that do not recommend news stories. Another example is when the algorithms of news sites or social media platforms direct audiences to certain news feeds, possibly causing a distraction (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). However, contents that are not recommended by the algorithm tend not to appear, despite individual interest. Unintentional news avoidance also occurs in situations where a person traditionally shows no news concern. Therefore, it is very possible for an individual in this second category to demonstrate a high preference for entertainment, compared to news materials.

It is important to note that news avoidance is not always a negative thing. In some cases, it can be a healthy way to cope with stress or anxiety. However, it is also important to be aware of the potential consequences of news avoidance, such as being less informed about current events and issues. However, many scholars believe that news avoidance contributes to a reduction in civic and political participation, ultimately undermining the functioning of a democratic society (Lindell & Båge, 2022). The act of deliberately avoiding news content is seen as a disengagement from the events that shape public life, leading to uninformed

decision-making and limited accountability of governmental institutions. Moreover, existing research predominantly focused on political news, underscores the negative implications of news avoidance on civic engagement (Toff & Nielsen, 2022). However, little we know whether findings on political news avoidance would be in parallel with audience's behaviour on different issues like health news.

Some other scholars also examined the relationship between demographic factors and news avoidance patterns. Age, gender, and education level play pivotal roles in shaping individuals' preferences and habits regarding news consumption (Boulianne & Shehata, 2022; Edgerly et al., 2018; Karlsen et al., 2020; Toff & Palmer, 2019). Younger generations often rely on digital platforms for news, while older adults lean towards traditional media (Boulianne & Shehata, 2022). Younger people are also more likely to avoid news than older people (Edgerly, 2017). This may be because younger people are more likely to get their news from social media and other digital platforms (Newman et al., 2021), which are often seen as less reliable than traditional news sources. Gender differences emerge, with women showing greater interest in health and education news, and men gravitating towards political and economic news (Azari & Setianto, 2021). Additionally, higher education levels are associated with increased news consumption (Ksiazek et al., 2010; Lindell & Båge, 2022; Price & Zaller, 1993). Nevertheless, the interplay between age, gender, and education in the context of news avoidance during the pandemic remains understudied.

For this reason, this study proposes hypothesis as follow:

H1: Demographic factors, including gender, age and education levels are associated to higher news avoidance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to demographics, other factors have been identified as contributing to news avoidance, particularly intentional or active avoidance. Some research has also focused on individual-level factors. For example, Skovsgaard and Søberg (2016) found that low news self-efficacy, or the feeling that one is unable to navigate news information, is a notable factor in news avoidance behavior. This is especially true during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when there is a significant amount of false and misleading information circulating. As the World Health Organization (WHO) has noted, the pandemic has led to an infodemic, or an excessive amount of information, much of it inaccurate (Zaracostas, 2020). Consequently, individuals wary of misinformation may resort to news avoidance as a protective mechanism, and thus, limiting their access to crucial pandemic-related information. In this context, it is important to further explore the relationship between news self-efficacy and news avoidance, particularly in relation to COVID-19 media coverage.

H2: Lower news self-efficacy with regards to COVID-19 media coverage instigates higher news avoidance

In the context of political news, several factors also contribute to the influence on news avoidance, including political interest (Edgerly, 2022; Goyanes et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2020; Strömback & Shehata, 2010), trust in news (Goyanes et al., 2023), and information overload (Song et al., 2017). For example, some studies also explain why the news audience who is less interested in political affairs might also exhibit low level of political news consumption

(Goyanes et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2021; Wojcieszak et al. 2023). Gurr and Metag (2021) further explain those who are less interested in particular issues like politics, would exhibit 'selective avoidance' in distancing themselves with politics while accessing news in general. Also, less public trust in news is found as another factor that greatly promotes news avoidance (Schrøder, 2016; Newman & Fletcher, 2017; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020).

Similar conclusion was also obtained through qualitative studies by Woodstock (2014), and also by Edgerly (2018), which focused on adolescents' news consumption behavior. Moreover, the amount of media content across various platforms is also highly perceived as excessive, probably leading to a news overload situation (Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Song et al., 2017). This condition also triggers confusion, in terms of sorting reliable news from a widespread of conflicting sources (Toff & Nielsen, 2018; Tsfati & Capella, 2005), especially among audiences with low self-efficacy (Edgerly, 2018). In parallel with this line of though, this research aims to further examine whether people who were less interested in COVID-19 news, less trusting the news, and with the higher level of news overload would also increase their avoidance with pandemic-related news during this period.

Based on the above description, the present research aims to further investigate:

H3: Lower interest levels in COVID-19 concerns relate to higher news avoidance.

H4: Lower trust levels in news sources generate higher news avoidance.

H5: Higher news overload triggers higher news avoidance during the pandemic.

Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020) further explained that a nation's political culture also needs to be considered in terms of news consumption. They argued that this phenomenon is commonly observed in a society with a high-income democracy and political stability, where a suitable index of press freedom tends to embolden public confidence as regards news quality. Nevertheless, in a corrupt political system, or low public trust in politicians and the press, news consumption tends to decline (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). This is also because the information is not considered very reliable or useful by the local community.

In addition to the level of news consumption in the current pandemic, public perception of the government—in terms of how they perform crisis management, is also another essential factor (Paskarina, 2023). Under normal conditions, low political interest is known to be associated with the low number of political news viewing, especially for those who are considered as news avoiders (Strömbäck et al., 2013). While Strömbäck et al. (2013) was focusing more on political interest, here we aim to better understand the relationship between public's perception of the government's crisis management during the pandemic as an important factor during the crisis (Enria et al., 2021; Gesser-Edelsburg et al., 2020) and declining number of news use (Fletcher et al., 2020; Jurkowitz, 2021). Therefore, in a pandemic situation, especially with government's poor performances in disaster mitigation, the news avoidance is predicted to be higher. As a consequence, the present study further examines:

H6: Negative perception, in terms of government's crisis management efforts, relate to news avoidance during the pandemic.

Overall, it is important to observe the occurrence of news avoidance in a society, with traditionally poor news consumption. Most related studies are conducted in Western countries and nations with a stable political system and fairly good press freedom. This research is focused on Indonesia as a developing country with limited cultures of news consumption, both in terms of media technology penetration less beneficial to the political situation and press freedom currently considered as problematic. Therefore, the present research is expected to provide a new nuance in comprehending the factors influencing news avoidance, particularly after a year of the COVID-19 outbreak.

RESEARCH METHOD

In the context of this study, classifying Indonesia as a high-choice media environment presents challenges, primarily due to the inconsistent accessibility of diverse news platforms. While acknowledging certain limitations, it is important to note that the Indonesian populace maintains significant exposure to news through social media channels (Newman et al., 2023). Consequently, this investigation exclusively focuses on news consumption behaviors across two predominant platforms: television and social media, which includes news websites (Kriyantono et al., 2023; Rochyadi-Reetz et al., 2020). Several other mediums, including national and local print newspapers, as well as radio, have been omitted from the analysis. This omission is grounded in our early field observation that these platforms are frequently inaccessible or rarely utilized by the general public to access COVID-19-related news, at least in Banten province where this study was conducted. This selective scope ensures a concentrated examination of news consumption trends within the available and widely utilized channels, enhancing the accuracy and applicability of the findings to the Indonesian context.

The current study utilized a survey method in the period between April and June 2021 within Indonesia's Banten Province. Banten was chosen as the research focal point due to its proximity to Jakarta (the province with the highest COVID-19 case count) and its notable contrast between urban and rural areas. This period also marked the end of the pandemic for one year since the Indonesian government announced the first cases in the country (April 2020). We utilized face-to-face surveys under strict adherence to specific health protocols to further accommodate participants with limited media and the internet access. In this case, the researchers utilized quota sampling to gather data from the five specified Banten regions: Tangerang, Serang, Cilegon, Lebak, and Pandeglang. These regions were categorized into two distinct groups: urban (Tangerang, Serang, and Cilegon) and rural (Lebak and Pandeglang), each representing different population characteristics.

For each region and its corresponding category, a predetermined quota of respondents was set. For practical reason due to the limited mobility during the pandemic, the researchers recruited 200 respondents for each region and focusing only on the district with the most population in each region. Since we used non-probability sampling procedure, we do not aim for generalization of our findings into a wider population. In total, the research study secured the participation of 1,000 respondents. As a token of appreciation for their contribution, each participant received a souvenir from the research team. Also, it is worth mentioning that the research questionnaires were originally developed in the Indonesian language. In order to enhance the accessibility and comprehensibility of the research findings, the questionnaires were subsequently translated into English after consulting with language experts in both languages.

Variables of Interest

a.   *News Consumption*

This research only focused on the two most available news platforms in Banten province, which are television and social media. For practical reasons, news portals and social media were grouped together since these two sources appear to be identical for the local population. Subsequently, news consumption was evaluated by asking respondents the following questions: (1) "how often do you watch news on television?" (M= 2.25, SD = 0.651) and (2) "how often do you access news on social media (eg, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp)?" (M = 2.31, SD = 0.936). For both items, possible answers were provided: (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) sometimes, (4) often.

Further questions included (1) "how much time do you spent on watching television news? "(M = 3.71, SD= 1.732) and (2) "how much time do you spent on accessing news on social media (eg, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp)?" (M =3.53, SD =2.268). For both items we provided these set of responses: (1) none, (2) 1–5 minutes, (3) 6–10 minutes, (4) 11–15 minutes, (5) 16–30 minutes, (6) 31–60 minutes, (7) 61–90 minutes, and (8) more than 90 minutes.

Additionally, we asked respondents' frequency of accessing television news related to COVID-19 (M = 2.09 SD = 0.691), time spent accessing television news related to COVID-19 (M = 3.10, SD = 1.604), frequency of accessing COVID-19 news on social media (M= 1.94, SD= 0.818), and time spent on accessing COVID-19 news on social media (M= 2.90, SD= 1.945).

b.   *News Avoidance*

In line with Kalogeropoulos' (2017) as well as Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen's (2020) studies, to measure pandemic news avoidance, we asked the respondents, "do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days?" (M= 1.86, SD=0.793), with possible responses including (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) sometimes, (4) often. Further question included an inquiry whether they recently avoided coronavirus-related news (M= 1.88, SD=0.833).

Kalogeropoulos' (2017) and Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen's (2020) research were again adopted to further identify respondents' reasons on news avoidance. While emphasizing that the questions are specifically referring to their pandemic news avoidance behavior, we asked them follow up questions: "I am actively trying to avoid news because.... (1) It has a bad effect on my mood, (2) I feel like there is too much news, (3) I don't trust the news, (4) I don't feel like there is anything I can do with the information, (5) It distracts me from other things, (6) I think a lot of news is about things that are not important, (7) I'm not interested enough in the news."

c.   *News Overload*

In this study, the authors followed Holton and Chyi's (2012) as well as Tunney et al.'s (2021) study by using the same single item to measure news overload. The item was "I feel overloaded by the amount of news available." Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with this statement on a 5-point scale.

d.   Self-Efficacy in Relation to News

A measure of news self-efficacy was captured by respondent's level of agreement on a 5-point scale (5= strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree) with the statement, "When I encountered online news, it is difficult for me to identify whether the news is factual or fake." This measurement is in line with Hopp's (2022) study on news self-efficacy.

e.   Public Trust in News

Based on Newman et al. (2021), the three questions used to measure public trust in news, including (1) I think I can trust most news most of the time, (2) I think I can trust most news I consume most of the time, (3) I think I can trust most news on social media most of the time. Five possible responses (5= strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree) were provided.

f.   Interest in COVID-19 News

The interest in COVID-19 news was evaluated according to Pew Research (Jurkowitz, 2021), using a single question, "How closely have you been following news about the COVID-19?" and a set of response was provided (5 = Very closely, 4 = Fairly closely, 3 = Not too closely, 2 = Not at all closely, 1 = No answer).

g.   COVID-19 Perception

Pew Research's study (Jurkowitz, 2021) was also used to measure the COVID-19 perception by asking respondents two questions: (1) "All in all, what do you think about the coronavirus outbreak?" (provided responses include: made a bigger deal than it really is, made a smaller deal than it really is, approached about right, no answer), (2) "Which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?" (provided responses include: the Indonesian government has controlled the outbreak as much as it could have, the Indonesian government has not controlled the outbreak as much as it could have, and no answer).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, we used the descriptive data to comprehend respondents' behavior towards COVID-19 news consumption. The results in Table 1 showed that in terms of media preference, 52.4% said they obtained news from television and 41.9% preferred accessing news from social media. Additionally, on the average 66.5% participants said that they 'rarely' watched television news and 22.7% of the audience only spent 1-5 minutes per day on TV news. In relation to COVID-19 news, around 61% 'rarely' watched the news on TV and 31.1% spent 1-5 minutes per day on the same content. Meanwhile, in terms of the news accessed using social media, about 35.4% said 'rarely' used the platform for such a purpose and only 18.1% of the participants spent 1-5 minutes per day for this activity. Whereas the COVID-19 news, social media was said 'rarely' used by 44.6% of the respondents and 23% of them only spent 1-5 minutes per day getting COVID-19 news on this platform. Also, it is worth mentioning that 24.6% and 30.6% of them did not use social media to obtain news and COVID-19 news respectively. In general, the level of COVID-19 news consumption in both platforms, television and social media, appeared very minimal and also at a relatively low duration, after almost a year of the outbreak in Indonesia. Yet, the number of social media used for obtaining news was inferior to television since social media was not always available for these respondents, especially in rural areas.

Table 1: Respondents' demographic profile

Variables	Number of Respondents	% (N = 1,000)
Age		
18-24	436	43.6
25-34	189	18.9
35-44	188	18.8
45-54	119	11.9
55 and above	68	6.8
Gender		
Male	407	40.7
Female	593	59.3
Education		
Elementary	147	14.8
Junior high	221	22.3
Senior high	543	54.8
Undergraduate/diploma	78	7.9
Postgraduate	2	0.2

In addition to the limited access to news, almost half the total respondents admitted to 'rarely' avoiding general news (46.4%) and in particular, COVID-19 related news reports (42.5%). However, only about 20% of the total responses acknowledged they 'sometimes' and 'often' avoided pandemic news in recent times. For this reason, it is to be noted that the low level of news consumption does not always mean that the audience also avoids the news. Among the respondents, they distanced themselves from news for various reasons (listed from the highest mean to the lowest), including: I think a lot of news is about things that are not important (M=3.40, SD=0.939), I feel like there is too much news (M=3.30, SD=1.035), it distracts me from other things (M= 3.19, SD=1.019), it has a bad effect on my mood (M=3.09, SD=1.006), I don't feel like there is anything I can do with the information (M=3.03, SD=0.936), I'm not interested enough in the news (M=2.72, SD=0.972), and I don't trust the news (M=2.70, SD=0.906). This finding at least provides a novelty that the news avoidance was not necessarily driven by negativity of the news, prone to affect mental or psychological health of the audience during the pandemic.

In subsequent stages, we are interested in determining the influential predictors of news avoidance using Hierarchical Regression analysis. Corresponding to previous research, we first include a number of demographics (age, gender, and education) in the first model. In model 1, age served as the only significant factor of the demographic variables in predicting news avoidance, despite the negative value. This outcome indicates that younger people tend to avoid COVID-19 news, compared to older adults, while gender and education were not significant. Therefore, in relation to H1, age is described as the only influential demographic predictor on news avoidance.

Table 2: Hierarchical regression models in understanding news avoidance predictors

Variables	Model 1 St. Beta	Model 2 St. Beta	Model 3 St. Beta
Block 1. Demographic			
Age	-0.104*	-0.063**	-0.060**
Gender	-0.030	-0.015	-0.012
Education	-0.006	-0.043	-0.045
Block 2.			
News self-efficacy		0.003	0.008
Interest in COVID-19 news		-0.232*	-0.239*
News trust		-0.141*	-0.142*
News overload		0.178*	0.176*
Block 3.			
Perception on COVID-19			-0.044
Total adjusted R² (%)	0.9*	12*	12.1*
N = 1,000			
*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.001			

In order to answer H2, we examine whether self-efficacy regarding pandemic news influences news avoidance. Here we found that news self-efficacy with regards COVID-19 media coverage did not predicts higher news avoidance, and thus, the second hypothesis was not supported. As for H3, we identify that the lower interest on pandemic issue significantly contributes to the extensive news avoidance. Moreover, we identified that in both H4 (Lower trust levels in news sources generate significant news avoidance) and H5 (Higher information overload contributes to higher news avoidance during the pandemic) are significant. This showed that higher news avoidance is influenced by audience's news trust as well as information overload.

Furthermore, we included these additional predictors, news self-efficacy, interest in COVID-19, news trust, and news overload in the second model. Here in model 2, age remained a significant factor as a predictor. Subsequently, COVID-19 interest (negative value), trust on news (negative value) and news overload were three additional variables determining news avoidance. Again, news self-efficacy was not significant in predicting why people distancing themselves with pandemic news. Overall, it can be argued that younger people, individuals who are less interested in COVID-19 issue and low trust on news, as well as persons that felt overloaded with pandemic news, appeared more prone to avoiding COVID-19 news.

Finally, in the last model, the perception on COVID-19 related issues and how the overall factor predicts news avoidance were introduced. Here, the relationship between public's perception of the government crisis management during pandemic and news avoidance was not significant, and thus, H6 was not supported. Also, in model 3, the addition of the COVID-19 perception did not show any great improvement. The four earlier variables, including age, news overload, trust and interest in COVID-19 news, remained the significant predictors of news avoidance. This conclusion was also similar with the previous description in model 2.

Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers of people who are distancing themselves from news are increasing in many countries (Newman et al., 2019; Villi et al., 2022). But at the early stages of the pandemic, this habit of avoiding the news appeared to be anomalies since many people were closely monitoring the newest information regarding the virus (Nelson & Lewis, 2022). However, in the long run, there are more audiences who showed minimal consumption COVID-19-related news for various reasons. This research helps determine the factors that influence COVID-19 news avoidance, especially in the Global South context such as in Banten Province, Indonesia. Amidst a pandemic, the overwhelming flood of COVID-19 coverage across different media outlets has a tendency to demotivate individuals from keeping up with current events. This present study is also found the low level of people's engagement with COVID-19 news, whether it's from TV or social media channels. However, in terms of news avoidance, only about 35.6% of research participants admitted to never evading the news, while the remaining 63.4% reported that they avoided COVID-19-related news, either rarely, sometimes, or often. These findings indicated higher level of news avoidance behavior compared to a similar number of reports in various countries (Newman et al., 2019), while even in a high-choice media environment like in the United States, news avoidance alone only reached 41% (Edgerly, 2022).

Subsequently, if a number of factors influencing news avoidance are considered, this research then confirms the findings of several related previous research. However, out of the three demographic factors measured, only age showed relevance to news avoidance, where the younger people appeared more prone to the news avoidance. Similar findings also occurred in Edgerly (2022) research, where the younger age group was categorized as low news consumption. However, is it necessary to consider the reason young people tend to avoid COVID-19 news?

Therefore, there is a need to address why news avoidance is often associated with factors beyond demographic, such as news or information overload factors. Previous studies have confirmed that these factors tend to negatively influence the level of news consumption (Park, 2019; Song et al., 2017). In the case of social media, Park (2019) explained that news fatigue due to excessive media reports available on social media, actually boosts news avoidance. Here, we found a similar finding regarding why people distance themselves with COVID-19 news reports. Also, the audience reported that they avoided Corona pandemic news on social media more than on traditional platforms like television. This finding suggests that people who are more overwhelmed by the number of pandemic news have a higher tendency to become news avoiders. After all, most major news media outlets are reporting progress of the pandemic regularly, and thus, make it more difficult for the ordinary audience not to be overwhelmed by such news reports. Unsurprisingly, as suggested by de Bruin et al (2019), those who did not distance themselves from COVID-19-related news were said to be having a higher risk of mental-health issues, while people who perceived the negative impact of news upon their well-being would consider avoiding the COVID-19 news.

Studies discussing the role of news trust on the level of news consumption (Goyanes et al., 2023; Schrøder, 2016) also resonate with our findings regarding why people reject the COVID-19 news. In the case of news audiences in Banten, Indonesia, those who have a lower trust on news have a tendency toward news avoidance. In the previous studies, scholars found those who actively avoid the news tended to consider the news media as a "propaganda machine" (Schrøder, 2016), biased and mostly bounded by their own political and economic interests (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). In the absence of trusted public media

in Indonesia where many major media outlets are owned by politicians (Lim, 2012), it is only to be expected that the audience's level of trust is low, and thus, influence their decision to distancing themselves with news during the pandemic. It is important to note that the decreasing trust on news has been a global trend, even before the pandemic (Swift, 2016), and thus, should be placed into a wider context.

Another factor needed to be considered is the issue of interest in the COVID-19-related affairs. According to Edgerly (2022), political interest has a relationship with news consumption, as people interested in politics share high value for political news. Similarly, we found that in the context of a COVID-19, individuals with an interest in the pandemic tend to consume more news and are also less prone to avoiding the news. The more they concern with the threat of COVID-19, there more they feel the need to be always updated with the latest development of the pandemic. Conversely, people who evade news are basically those who are not interested in following any developments regarding this virus, especially since this pandemic has continued for more than a year in Indonesia without any possible end in mind.

Also, Edgerly (2021) argued that the audience's self-confidence in navigating the news is closely related to the level of news consumption. Within this sense, a low news self-efficacy possibly might lead to a reduced consumption and in turns triggers news avoidance. In contrast to her findings and in the COVID-19 context, in this study we found that news efficacy is not a motivating factor for its avoidance. It is also worth mentioning that the audience's level of self-efficacy regarding pandemic news might be different compared to the same scenario in when they were engaged in political news, which was more commonly measured in previous studies (Edgerly, 2022; Park, 2019). Here we argue that to some extent, during the early pandemic people tend to consume more than average pandemic news, mainly for social monitoring (Nelson & Lewis, 2022). Within this context, people would be relying more on media to deliver more updated news for them regardless their self-confidence in navigating the news. The same reason goes when individuals gradually distancing themselves from news one year after the initial COVID-19 outbreaks, meaning that pandemic might create a situational factor that drove people closer and further away from the news, rather than influenced by their ability to navigate the news.

Furthermore, based on Toff and Kalogeropoulos' (2020) study, where the importance in considering the political context was emphasized, the present research acknowledged that audience perceptions of government crisis management of the current outbreak, are not very relevant to news avoidance. This indicates that the views of whether the Indonesian government is successful or not in dealing with COVID-19 concerns, does not contribute to the news avoidance behavior.

Finally, Karlsen et al. (2020) highlighted that in a high-choice media environment, news avoidance was evident. On the contrary, they argued that even in a situation where people could only obtain a limited access to news, does not mean that they would completely distance themselves from news. However, regardless of low-choice media availability, our study found that in the case of audiences in Banten province of Indonesia there was a higher number of people who were considered as news avoiders, especially during the pandemic. This finding suggests that the trend of news avoidance, which previously seemed to be more salient in media-rich countries, was also becoming more noticeable in an information-poor country like in Indonesia.

This research confirms that news avoidance is a global phenomenon and is not limited to high-choice media environments, especially during the pandemic COVID-19. This is important because it challenges the assumption that news avoidance is only a problem in countries where people have a lot of access to news. The findings also suggests that news avoidance may be more common in countries with low levels of trust in the media. This research also identifies several factors that are associated with news avoidance, which can be used to develop interventions to reduce news avoidance. For example, news organizations could develop strategies to reduce news fatigue, such as providing more in-depth coverage of fewer stories. They could also work to increase trust in the media by being more transparent about their reporting practices, in particular in reporting health issues like pandemic news.

CONCLUSION

This research seeks to comprehend the factors influencing news avoidance among audience in over a year since the advent of COVID-19 pandemic. The present study discovered various findings which assist us in enriching the understanding pertaining to the topic and provided stronger empirical evidences in support of findings of previous research on news avoidance. Specifically, the present research results showed that avoidance of COVID-19 news during the pandemic is associated with factors namely age, news overload, level of trust in news and the interest in COVID-19 information. However, an important consideration is that these outcomes enrich the understanding in the context of a low-choice media environment, where people's chances of avoiding news are also prominent during the pandemic, even if compared to a high-choice media environment situation in the Western countries. Therefore, the findings in the context of the Global South, is expected to also reaffirm the global phenomenon of news avoidance.

Although this study provides empirical data on news avoidance during the pandemic in a non-Western context, some limitations in the data should also be discussed. First, rather than using the average time of news consumption, we relied on a self-report from the respondents regarding their news avoidance. Second, this study used quota sampling since using probability sampling was impractical during the pandemic. This was done since we wanted to make sure that people with limited access to news media in rural areas could participate in this research. Nevertheless, this study provides a more nuance regarding factors influencing people's decision to distance themselves to COVID-19 news during the pandemic.

Finally, this study also suggests for future research to address the following issues. First, the current study found that news avoidance is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a variety of factors, including individual characteristics, such as age and news trust, as well as situational factors, such as the amount of news coverage available. However, the study also noted that the cultural and contextual factors may also play a role in news avoidance behavior. For example, in some cultures, there may be a stigma associated with being informed about current events, or there may be a lack of trust in the media. These factors could discourage people from seeking out news, even during important times like pandemic. Second, this study used a quantitative survey to collect data on news avoidance behavior. This method is useful for collecting data from a large number of people and for identifying trends in news avoidance behavior. However, quantitative surveys can be limited in their ability to understand the reasons why people avoid news. Qualitative inquiries, such as interviews and focus groups, can be used to get a deeper understanding of the motivations

behind news avoidance behavior. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, researchers can get a more comprehensive understanding of news avoidance behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

BIODATA

Yearry Panji Setianto is a lecturer at Digital Journalism Department, Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, Indonesia. Email: yearry.panji@umn.ac.id

Puspita Asri Praceka is a lecturer at Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, Indonesia. Email: praceka@gmail.com

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