



A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF INFORMATION ANXIETY AND INFORMATION AVOIDANCE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Darko Lacović¹, Lorena Palameta²

¹Department of Information Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek (Croatia)

²University Library Rijeka (Croatia)

Abstract

Information anxiety can occur when people are faced with an excessive amount of information that they cannot process effectively. In some situations, people avoid information about certain topics (e.g., politics, health) because they want to preserve their beliefs or avoid getting upset. This paper describes some of the main findings of recent studies that have shown that information overload causes not only information anxiety but also information avoidance, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this paper presents research aimed at identifying the topics on which respondents experience anxiety and avoid information, as well as the reasons for information anxiety and information avoidance when seeking information for various purposes in daily life. The research was part of a master's thesis and was conducted using the qualitative method (structured interviews) with 17 respondents from the city of Požega (Croatia). The data was collected by e-mail, which is one of the methodological limitations in this research. According to the research results, respondents mainly have information anxiety when they search for health information, while most of them avoid financial information. As expected, one of the main reasons for respondents' information anxiety when searching for information is information overload. When they experience an unpleasant feeling such as anxiety or worry, they usually stop their information search. In addition, respondents indicated that they mainly avoid information from web portals and social networks because they want to keep their peace of mind. Some respondents reported that they are not interested in information about the COVID-19 pandemic because they receive conflicting information from different sources. Libraries can offer workshops on information literacy skills such as selecting and evaluating credible online sources in order to neutralize information anxiety and information avoidance. Despite the qualitative methodology and a small sample of respondents, this study provides interesting insights and could be a starting point for a larger quantitative study.

Keywords: information anxiety, information avoidance, COVID-19, qualitative study, Croatia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Information anxiety usually arises when interacting with an excessive amount of information, resulting in people's inability to properly receive, process, and implement information (Hartog, 2017). Naveed and Anwar (2019) state that information-seeking anxiety causes feelings of uncertainty, discomfort, and fear while searching for information online, in a library, or from others.

Information anxiety can be associated with information avoidance, although the two concepts are not necessarily related. It allows people to retain the knowledge and beliefs they have at a given time. In some situations, people do not want to receive negative or unpleasant information, so they metaphorically bury their heads in the sand, which is referred to as the "ostrich effect" (Karlsson, Loewenstein, & Seppi, 2009). For example, potentially ill people sometimes avoid information to avoid

being alarmed by the fact that they may be ill (Narayan, Case, & Edwards, 2012), and people with financial difficulties may avoid checking their account balances. Physical information avoidance means avoiding reading newspapers and magazines, listening to the radio, watching television shows, etc. People usually avoid information that is not consistent with their attitudes and beliefs. This can then lead to the deprivation of useful information, confirming their biased attitudes and opinions, the possibility of spreading (contagious) diseases, ethical lapses, media bias, political polarization, climate change denial, etc. (Golman, Hagmann, & Loewenstein, 2017).

Some authors have examined the impact of the pandemic on information anxiety and on people's tendency to avoid information about COVID-19. Before the pandemic, Guo, Lu, Kuang, and Wang (2020) conducted a quantitative study in China, which showed that information anxiety arises from the (excessive) use of social networks and can lead to information avoidance. According to a survey conducted by Dreisiebner, Marz, and Mandl (2020) in Germany, 75% of respondents followed a larger amount of news and information after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most respondents (96%) sought information to keep track of the overall situation, and some respondents indicated that they were overwhelmed with information about the coronavirus and therefore avoided it. Siebenhaar, Köther, and Alpers (2020), in a larger quantitative study also conducted in Germany, found an association between unpleasant information respondents found about coronavirus and avoidance of such information, but also with better adherence to epidemiologic measures. Respondents sought health information about COVID-19 (80.7%) primarily through news websites (84.1%), social media (73.2%), and public television (69.4%). Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen (2020) found in their quantitative study in the United Kingdom that more than half of the respondents avoided information and news about the COVID-19 pandemic because it made them feel bad (56%). In addition, respondents avoided news because of distrust, excessive information, lack of interest in the topic of the pandemic, etc. Television news (77%) was largely avoided, followed by websites and apps (51%), social media (50%), newspapers (48%), and radio (41%). Kim, Ahn, Atkinson, and Kahlor (2020) found in a survey in South Korea, Singapore, and the United States that respondents were more likely to avoid information due to the increasing prevalence of misinformation. The results of a Finnish study by Soroya, Farooq, Mahmood, Isoaho, and Zara (2021) showed that frequent exposure to coronavirus information sources in social media and information overload affected respondents' cognitive and affective states and led to information anxiety. Consequently, feelings of anxiety caused people to avoid information about the pandemic.

2 METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research was to identify (thematic) areas where information anxiety occurs among respondents and where they avoid information. In addition, the purpose of the study was to find out why respondents feel anxious when seeking information and why they avoid information in everyday life. The research questions were as follows:

- Why do respondents experience information anxiety during information seeking?
- What information do respondents avoid when seeking information?
- Do respondents avoid information about the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research was conducted as part of a master's thesis during August and early September 2021 in Požega (Croatia) using a qualitative methodology, i.e., a structured interview. The thesis is defended at the Department of Information Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (University of Osijek, Croatia). Research sample consisted of 17 male and female respondents of different ages, professions, and educational levels. Respondents used their experiences related to information anxiety and information avoidance with specific examples or cases using the critical incident technique, referring to the content that triggers information anxiety in them and from which they avoid information, as well as feelings that occur during information acquisition. Respondents indicated what content they fear and avoid, what sources of information they avoid, etc. Respondents answered the questions via email, as their commitments made it easier and simpler to participate in the research. However, this can be considered a methodological shortcoming, as it was not possible to ask respondents additional questions and to observe their (non-)verbal responses. The data obtained were descriptively analyzed and are presented in the next section of the paper.

3 RESULTS

There were 12 female respondents (R2, R3, R4, R5, R7, R8, R9, R12, R14, R15, R16, R17) and 5 male respondents (R1, R6, R10, R11, R13) in the study. The youngest respondent was 15, and the oldest

was 58 years old. Underage respondents took part in the survey with parental consent. Table 1 presents all respondents regarding gender and age.

Table 1. Respondents by gender and age

Respondents	Gender	Age
R1	Male	58
R2	Female	56
R3	Female	50
R4	Female	48
R5	Female	25
R6	Male	15
R7	Female	31
R8	Female	52
R9	Female	23
R10	Male	54
R11	Male	16
R12	Female	40
R13	Male	33
R14	Female	25
R15	Female	23
R16	Female	23
R17	Female	24

According to the level of education, 8 respondents stated that they have a university degree (R1, R5, R7, R9, R10, R12, R13, R14), 4 respondents have higher education (R3, R15, R16, R17), 3 respondents possess a high school diploma (R2, R4, R8), and 2 respondents completed primary education (R6, R11). Professions/occupations of research respondents are as follows: professors (R1, R5), nurses (R3, R12), typists (R2, R8), students (R15, R17), health laboratory assistant (R4), Master's degree in nursing (R7), conservator-restorer (R9), surgeon (R10), Master's degree in law (R13) and economist (R14). Three respondents did not provide an answer to this question. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents by profession/occupation

Respondents	Profession/occupation
R1	Professor
R2	Typist
R3	Nurse
R4	Laboratory assistant in health care
R5	Musicology professor
R6	-
R7	Master's degree in nursing

R8	Typist correspondent
R9	Conservator-restorers
R10	Surgeon
R11	-
R12	Nurse
R13	Master's degree in law
R14	Economist
R15	Student
R16	-
R17	Student

When it comes to areas where they need information in everyday life, 7 respondents searched for information about work (R1, R5, R9, R10, R12, R14, R17), 5 about health (R2, R3, R4, R8, R16), 4 about education (R6, R11, R13, R15), 2 about cosmetics (R3, R7), and 1 respondent about the weather forecast (R3).

"I was looking for information related to employment and gaining my first work experience." (R9)

"The last time I search for information was because of illness. The doctor did not give me instructions about the treatment or explained anything." (R8)

"About 2 months ago, I last looked some information for. The information was related to education. Most of the time I look for information about some school assignments or projects." (R11)

Regarding feelings, most respondents indicated that they were calm and relaxed at the beginning of the information search (R1, R2, R3, R7, R9, R10, R11, R12, R13, R16, R17), and only a few of them felt nervous or tense (R1, R4, R5, R8, R14). Some respondents added that they felt anxious and confused (R4), excited (R6), and optimistic (R17) at the beginning of the information search.

"Bearing in mind that I search certain pages of various state institutions every day as part of my work obligations, my feeling depended on the situation at work. If I was in a hurry and needed information urgently, I was tense. If I looked for information when there was no pressure, I was calm. Never relaxed." (R1)

"Usually relaxed and calm, often positive that I will find the information I need." (R17)

While seeking information, most respondents stated that they felt calm and relaxed (R2, R3, R6, R7, R9, R10, R11, R12, R13, R15, R17), and some nervous (R1, R5, R9, R14, R16). Two respondents stated that they were curious (R2, R4), and one respondent pointed out that their feelings depended on the information they found (R8).

"When the search went according to plan, I felt good, but when I could not find the right information in a short time, frustration and nervousness grew." (R1)

Most respondents found all the information they needed (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R7, R9, R10, R12, R13, R14, R15, R16, R17), and three respondents failed to find all the information they sought (R6, R8, R11).

"I always find the information I'm looking for, i.e., I don't give up until I find the information I'm looking for, regardless of the number of sources or the accuracy." (R12)

"I didn't find all the information I was looking for because I don't think I was looking well enough or long enough." (R11)

At the end of the information search, more than half of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the information they found (R1, R2, R6, R7, R9, R10, R11, R12, R13, R15, R17), and a slightly smaller number of respondents were confused about the different information they had encountered on the same topic or problem (R3, R4, R8, R14, R16). Two respondents were dissatisfied and frustrated with the quality and quantity of information they had found (R15, R16), and one respondent was

dissatisfied because they had not found certain information (R14). One respondent expressed fear and anxiety for himself or others after finding information (R5).

In terms of sources for seeking information, all respondents use the internet, such as e-mail, social networks, and databases, which was expected. Several respondents read books, magazines, and newspapers (R3, R9, R11, R12, R16) and get information from friends, colleagues, and family (R2, R5, R11, R17), and only one respondent uses leaflets and posters for seeking information (R1).

"The only sources I always use when looking for information is the internet, books and friends." (R11)

3.1 Anxiety in seeking information

In answering the question about information anxiety, respondents were asked to recall some situations in which they had sought and used information. Some respondents felt frustrated, worried, or uncomfortable with health information (R1, R2, R3, R4, R8, R11), information related to COVID-19 (R7, R16, R17), and advertisements that appear when searching for information (R1, R13). One respondent could not recall a specific situation (R12), while two respondents could not define the causes of information anxiety (R9, R14).

"I was looking for information on tachycardia. I felt a slight concern." (R2)

Respondents indicated that they feel anxiety when searching for and using information, mostly because of too much information (R4, R7, R9, R10, R11, R12, R14, R16, R17) because of unnecessary or inaccurate information (R1, R9, R10, R13, R16), limited access to information (R6, R8, R9, R15), and spending a lot of time searching for information (R3, R5, R8, R12). For some respondents, information anxiety occurs because they are worried about their health (R2) and because of technical difficulties with the laptop (R15).

"The fact that a large part of the information provided by the search engine has no value, or it is quite clear that it is not true, certainly contributes to the feeling of discomfort. Sometimes, it is quite difficult to differentiate between the truth and fabrications. This mostly refers to health problems, which dominate the internet." (R1)

"Too much unnecessary information and data in search of a clear and concrete answer as well as limited access to information." (R9)

"If I haven't got the time in certain situations, I am bothered by too much information that I need to research and review." (R12)

Apart from the fact that anxiety is most often triggered by health information (R2, R3, R4, R6, R8, R12, R13, R12, R13, R15, R17), respondents feel the same when seeking social and political information (R2, R3, R5, R7, R14, R16, R17). Some respondents stated that they were embarrassed or worried about advertising information about different products (R1), different interpretations of information in the media (R2), and financial information (R5). Two respondents stated that they did not experience information anxiety (R10, R11).

When they experience information anxiety, most respondents temporarily or permanently stop looking for information (R1, R2, R3, R6, R7, R9, R13, R15, R16, R17), they look for content with more lighthearted and spiritual themes (R2, R5, R6), try to calm down (R14, R15), talk to their family or doctor about the information (R4, R5). Two respondents indicated that they do not give up looking for information when it is important to them (R8, R14). One respondent indicated that they hide unpleasant feelings and try to accept them by becoming more familiar with the content (R12).

"(...) Usually, if I need the information, I find it, and if it is not essential, I give up." (R1)

"Naturally, I stop seeking information. Sometimes I talk to a member of my family about some information or try to distract my thought by doing something fun (e.g., taking my dog for a walk or reading several pages of a book)." (R2)

3.2 Avoiding information

The results in the areas of information avoidance show that most respondents avoid information about the COVID-19 pandemic (R3, R5, R8, R13, R15, R17). Some respondents avoid information about celebrities (R1, R2). One respondent (R6) stated that he seeks information about education and avoid information that appears to be untrue. One respondent pointed out that he avoids work-related information during the holidays (R7), and another respondent also occasionally avoids information

related to her work to keep her peace of mind and that of her patients (R12). One respondent states the reason for avoiding information is the violence in Afghanistan (R9).

"I avoided the information that was imposed on us about the degree of infection with COVID-19."
(R13)

"When I search, I get angry at articles based on so-called 'followers' ... and their comments. I don't care at all what someone thinks of a person, and what their comment is about the life or actions of the 'celebrity' they follow." (R1)

The reasons for avoiding information vary. Respondents explained that they avoid information to preserve their peace of mind (R3, R5, R9, R12, R15, R16, R17), because they are not interested in certain information (R1, R7, R11, R13, R15, R16) because the amount of information is too high (R8, R10, R12, R14, R17), because they distrust information (R6, R10, R12, R16, R17). Several respondents added that they avoid information because it affects their mood badly (R1, R15, R16, R17), because they do not want to change their attitudes and opinions (R3, R17), and because they believe that certain information is not useful to them. (R2). Two respondents (R10 and R14) did not answer the question about information avoidance. One respondent does not shy away from information because he is curious and seek further explanations from the profession depending on what it is about (R4).

"(...) For the sake of preserving my peace of mind, because I don't want to change my attitudes and opinions, they have a bad effect on my mood, there is too much information, I don't believe in that information." (R17)

Respondents pointed out that they mainly avoid financial information (R3, R5, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11), corporate information (R5, R6, R9, R12, R15, R16), and then health information (R11, R13, R14, R17). Some respondents avoid advertisements that promote easy money, fast weight loss, and the like (R1, R17). Also, some respondents avoid sports and daily political information (R10), information about unemployment, war, and violence (R9).

"I avoid all information that seems idiotic at first, all information on how to earn 10,000 kunas every day and how to lose weight while sleeping, how to prevent a heart attack, and all information related to people who post about their lives and families on social media." (R1)

In terms of information sources, respondents avoid internet portals (R2, R5, R8, R9, R10, R13, R17), social networks (R1, R3, R5, R12, R16, R17), newspapers (R3, R5, R10, R11, R16), and television and radio broadcasts (R5, R7, R14, R15). One respondent does not avoid any particular source (R6).

"I avoid watching the news and following non-professional portals with fake news." (R9)

"I usually avoid social networks because they take up too much time and often contain irrelevant information." (R12)

When asked about avoiding information about the COVID-19 pandemic, some respondents answered that they avoid it to a great extent because they encounter contradictory information, too much information, incompetence in transmitting this information, etc. (R1, R2, R3, R5, R8, R14, R16, R17).

"Yes, at the beginning of the pandemic I regularly followed the news and reports, but due to the increasing interference of politics and the growing number of experts who literally denied each other, I no longer knew who to trust and what was true and what was propaganda, so I gave up news coverage and articles on the subject. Of course, to keep myself generally informed about the pandemic, I listen to statistics about new cases and health care advice, but not with the intensity I did a year and a half ago when I turned up the radio and listened to the news every hour and watched the news on TV." (R2)

"(...) Everyone offers their theories about the disease, and everything related to it... I feel better when I don't read or follow anything because only then am I at peace." (R17)

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Recent quantitative studies have shown that there is a relationship between information-seeking anxiety and avoiding information, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was also confirmed by the research presented in this paper. It was found that respondents mostly feel fear or anxiety when seeking health information. One of the main reasons for this is too much information. When confronted with unpleasant feelings, respondents stop searching for information temporarily or permanently.

Siebenhaar et al. (2020) and Soroya et al. (2021) also reached similar conclusions, although their studies focused exclusively on the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is interesting, but also somewhat surprising, that respondents mostly avoid financial information, while their health information tends to fuel fears. These results are partially consistent with those obtained by Narayan et al. (2012) in their study related to the avoidance of health and financial information, which may be troubling or cause anxiety for some people.

Respondents generally avoid information to preserve their peace of mind, then out of a lack of interest in certain information, and out of distrust of information. One of the main reasons for avoiding information about COVID-19 is the conflicting information that respondents find or receive in different sources. Similar results can be found in studies by Dreisiebner, Marz, and Mandl (2020), Siebenhaar et al. (2020), and Fletcher et al. (2020).

Respondents in the research described in this paper avoided web portals, social networks, newspapers, TV, and radio as sources of information. Accordingly, Fletcher et al. (2020) found in their study that respondents did not want to follow news about COVID-19 from a variety of sources.

The results of this study may be useful to school, academic, university or public libraries and researchers investigating information anxiety or information avoidance in a variety of contexts. Librarians and information professionals should help people overcome their information anxiety by organizing training, workshops, or courses on information literacy and educating users to search the internet for credible and reliable sources of information, regardless of their topic. Such activities would also help develop the ability to distinguish between true and false information and raise awareness of the positive and negative aspects of information avoidance. It would certainly be desirable to conduct quantitative research of similar topic on a larger sample that would provide more relevant insights.

REFERENCES

- Dreisiebner, S., Marz, S., & Mandl, T. (2020). Information behavior during the Covid-19 crisis in German-speaking countries. *Journal of Documentation*, 78(7), 160-175. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-12-2020-0217>
- Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). News avoidance in the UK remains high as lockdown restrictions are eased. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID3704270_code2541703.pdf?abstractid=3704270&mirid=1
- Golman, R., Hagmann, D., & Loewenstein, G. (2017). Information avoidance. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 55(1), 96-135. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20151245>
- Guo, Y., Lu, Z., Kuang, H., & Wang, C. (2020). Information avoidance behavior on social network sites: Information irrelevance, overload, and the moderating role of time pressure. *International Journal of Information Management*, 52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102067>
- Hartog, P. (2017). A generation of information anxiety: refinements and recommendations. *The Christian Librarian*, 60(1), 44-55. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=tcl>
- Karlsson, N., Loewenstein, G., Seppi, D. (2009). The ostrich effect: selective attention to information. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 38(2), 95-115. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41761376>
- Kim, H. K., Ahn, J., Atkinson, L., & Kahlor, L. A. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 misinformation on information seeking, avoidance, and processing: a multicountry comparative study. *Science Communication*, 42(5), 586-615. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1075547020959670>
- Narayan, B., Case, D. O., Edwards, S. L. (2012). The role of information avoidance in everyday-life information behaviors. *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 48(1), 1-9. Retrieved from <https://asistdl.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/meet.2011.14504801085>
- Naveed, M. A., Anwar, M. A. (2019). Modeling information anxiety. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 1-14. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6359&context=libphilprac>

- Siebenhaar, K. U., Köther, A. K., & Alpers, G. W. (2020). Dealing with the COVID-19 infodemic: distress by information, information avoidance, and compliance with preventive measures. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.567905>
- Soroya, S. H., Farooq, A., Mahmood, K., Isoaho, J. & Zara, S. (2021). From information seeking to information avoidance: understanding the health information behavior during a global health crisis. *Information Processing & Management, 58* (2). Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S030645732030933X?via%3Dihub>