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# Zooming in on Topics: An Investigation of the Prevalence and Motives for Selective News Avoidance

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## ABSTRACT

Intentional news avoidance is a common behavior that can be influenced by individual, content, and contextual factors. However, prior studies have primarily focused on general news avoidance and neglected selective avoidance of specific topics. Therefore, our study aimed to determine which topics people tend to avoid and the reasons behind this behavior. We conducted an online survey ( $N = 1071$ ) with open-ended questions to gather information on topic-specific news avoidance and motives. Our systematic quantitative content analysis revealed that the most commonly avoided news topics were related to the pandemic, political issues, and soft news. Participants cited negative emotional reactions and lack of interest as their primary reasons for avoiding news on an individual level, while redundancy and lack of trust were cited as reasons related to content. Logistic regression analyses revealed that specific motives were related to topic-specific avoidance. Issue fatigue was the primary motivator for avoiding news about COVID-19, while anger and lack of trust were the main reasons for avoiding political news. Lack of interest and overload were the motivators for avoiding soft news. Our study highlights the importance of understanding selective news avoidance and provides insights into the reasons why people choose to avoid certain news topics.

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## KEYWORDS

News avoidance; intentional news avoidance; news exposure; news perceptions; political attitudes; selective news avoidance

News consumption and news coverage play pivotal roles in the functioning of a democracy. This is particularly emphasized in models of democracy that underscore the normative value of citizen engagement, such as participatory or deliberative democracy. In these models, there is a strong emphasis on citizens being active and engaged in the political process, which necessitates a certain level of knowledge. Consequently, democracies depicted in these models rely on an informed citizenry, and this can only be achieved if citizens stay informed about the news to understand relevant developments in politics and society (Strömbäck 2005).

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Despite the high normative value of news consumption, recent findings indicate that a growing share of citizens is avoiding the news (Newman et al. 2022). For the definition of news avoidance, it is differentiated between low news consumption and selective news avoidance (Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2023). People belong to the first category of news avoiders if they (almost) never consume news as a result of, for example, other media content, structural reasons or specific news attitudes (e.g., news is not relevant for me; Edgerly 2021; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020; Toff and Nielsen 2022). Selective news avoidance describes an active choice to turn away from news which is not necessarily related to a low level of news consumption (Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2023; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). Instead, it is a result of a feeling of being overwhelmed by news, for example due to the available amount of information, the negative tone of the news coverage or the lack of trust in news (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2022).

Usually, low news consumption is considered to be more harmful for democracy since it describes a general detachment of politics, journalism and society (Edgerly 2021). Selective news avoidance, on the other hand, indicates that people take breaks from the news. This does not necessarily mean that they miss important information since their overall level of news consumption can still be high (Palmer, Toff, and Nielsen 2023). However, to be able to judge the democratic relevance of intentional news avoidance, it is crucial to know what kind of news citizens avoid. For example, if people predominantly avoid soft news topics like sports and celebrities, effects for democracy are much less severe compared to avoiding political news. However, so far, selective avoidance of news topics has not been investigated in previous studies. Unless we disentangle intentional news avoidance due to general apathy from selective avoidance of specific topics, we cannot assess the consequences of intentional news avoidance for democracy.

Against this background, the current study conducted a quantitative survey with a large-scale sample representative for the Austrian society. Participants answered open-ended questions about the selective avoidance of topics in the news and reasons for avoiding these topics. This approach has crucial advantages compared to closed questions because we are able to generate information about the kinds of topics people avoid and their motives in an exploratory way which gives us nuanced insights into the avoidance of topics and their motives. We analyze this data with a manual content analysis to be able to explain (1) what types of topics participants avoid, (2) why they avoid these topics and (3) if motives for avoidance depend on the specific topics that people avoid.

## Selective Intentional News Avoidance of News Topics

News avoidance does not have one generic definition, but there are different types of news avoidance which differ with regard to the underlying intention and the scope of avoiding news (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2022). Concerning the first, *unintentional news avoidance* refers to a low level of news exposure that is a result of news not being part of a person's news repertoire (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). Reasons can be a preference for other content than news or a daily routine that does not include time to engage with news (Toff and Palmer 2019). *Intentional news avoidance* can be defined as a deliberate and active choice against news because of a specific dislike for news (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). Concerning the scope, Skovsgaard and Andersen (2022) point out that news avoidance can be *consistent*, *occasional* and *selective*.

Consistent news avoidance means that people have very low to non-existing news engagement that can be intentional, unintentional or even a mix of these types of avoidances. Occasional news avoidance describes taking active breaks from the news from time to time, without entirely turning away from the news. Finally, selective news avoidance is delineated as a subtype of intentional news avoidance, characterized by the conscious avoidance of specific types of news, such as particular news topics.

In this article we focus on *selective intentional news avoidance*. This can be characterized as a distinct form of intentional news avoidance, involving a deliberate decision to disengage from specific topics (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2022). As highlighted by Skovsgaard and Andersen (2022), selective news avoidance is inherently intentional, involving a deliberate decision to refrain from engaging with specific types of news content. This implies that individuals avoiding particular topics can also be regarded as general intentional news avoiders. While most studies investigate news avoidance without considering specific topics (Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2021; Edgerly 2021; Gorski 2022; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020), there are some qualitative and quantitative findings on avoiding specific news topics. Recent publications point out the pandemic has elicited that kind of behavior resulting in a high share of people avoiding news about COVID-19 (Buneviciene et al. 2021; de Bruin et al. 2021; Grady et al. 2022; Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022; Mannell and Meese 2022; Nguyen, Glück, and Jackson 2023; Schäfer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2023; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2018). This was especially the case during the peaks of the pandemic. For example, findings for Austria show that the share of people avoiding news about COVID-19 at least sometimes increased from 75 to 80% between April and May in 2020 (Schäfer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2023). More recent findings for Austria suggest a pronounced avoidance of news about the war in Ukraine, followed by health news, encompassing COVID-19 updates, celebrity news, news about social justice and information regarding climate change (Gadringer et al. 2023). Other quantitative studies investigated the avoidance of news about Brexit (Gurr and Metag 2022) and refugee policies (Arlt, Schumann, and Wolling 2020) with the concept of issue fatigue. This concept describes a feeling of annoyance with a topic that is frequently covered in the news over a longer period of time (Metag and Arlt 2016). Further, qualitative findings showed that people indicate to avoid information about other, usually political topics, like news about former US president Trump (Wagner and Boczkowski 2021) or the Druze rallies in Israel (Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2021). However, since these topics have been brought up in qualitative interviews, it is not possible to tell whether political topics or the topics single participants mentioned are “typical” topics people avoid. Indeed, as far as we are aware, the Digital News Report (Gadringer et al. 2023) stands out as the sole study employing a comprehensive large-scale quantitative approach to explore topic-specific avoidance and potential motivations. It is noteworthy, however, that their methodology involves presenting participants with a predefined list of potentially avoided topics, leaving the possibility that certain pertinent topics might be overlooked or omitted from consideration. Since knowing what kind of topics people avoid is crucial for a better understanding of the nature of news avoidance, its democratic implications and for potential measures to keep news avoidance low, we ask:

RQ1: What news topics do people avoid in Austria?

## Motives for (Selective) Intentional News Avoidance

Concerning motives for intentionally avoiding the news, Skovsgaard and Andersen (2022) point out that they can be separated into *individual-level factors*, (perceptual) *content-level factors* and *contextual factors*. Concerning the first, it can be differentiated between general (political) attitudes and news perceptions. Previous findings have shown that political interest (Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, and de Zúñiga 2023), general political trust (Villi et al. 2022) and political orientation (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020) are related to intentional news avoidance: high levels of interest in politics, higher levels of trust in politics and a leaning towards the right on the political spectrum have shown to lower news avoidance. Another study found that people turn away from the news if they do not agree with the political view that is presented, especially for heated political debates (Newman et al. 2023). For news perception, previous findings indicate that how people feel with the news is a crucial predictor of news avoidance. An important predictor of news avoidance that could be identified in both qualitative and quantitative studies is that people feel emotionally stressed by the news due to a feeling of being overloaded, a feeling of sadness or anger that is related to lower levels of news consumption (Gorski 2022; Newman et al. 2022; Park 2019; Toff and Nielsen 2022).

Further, *perceptions of the content* have shown to be related to turning away from the news. Findings of the Reuters Digital News Report indicate that participants explain their behavior to avoid the news with the perception that news is too negative and that it has a too strong focus on the same topics (Newman et al. 2022). This aligns with the conclusions drawn by Gurr and Metag (2023), who observed that the frequent recurrence of a topic in the news contributes to heightened fatigue, subsequently leading to an increased tendency to avoid information related to Brexit, as demonstrated in their respective study. Furthermore, a lack of trust in the news due to biased news reporting increases turning away from news (Gorski 2022; Schumann and Arlt 2023; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). That means, negative news, redundancy in the news and a lack of trust in the news coverage are crucial factors for intentional news avoidance.

Finally, the *context of news* also plays a role for news avoidance. Contextual factors refer to “environmental and situational characteristics, which potentially impact the consumption and content of the news” (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2022, 7). A relevant contextual factor is the media system as pointed out by Hallin and Mancini (2004), including the existence of a public service broadcasting system, the level of freedom of press or the concentration of the press market that shape norms related to news consumption and have shown to be relevant for avoiding news (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). Other relevant contextual factors are situational changes which influence the news landscape. For example, in times of crises, the need for information increases, but so does the amount of available information (Van Aelst et al. 2021). In addition, citizens have an elevated level of stress and anxiety which influences news use practices (Schäfer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2023). As a result, both the level of news exposure, but also the frequency of taking a break from the news are increased in acute crisis situations (de Bruin et al. 2021; Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022; Schäfer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2023).

While previous studies found that individual-level factors, content-level factors and contextual factors are crucial to explain intentional news avoidance, we do not know if

these factors also explain selective avoidance of specific news topics. Gorski (2022) showed that the avoidance of specific topics is only a weak predictor of general news avoidance. This indicates that general news avoidance and topic-specific news avoidance do not refer to the same concept and therefore seem to be different in nature. As a result, findings for general news avoidance cannot be generalized to topic-specific news avoidance. Recent studies investigated the case of COVID-19 and found that individual feelings like the fear of COVID-19, the perception of the COVID-19 news coverage and the general crisis situation explain avoiding news about COVID-19 (Buneviciene et al. 2021; Schäfer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2023). For example, a common motive to avoid news about the pandemic was the feeling of being fatigued by the topic, as a result of a lack of trust in news about the COVID-19 pandemic and the frequency of mentioning the topic on the news (Schumann and Arlt 2023). This was further substantiated by the results of a cross-national study, indicating that issue fatigue, in conjunction with media trust, emerged as a significant predictor across the three countries examined: Germany, Pakistan, and Indonesia (Schumann et al. 2022). The latest Digital News Report showed that the war in Ukraine is currently a news topic that is frequently avoided. This behavior is explained with the need to protect one's mental health and as a form of coping (Newman et al. 2023). However, it is unclear if these motives also apply to other news topics. Thus, we ask:

RQ2: In how far do individual-level factors, content-related factors and context-related factors serve as motives for topic-specific news avoidance?

As mentioned earlier, prevalent topics actively avoided in Austria encompass news related to the war in Ukraine, the pandemic, soft news, politics, and climate change (Gadringer et al. 2023). Considering the substantial differences in their salience, emotional impact, and urgency, it is highly probable that the motivations for avoiding each of these topics also vary. The emotionally draining nature of the war in Ukraine likely prompts individuals to avoid it for reasons related to the individual level factors, such as negative emotional reactions, as demonstrated in recent findings (Newman et al. 2023). In contrast, motives for avoiding news about the pandemic may be tied to perceptions of the news content, including trust in news coverage and the perception of news redundancy, as indicated in previous studies (Schäfer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2023; Schumann et al. 2022). For the avoidance of soft news, personal interest is likely a key factor, whereas the avoidance of other hard news topics may be linked to political attitudes and the general perception of political issues. This has been demonstrated in previous studies focusing on topics such as Brexit and the refugee crisis (Arlt, Schumann, and Wolling 2020; Gurr and Metag 2022, 2023). When it comes to avoiding information on climate change, contextual factors related to a crisis situation, including feelings of stress, anxiety, or threat, are likely influential.

In conclusion, the findings and reflections mentioned in the previous paragraph highlight differing reasons to avoid information about certain topics, such as crisis-related and political themes. However, this may not be as pronounced for other categories of topics, such as those falling under the umbrella of soft news. To learn more about the relation between topics and motives, we ask:

RQ3: Is there a relation between avoided topics and motives for selective avoidance?

## Method

### *Case Selection and Sample*

To investigate the research questions, we conducted a quantitative survey study in Austria. Since country-level characteristics as well as context-level factors have shown to influence news avoidance behavior (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2022; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020), it is important to highlight characteristics of Austria to fully understand dynamics that drive selective avoidance in this country. Austria is country with about 8 million inhabitants located in central Europe. Adopting the framework introduced by Hallin and Mancini (2004), further refined by Humprecht et al. (2022), Austria can be classified as a democratic corporatist country. Characteristic features of media systems within this category include a widespread daily readership of both online and offline newspapers, extending to the groups which on average engage less with news, such as working class and women. Moreover, there is a relatively low degree of political parallelism, indicating minimal influence from partisans and political parties. The media landscape demonstrates high journalistic professionalism, marked by the autonomy of journalists, elevated credibility levels, and a strong responsiveness of journalists in online environments. Additionally, state support is substantial, signifying a notable market share for public service broadcasting and a general framework of public support for the media sector. In Austria, the interest in news is quite high with 90% being somewhat interested in news (Gadringer et al. 2022). Further, 40% trust the news, which is similar to the European (42%) and global (42%) average (Gadringer et al. 2022).

During the time of data collection between mid-June and mid-July 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic was still a salient topic. Since June 2021, the vaccination was available to the general society and the government campaigned for the vaccine to achieve high vaccination rates. Further, the European Championship took place in ten different European cities at that time. Another topic that was prevalent in the news was the murder of a thirteen-year-old girl in Vienna who was drugged and sexually abused by three men with a migration background from Afghanistan on June 26th. This resulted in a heated debate about migration policies in Austria.

For the recruitment of the sample, we collaborated with the market research company Dynata. Dynata is an American company which offers high-quality samples worldwide by recruiting from their pool of panelists (Dynata 2022). The sample was chosen based on age, gender, education and geographic distribution (considering the Austrian Bundesländer) of the Austrian society. The final sample consisted of 1071 participants representative of the Austrian society for the relevant criteria ( $M_{age} = 41.96$ ,  $SD = 12.94$ ; 52.87% women; 15.32% with a college degree).

Before the start of the survey, participants were informed about the data protection regulations in the EU and had to agree that their data could be used for scientific purposes. They were also informed about their right to withdraw their participation any time after the data collection by reaching out to the market research company. An additional ethical approval was not necessary based on the University's regulation and due to the topic of the survey which did not contain any ethically critical elements.

## **Measures**

### **News Avoidance**

Intentional news avoidance was used as a filter question for selective news avoidance. That means, participants were only asked about specific topics they avoided if they indicated to intentionally avoid the news in general. For this purpose, we used an item which was utilized in previous studies to measure intentional news avoidance (Newman et al. 2022; Toff and Nielsen 2022). This item was “I actively tried to avoid the news”. However, instead of measuring news avoidance only with a single item, we also asked in how far participants showed the following behaviors in the previous week: “I try hard to not have to engage with news”, “If I got in touch with news, I actively turned away from it”, and “I didn’t want to engage with news”. People could indicate their answers with a scale from 1—never, to 7—very often. All items were combined to an index (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .94$ ;  $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ). If people answered at least one of these items with a value  $>1$ , they were asked the following questions about selective news avoidance. The decision to filter for intentional news avoiders before addressing selective avoidance of specific topics aligns with the methodology employed by Newman et al. (2023) and is consistent with the definition of selective news avoidance as a subtype of intentional news avoidance, as outlined by Skovsgaard and Andersen (2022).

### **Selective News Avoidance**

To measure selective avoidance of topics, we asked participants an open-ended question. The wording of the question was:

Now, please, think about whether you have avoided specific topics in the news recently. We mean that you have encountered specific topics in the news and actively turned away from them, for example by changing the TV program, actively ignoring news posts on social media or not to continue reading a newspaper article. The type of medium doesn’t matter. Please, use the text field to list the specific topics you have actively avoided. You can also write down several topics if you avoided news about more than one topic. If you did not avoid specific topics, but rather news in general, please leave the field blank.

### **Motives for Selective Avoidance**

To identify motives, we also chose an approach with an open-ended question. Here, the wording of the questions was: “Can you explain why you avoided these topics? Please, try to explain the reasons why you actively avoided these topics. Try to write down the reasons in the text field”

### **Control Variables**

As control variables, we considered political efficacy, political interest, age, gender and education. To measure political efficacy, we used a two-item scale by Beierlein et al. (2012). The items were “I have a good understanding and assessment of important political questions” and “I have confidence to actively participate in a political discussion”. To measure political interest, we asked “How politically interested are you?”. Participants could choose a value ranging from 1 “not at all politically interested”, to 10 “very politically interested”.



## Data Analysis

To analyze the open-ended question, we developed a coding scheme for the avoided topics (Table 1) and the motives (Table 2). To develop this scheme, we chose a mix of an inductive and deductive approach. For the coding of the topics, we started with COVID-19, sports, migration and politics (both in Austria and foreign politics), because these were salient news topics at that time. In a next step, we added categories in the process of coding. These were climate, violence, news in general, war/terror, negative news, economy, advertisement and soft news. For the coding scheme of the motives, we started with motives related to issue fatigue (Gurr and Metag 2022), which resulted in the categories redundancy and overload. Based on the motives for general news avoidance (Gorski 2022; Schäfer, Aldering, and Lecheler 2023; Toff and Nielsen 2022), we considered negative physical reactions to news, sadness/depression, negativity and trust as potential categories. These categories cover the most important individual-level, content-level and context-level factors related to news avoidance (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2022). During the coding procedure, we added interest in the respective topic, anger/frustration, being annoyed, structural reasons (e.g., not enough time, daily routines), quality of the news, not being affected and boring, as additional motives. For each topic and each motive, it was only possible to code one topic or motive. However, participants could provide several topics and motives in their answer which were then all coded by the coder.

The coding was conducted by one trained coder. To ensure reliability of the coding process, a second trained coder coded about 20% of the material. This material was randomly selected. After the coding, we calculated Krippendorff's Alpha for topic and motive categories to determine the inter-coder-reliability of the coding process. For topics, results show that for all categories, the average value was  $\alpha = 0.92$  ranging from  $\alpha = 0.75$  for politics (foreign) to  $\alpha = 1$  for sports, climate, negative news, advertisement and economy. For motives, the average value was  $\alpha = 0.79$ , ranging from  $\alpha = 0.70$  for quality of information to  $\alpha = 0.89$  for interest. A list of all alpha values for all coded categories can be found in the online appendix under <https://osf.io/rb346/>

To learn about the relation between the avoidance of topics and motives, we calculated logistic regression analyses with avoidance of COVID-19, politics and soft news topics as dependent variables and the motives as independent variables. Before calculating the logistic regression models, we checked for multicollinearity of the independent

**Table 1.** Coding scheme for avoided topics.

Category	Explanation
COVID-19	Everything related to the pandemic, including political measures, lockdown, press conferences about the vaccine, the virus, mutations
Politics (domestic)	Political actors or processes in Austria, Ibiza scandal, tax fraud by politicians
Politics (foreign)	(Happenings in) other countries than Austria, political actors of other countries
Sports	European Championship, other sports
Violence/Physical Harm	Killing, murdering or torturing of animals or humans, sexual abuse (including children), cruelty
Migration	Refugee, refugee crisis, migration reforms
Climate	Climate crisis, glacier melting, temperature changes, extreme weather conditions
Terror/War	Terror attacks, war scenes in the news
Negative News	Unspecified negativity in the news
Advertisement	Advertisement in general, specific
Soft News	The weather forecast, royals, celebrities, topics with low democratic relevance

**Table 2.** Coding scheme for motives to avoid certain topics.

Category	Explanation
Lack of Trust	Doubts when it comes to the accuracy of the news coverage, lying press, fake news accusations, feelings of being manipulated
Redundancy	Always the same topic and/or information
Overload	Too much of the same topic, amount of news too much, feeling overwhelmed by the amount of news
Negativity	News is too negative, the negative tone of news
Lack of Interest	No interest for the topic/not feeling like engaging with news (topic), boring, irrelevant
Negative Physical Effects	Physical symptoms such as racing heart, problems to fall asleep
Structural Reasons	Daily routines that interfere, no time, personal problems
General Quality of Information	Dissatisfaction with the news coverage, badly reported
Depressed	Sad, depressed, negative psychological reactions, also low self-efficacy
Anger/Frustration	Being angry, frustrated, feeling of “nothing changes”, “I can’t bear it anymore”

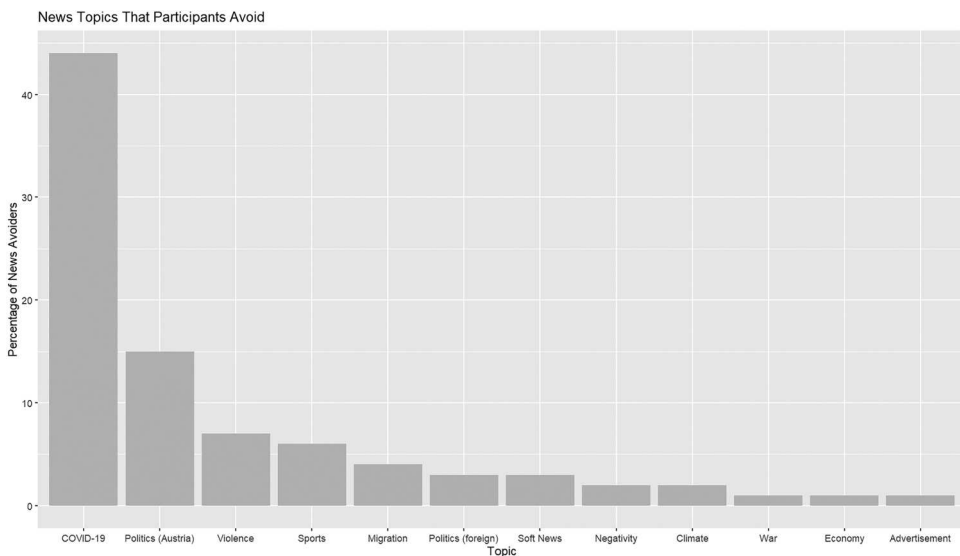
variables and influential values which did not indicate any problems for all three models. The data, as well as the code, for the main analysis and the regression diagnostics can be found under <https://osf.io/rb346/>.

## Results

RQ1: What news topics do people avoid in Austria?

Of the full sample, 70% percent self-identified as news avoiders. That means, they had values greater than one for at least one of the four news avoidance items. Of these 753 news avoiders, 69% indicated avoiding certain topics which can be inferred from the fact that they answered the open-ended questions. Of these open-ended questions, it was possible to code a topic of the coding scheme for 484 participants (63% of the news avoiders). On average, people avoided 1.38 topics ( $SD = 0.69$ ).

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the topics. COVID-19 is by far the topic most participants avoided. 44% of the news avoiders indicated to have avoided this topic. 20% of the



**Figure 1.** Frequency analysis of the topics participants avoided. Note:  $N=753$  news avoiders.

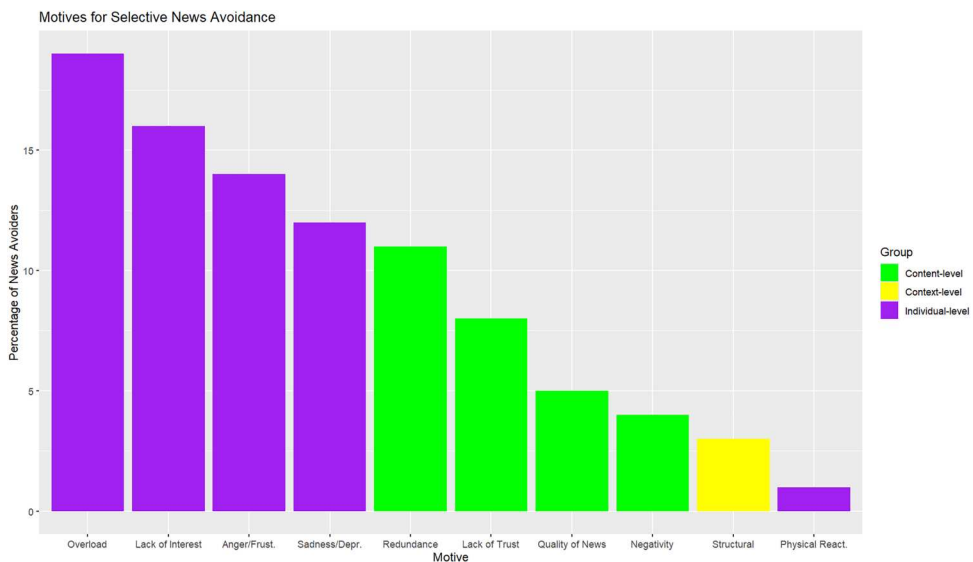
news avoiders answered avoiding topics related to politics (politics Austria, migration, politics foreign). In this category, most participants avoided topics related to domestic politics. This was followed by 9% indicating avoiding a soft news topic which was predominantly sports (6%), followed by other soft news topics (3%) and advertisement (1%). And finally, 8% indicated avoiding topics related to depressing news. In this category, most participants avoided violent news content (7%), followed by negative news in general (1%) and depictions of war and terror (1%). Finally, a small percentage of the participants indicated avoiding news about climate (2%) and news about the economy (1%).

RQ2: In how far do individual-level factors, content-related factors and context-related factors serve as motives for topic-specific news avoidance?

If it comes to the motives for selective news avoidance, results are summarized in [Figure 2](#). Most motives that participants mentioned in their answers are related to the individual level. Overload is frequently mentioned (19%), but also a lack of interest (13%) and emotional reactions to news like anger (15%) or depression (12%). Further, also motives related to the news content play a role. Participants wrote that redundancy (12%), but also a lack of trust (8%) and the perception of general news quality (7%) are motives to avoid certain topics. Negativity is mentioned by 4%. Finally, context-level motives were only brought up by 3% of the news avoiders. That means that selective news avoidance seems to be mainly motivated by negative reactions to news on an individual level as well as dissatisfaction with the news coverage.

RQ3: Is there a relation between avoided topics and motives for selective avoidance?

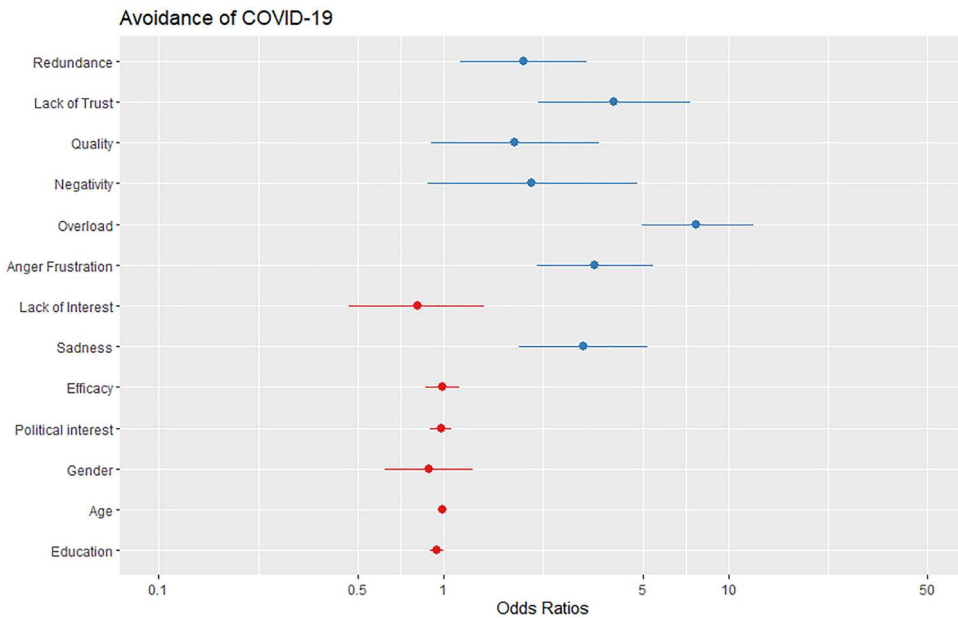
To learn about the relation between motives and topics, we calculated regression analyses. As dependent variables, we looked into the avoidance of topics related to (a) the pandemic, (b) political topics and (c) soft news. These were the categories of topics which were most frequently mentioned by the participants in their answers. That



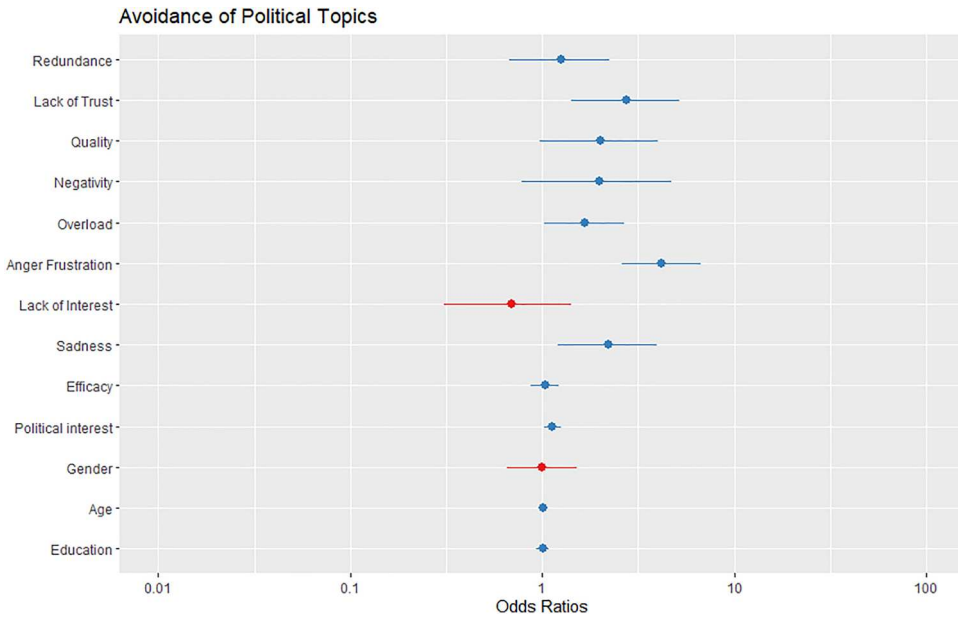
**Figure 2.** Motives for the avoidance of specific topics. Note:  $N = 753$  news avoiders.

means, we calculated three different logistic regression models with each of the topics coded as 1 if the topic was mentioned by the participant and 0 if no or only one or several other topics were mentioned. This results in each of the three logistic regressions predicting a binary variable consisting of whether the participant indicated (or not) avoiding the respective topic. As independent variables, we considered all motives which were mentioned by more than 3% of the participants. As a result, redundance, lack of trust, quality of the news, negativity, overload, anger, lack of interest and sadness served as predictors in our models. Physical reactions to news and structural motives were not considered since too few participants mentioned these motives in their answers. Furthermore, we controlled for political efficacy, political interest, age, gender and education.

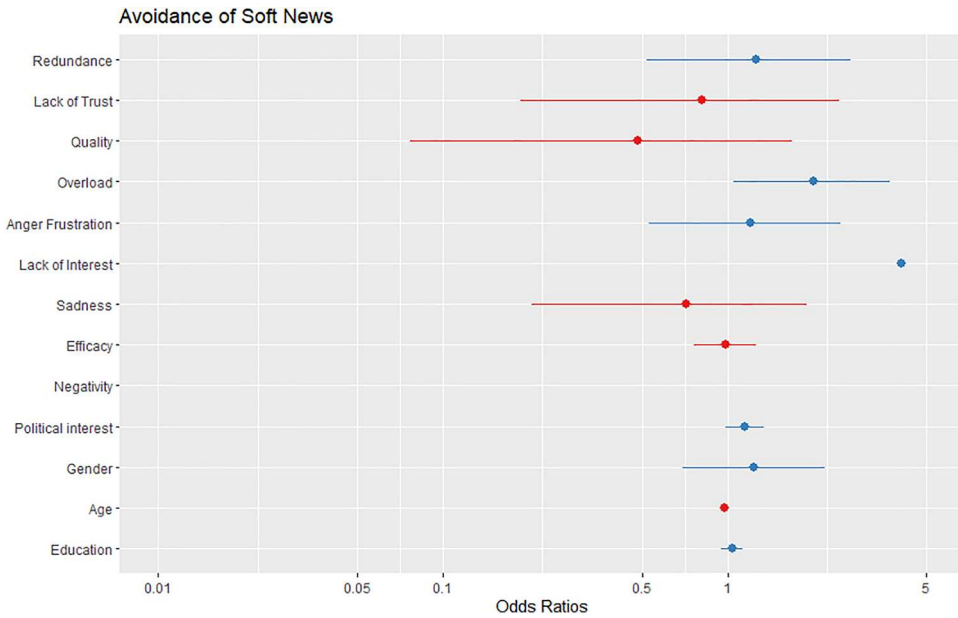
In the Figures 3–5, we provide the odds ratio for each of the independent variables as well as their significance level. These values indicate how the odds of mentioning a specific topic (compared to not indicating this specific topic or indicating (possibly several) other topics) increase if the independent variable increases by one unit. Findings show that mentioning COVID-19 as a topic that participants avoid is more likely if motives on the individual level are mentioned, such as overload (OR = 7.73), anger (OR = 3.39) and sadness (OR = 3.08). Further, perceptions of the news content including lack of trust (OR = 3.95) and redundance (OR = 1.91) matter for the chance of avoiding COVID-19 in the news. The strongest predictors are overload and anger. According to the coefficients, it gets 7.73 times (overload) and 3.39 times (anger) more likely that COVID-19 was mentioned as a topic if these motives were mentioned. When looking at predictors for avoiding political topics, anger (OR = 4.18) is the strongest predictor, followed by sadness (OR = 2.21) and overload (OR = 1.67) on the individual level. Further, also lack of trust (OR = 2.73) on the



**Figure 3.** Results of the logistic regression model with avoidance of COVID-19 as a dependent variable. Note:  $N = 753$  news avoiders; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .25$ .



**Figure 4.** Results of the logistic regression model with avoidance of political topics as a dependent variable. Note:  $N = 753$  news avoiders. Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .15$ .



**Figure 5.** Results of the logistic regression model with avoidance of soft news as a dependent variable. Note:  $N = 753$  news avoiders. Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .12$ , Negativity is not part of the figure because the value is not within the range of values displayed. It has no significant relationship with the dependent variable.

content-level plays a role. For soft news topics, lack of interest is the strongest significant predictor (OR = 4.09), followed by overload (OR = 2.00) while all other independent variables are not significantly related to avoiding certain topics.

## Discussion

Intentional news avoidance has recently attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Several studies have investigated the prevalence of avoiding news in general (Newman et al. 2022; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020; Villi et al. 2022), avoiding news about the pandemic (de Bruin et al. 2021; Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022; Schäfer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2023) and identified predictors for this kind of behavior (Schäfer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2023; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). However, previous research on news avoidance has paid less attention to the fact that people do not just avoid the news in general, but they might avoid news selectively. That means, they actively skip certain topics in the news (Skovsgaard and Andersen 2022). Since knowing what kind of topics people avoid and what motivates this behavior is crucial to understand democratic consequences of avoiding news and to find solutions to keep news avoidance low, the current study investigated selective news avoidance and its motives with open-ended questions in a quantitative online survey in Austria.

Findings for the selective avoidance of news show that about two thirds of the participants said that they avoid certain topics in the news and not just news in general. As a result, our findings underline that intentional news avoidance does not necessarily mean that people have a specific dislike for news in general but instead, it indicates that people have a dislike for specific topics in the news that they try to circumvent when engaging with news content.

Looking at the topics that our participants avoided, the findings are very much in line with the latest Reuters Digital News Report of the time when our data was collected. According to the report, about half of the people who avoided the news explained that behavior with too much news about the pandemic and politics (Gradinger et al. 2021). Our findings confirm these patterns of news avoidance, but additionally point out that people tend to avoid soft news as well. When evaluating this type of behavior from a normative perspective, it is crucial to define a democratic model to determine whether and how it may be harmful to democracy (Strömbäck 2005). Strömbäck (2005) distinguishes between four democratic models: procedural, competitive, participatory, and deliberative. The first two highlight the role of journalism as a burglar alarm, keeping citizens informed about significant updates, such as the misconduct of political elites. However, in these models, it may be within the normative standard to miss certain political or societal information unless there is a pressing update, meaning unequal distribution of knowledge might be normatively acceptable to a certain degree, for instance when citizens scoring lower in political knowledge obtain the information from their peers (Leeper 2020). On the other hand, the participatory and deliberative models underscore the importance of ongoing civic engagement and the active role of citizens in the democratic process. This necessitates a high level of knowledgeability, implying that any form of news avoidance would be problematic when applying this standard. But even within democratic models which stress the importance of knowledge of citizens, it can be argued that avoiding news about politics is a problematic behavior while the

avoidance of news about the pandemic and especially soft news is not that harmful for political processes. At the time of the data collection, following daily updates about the pandemic was not as crucial to keep the pandemic under control anymore. The vaccination was available for everyone, measures were eased and infection rates were dropping. Especially after over a year into the pandemic, it is an understandable and also acceptable behavior that participants seemed to ban the pandemic out of their life which also seemed to include avoiding news and updates about COVID-19. The high share of avoiding soft news can be explained with the European Championship which was frequently on the news and just did not match with everyone's personal interest. As a result, especially the 20% of news avoiders who turn away from political news should be taken seriously since they might miss democratically relevant information. However, it can also be argued that 20% of avoiders of political news content is still an acceptable rate since it is an unrealistic—and also unnecessary—expectation that all citizens are constantly and equally engaged in political news content (Schudson 1998). As a result, it can be concluded that intentional news avoidance is to a large extent not a severe threat for democracy, since most news avoiders do not actively turn away from information which are crucial for their civic duties as citizens, such as news about politics.

Considering the motives for news avoidance, it can be concluded that explanations for selective news avoidance overlap to a certain degree with predictors that have been identified in quantitative studies on general news avoidance: individuals in our sample avoid certain topics mainly due to a feeling of being overwhelmed, due to negative emotional reactions and due to a lack of trust. In general, we have identified motives on three distinct levels: content-level, individual-level, and context-level, in line with the framework proposed by Skovsgaard and Andersen (2022). On the content-level, participants point to aspects of news reporting as factors influencing their avoidance of news. This includes instances where they receive an excess of repetitive information, lack trust in the news source or its quality, or perceive the coverage of a news topic as overly negative, prompting avoidance. Motives at the individual level are more closely tied to inherent characteristics of a news topic, irrespective of its coverage. Reasons for avoidance at this level encompass a sense of overload with an issue, feelings of anger towards a topic, a lack of personal interest, experiencing depressive emotions when contemplating a specific subject, or even negative physical reactions. Notably, the distinction between motives for avoiding a specific topic based on features of news coverage versus the intrinsic nature of the topic itself was also highlighted in the findings by Gurr and Metag (2022).

Further, we also found that the reasons for avoiding news are very much tied to specific topics. Avoiding news about COVID-19 can be considered a result of issue fatigue (Gurr and Metag 2022): participants in our sample felt overloaded by the amount of information and disliked the permanent repetition of the topic which motivated them to avoid the topic to a high extent. Avoiding political topics was rather an expression of the frustration with politics. Participants predominantly avoided domestic politics and emphasized their anger related to political topics but also their sadness when being confronted with the news about that matter. Interestingly, interest was only related to avoiding soft news and not to avoiding news about the pandemic or about politics. As a result, avoiding news about politics or the pandemic is not an indicator that people do not care about these topics anymore. Instead, our respondents report that these topics make them angry, sad and they feel manipulated by news which is why they turn away from them.

Naturally, our study comes with limitations. First, topic-specific news avoidance is very much tied to the news landscape at the time of the data collection. As a result, our findings also reflect the course of the pandemic of that time, the political affairs that were happening and the European Championship that was on while we collected our data. That means, we cannot tell if the topics or the motives for avoidance also hold over a longer period of time. Therefore, we encourage future research to replicate our study to be able to investigate the robustness of our findings. Second, we chose an open-ended approach to investigate both the topics and the motives of selective news avoidance. This comes with many advantages since answers of the participants are not restricted to certain predefined answering categories. As a result, we can get a more complete picture of avoided topics and their motives. However, there are also several downsides. With our open-ended approach, we primarily capture manifest topics and motives that are on top of participants' minds. Consequently, it is not surprising that respondents mention very salient topics along with reasons that are relatively obvious for those particular subjects (e.g., redundancy for salient topics) or reasons tied to strong emotional reactions which are easy to recall (e.g., anger with political issues). However, less prominent topics that do not receive as much attention in the news and motives that are more subtle and challenging to identify, such as complexity or specific framing, as described by Gurr and Metag (2023), may be overlooked with this approach. Therefore, it is advisable to complement our research with alternative methodological approaches, including a combination of content analysis and surveys, as well as experimental designs. This multifaceted approach would contribute to obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of selective intentional news avoidance. Furthermore, an open-ended approach is a more demanding way to collect answers which requires a certain level of self-reflection and articulation skills. Participants who struggle with these competences are therefore systematically disadvantaged and might not have had the abilities to share their answers with this question format. Another disadvantage is the analysis of the answers. We had to code all answers and assign them to answering categories which we developed based on the theory as well as the answers. Even if the coding process worked very well overall, some answers could not be (clearly) assigned to categories of the codebook or were differently assigned between the coders. Thus, future research should replicate our study with a more standardized procedure.

In sum, two overall implications can be inferred from these findings. First, the share of news avoidance of political topics and the related motives indicate that the Austrian society is to a certain degree frustrated with Austrian politics. This motivates them to turn away from the news, but it is also likely that this share of people generally turns away from politics. Eventually, also citizen engagement and participation rates might decline. As a result, politicians should put effort into winning back the trust of these people and refrain from providing more reason to doubt the integrity of political actors in Austria. Secondly, especially findings for motives for selective news avoidance contain important implications for journalism. According to our findings, it is important to not overload people with single topics and to avoid redundancy in the news coverage. This is especially important if topics dominate the news over a longer period of time. Even if it is important that citizens receive regular updates about certain topic, it is still advisable to keep the amount of news about that topic low and the variance of topics high, which might lower the feeling of issue fatigue. Regarding issue fatigue, the research



conducted by Gurr and Metag (2023) reveals that news coverage featuring repeated information, a higher level of complexity, and strategy framing contributes to increased issue fatigue. While our findings align with the aspect of repeated information, the latter point introduces additional considerations for journalism to alleviate the feeling of annoyance toward a topic. Participants might not have mentioned these factors, potentially due to a lack of awareness, but addressing them could potentially reduce the avoidance of salient topics.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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