Examining Avoidance of Ongoing Political Issues in the News:
A Longitudinal Study of the Impact of Audience Issue Fatigue

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This study examines relations between news users' fatigue from ongoing political news issues and different forms of avoiding these issues. When it comes to political issues, avoidance would be detrimental to an informed citizenry and problematic against the backdrop of citizens increasingly tuning out news media in general, as observed in recent years. The results from fixed effects regressions based on a three-wave panel survey show that increasing issue fatigue leads to increasing avoidance of the issue when selecting news media content and during exposure to news media content on the issue, although it does not affect avoidance of interpersonal discussions on the issue. Issue fatigue is a stronger predictor of avoidance during media use than other issue predispositions, such as issue importance and attitude. Thus, it emerges as a new explanatory approach to avoidance of media content on an issue level.

Keywords: media avoidance, issue fatigue, news issues, political issues, news media use

Coronavirus, Brexit, and climate change: News media have been covering these issues frequently and extensively over a long period of time. The emergence of news users' fatigue from these ongoing issues has been observed and discussed publicly, including in regard to an increasing number of news avoiders in general (Bedingfield, 2020; Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). The idea that overexposure to extensive media coverage of a political news issue during a particular period eventually causes a perception of fatigue from the issue has been introduced as a phenomenon known as *issue* or *topic fatigue* (Metag & Arlt, 2016; Schumann, 2018). When news users no longer want to hear or see anything about an issue, they might strive to avoid the issue. Previous research already has found indications that issue fatigue is related to avoiding the issue in regard to news exposure and interpersonal conversations (Kuhlmann, Schumann, & Wolling, 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016). However, causal relationships between issue fatigue and different avoidance forms have yet to be investigated longitudinally.

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As opposed to positive effects from extensive media coverage of public issues on media users, such as devoting more attention to such issues (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) and processing the information provided more deeply (Ciuk & Yost, 2016), fatigue from news issues and subsequent avoidance behavior are problematic. Mass media are viewed as the most important source of information for citizens, whose use of it for information purposes is associated positively with political knowledge and participation (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Scheufele, 2002). If individuals stay away from information on a current political issue, they may become less knowledgeable about current developments and decisions regarding the issue. This is problematic for the functioning of modern democracies, which are founded on an informed and participatory citizenry (van Aelst et al., 2017), particularly against the backdrop of an increasing number of general news avoiders tuning out current affairs completely (Blekesaune, Elvestad, & Aalberg, 2012).

Thus, it is relevant to investigate the dynamics of ongoing news coverage of a political issue and news users' avoidance behavior. We do so by using the concept of issue fatigue to grasp news users' state of being overexposed to ongoing news coverage of an issue. Avoidance behavior so far has been researched in a variety of communication contexts, such as politically motivated selective exposure (Stroud, 2008), advertising (Cho & Hongsik, 2004), and news in general (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2019). Issue fatigue differs from these approaches because it occurs on the level of a single issue and is the result of overexposure to information on that issue. Furthermore, avoidance does not occur initially, but only if issue fatigue has emerged after a period of exposure to information on the issue. Against this backdrop, this study investigates how issue fatigue is related to issue-specific avoidance behavior. To account for the fact that issue fatigue and potential avoidance behavior develop over time and for underlying causal mechanisms, we used data from a panel survey.

The Concept of Issue Fatigue

Some researchers have introduced the idea that fatigue from public issues that news media cover extensively over a long period leads to avoidance of media content and interpersonal discussions on the issue (Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016; Schumann, 2018). We define issue fatigue as an individual's negative state that emerges because of overexposure to an issue that news media cover extensively over a long period. Extant research on the effects from repeated exposure to stimuli, such as advertising or health messages, suggests that after a certain number of repetitions, the evaluation of a stimulus can shift from positive to negative. In the beginning, the stimulus is novel and perceived as interesting and stimulating; however, after a certain number of repetitions, negative cognitive and emotional reactions occur (Berlyne, 1970; Cacioppo & Petty, 1979, 1989; Calder & Sternthal, 1980; So, Kim, & Cohen, 2017). Overexposure first affects the evaluation of the stimulus, information-processing strategies, and learning (Burke & Edell, 1986; Claypool, Mackie, Garcia-Marques, McIntosh, & Udall, 2004). Moreover, perceptions of boredom, tedium, reactance, and anger occur (Craig, Sternthal, & Leavitt, 1976; S. Kim & So, 2018; Rethans, Swasy, & Marks, 1986; So et al., 2017). It is assumed that repeated exposure to information on the same political news issue at some point causes negative cognitive and affective responses to the issue also. Thus, we transfer findings on other overexposure phenomena to ongoing news issues and suggest three conceptual dimensions of issue fatigue, considering that an ongoing news issue is an informative stimulus and nonpersuasive: decreased processing involvement, negative emotions of anger and annoyance, and information overload regarding the issue.

When recipients are too frequently exposed to information on the same issue, their motivation to engage with the issue or to process information on the issue extensively (Perse, 1998; Schemer, Matthes, & Wirth, 2008) is assumed to decrease. Processing involvement is determined particularly by the information received on the issue rather than by the issue itself (Antil, 1984). If—after repeated exposure—the information on the issue is perceived as less newsworthy and rather repetitive (Berlyne, 1970), the motivation to process the received information should decrease. Second, repeated exposure to information on the same issue over weeks or months leads to increasingly negative emotions associated with the issue, particularly annoyance and anger (Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016; Schumann, 2018). Annoyance and anger are negative, obstructive emotions and emerge in situations in which situational factors hinder a person's goal (Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 2005), such as being exposed against one's will to a health message (S. Kim & So, 2018) or an ongoing news issue. Finally, repeated exposure to media content on the issue, at some point, can turn into receiving too much information, thereby creating feelings of being overloaded or overwhelmed by the information. It is assumed that news overload (Ji, Ha, & Sypher, 2014; Lee, Holton, & Chen, 2019) can apply also to information on a single news issue, thus making information overload a dimension of issue fatigue. Issue fatigue is about ability and motivation to engage with the issue. It thus goes beyond mental fatigue as exhaustion and weariness following exertion (Ream & Richardson, 1996). It is not only about being overwhelmed by information, but also about no longer wanting to hear or see about the issue (Kuhlmann et al., 2014).

Approaches to Avoidance of Media Information

Communication research has dealt with selection and avoidance of media objects in several contexts. One theoretical approach is based on consistency theories. Cognitive dissonance is a situation of being exposed to conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behavior, which causes mental discomfort that individuals strive to avoid (Festinger, 1957). Transferred to media information, the selective exposure approach (e.g., Donsbach, 1991; Stroud, 2008) postulates that individuals select information that matches their beliefs and predispositions to reduce dissonance. Selective avoidance refers to avoiding information with challenging views (Jang, 2014; Johnson & Kaye, 2013).

Another approach to selectivity are motives or their absence. The uses and gratifications approach assumes that individuals select media content based on their needs, orientations, and motivations (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), such as political interest (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013; Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & van Meurs, 2011) and perceived duty to keep informed (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001) for news. In that respect, the instrumental utility theory explains selection of information by the degree of utility attributed to the information. When individuals are uncertain about topics or events because they do not have sufficient knowledge, they select information on these (Atkin, 1973; Knobloch-Westerwick, Carpentier, Blumhoff, & Nickel, 2005). In addition, noninstrumental motives of information selection have been identified, such as personal issue importance (Y. M. Kim, 2008) and interest in the issue (Silvia, 2006). Consequently, individuals are less likely to select information on issues if they do not perceive a lack of knowledge and do not perceive the issue as relevant or interesting.

Issue fatigue differs from previous approaches to avoidance. It is not about the attitude toward an issue, which is central in selective exposure research (Stroud, 2008). It is also different from the expected

utility of information on the issue for gaining knowledge (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2005) and general attributed importance to the issue (Y. M. Kim, 2008). Issue fatigue is a negative effect from overly frequent exposure that does not exist initially, but emerges only over time and can emerge whether an individual is for or against an issue. It concerns those who are generally interested in politics and the issue and thus expose themselves to political news (Strömbäck et al., 2013) and information on the issue during their news exposure. This enables them to become fatigued as opposed to those who do not expose themselves to news on the issue.

Avoidance Forms

Communication research applies different understandings of avoidance. Selective avoidance is often conceptualized and measured as not selecting particular media content such as information on issues (Jang, 2014) and news (Strömbäck, 2017; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). Some communication scholars, however, emphasize the distinction between nonselection and active avoidance, and they conceptualize avoidance as a conscious and deliberate choice to stay away from the media object in question (Böcking & Fahr, 2009; McLeod & Becker, 1974). In line with this, information science describes active or intentional information avoidance as an individual's purposeful decision to stay away from available information (Howell & Shepperd, 2016).

Not selecting a media item can be traced to its characteristics, such as a lack of importance or dissonant information. However, it can also be due to a prioritization of other content, given the impossibility to select all media content available. Thus, nonselection does not sufficiently inform about its causes. Avoidance, on the contrary, relates more explicitly to the media object as its potential cause. Because we are interested in whether issue fatigue leads individuals to turn away from the issue, we focus on avoidance strategies of the issue rather than on nonselection. Similarly, selective exposure research differentiates between "defensive avoidance" (selectively avoiding dissonant information; Garret, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013, p. 115) and "confirmation bias" (seeking consistent information; Garret et al., 2013, p. 115).

First, avoidance can occur during the media selection process. Previous research has found that selective scanning and selective attention are strategies to avoid content users do not like, are not interested in, do not consider as important, or feel overloaded by (Bode, Vraga, & Troller-Renfree, 2017; Eveland & Dunwoody, 2002; Lee et al., 2019; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). In addition, research on emotion regulation argues that avoidance during selection occurs to prevent the perception of undesirable affect expected from particular content (Schramm & Wirth, 2008). Findings on advertising avoidance point to avoidance strategies such as ignoring the ads, turning the page, and discarding content (J. K. Kim & Sang, 2017; Speck & Elliott, 1997). If issue fatigue triggers avoidance of information on the issue initially during media selection, affected individuals neglect to learn about the issue because news exposure, together with interpersonal discussions, increases political learning (Eveland, 2004).

Second, avoidance occurs during exposure to a selected program or report. There is the possibility that users see a media report and start reading or watching it intentionally or incidentally (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018), but then take countermeasures (Bode et al., 2017). To regulate emotions, media users can apply behavioral and cognitive strategies during exposure (Schramm & Wirth, 2007, 2008). Behavioral strategies

are interrupting or terminating reception, selecting other content, or doing something else (Böcking & Fahr, 2009; Perse, 1998). Cognitive strategies concern the attention during exposure (Schramm & Wirth, 2008); similarly, inattention to the information is a strategy of information avoidance (Golman, Hagmann, & Loewenstein, 2017). During media exposure, cognitive avoidance can occur as shifting the attention elsewhere or rationalizing the received content (Schramm & Wirth, 2008). If issue fatigue triggers avoidance during exposure to information on the issue, it is possible that affected individuals learn about the issue during the initial phase of exposure prior to taking countermeasures, which then inhibit the further learning process.

Interpersonal discussions are social situations that involve other individuals and social norms (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Avoiding interpersonal discussions demands greater effort and potentially entails more unpleasant social consequences than avoidance during media use. Nonetheless, research has identified social aspects, such as dodging dissonance or conflict (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011), or anxiety and uncertainty (Duronto, Nishida, & Nakayama, 2005), as drivers of avoiding interpersonal discussions. When it comes to political news, individuals avoid talking about public issues because of a lack of interest (Wyant, Hurst, & Reedy, 2020). Similar to the finding that those individuals who are fatigued from health messages avoid discussions on the message topic (So et al., 2017), associations between fatigue from ongoing news issues and avoidance of interpersonal discussions have been found by cross-sectional research (Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016).

Hypotheses on Issue Fatigue and Avoidance

The cognitive and affective dimensions of issue fatigue have the potential to cause subsequent behaviors regarding the issue. First, negative emotions are generally associated with avoidance rather than approach behavior (Alexopoulos & Ric, 2007) and an individual's perception of certain emotions motivates them to act (Scherer, 2005). In media entertainment research, it has been shown that avoidance can take place if a positive affective state is to be maintained and a negative affective state is to be avoided (Zillmann, 2000). Actively avoiding media content because of negative affect also has been found in the context of nonentertaining media, such as election campaign information (Marcinkowski & Došenović, 2020), health information (Barbour, Rintamaki, Ramsey, & Brashers, 2012; So & Alam, 2019; So et al., 2017), and TV viewing (Böcking & Fahr, 2009; Perse, 1998). Although issue fatigue is different from mood and not about persuasive messages, these findings lead us to assume that the obstructive emotions of annoyance and anger (Scherer, 2005) cause avoidance of the issue.

Second, the dimension of decreased processing involvement could foster avoidance. The degree of motivation to process information on an issue is related to the extent to which information is sought and actually processed (Donnerstag, 1996). When issue-specific cognitive engagement is low—that is, when the individual does not want to know more information or more arguments, and does not want to spend time thinking about the issue (Matthes, 2013)—a plausible consequence is avoiding exposure to more information on the issue.

Third, information overload regarding the issue as a negative cognitive and affective state can result in avoidance behavior. For news in general, it has been shown that media users aim to avert the unpleasant experience of being overwhelmed by information (Schmitt, Debbelt, & Schneider, 2018; Song,

Jung, & Kim, 2017) and thus apply countermeasures (Lee et al., 2019). Thus, information overload regarding a single issue could also lead to avoiding the issue. Therefore, it is plausible that issue fatigue—entailing the interplay of increasingly perceived annoyance and anger, decreased information-processing involvement, and information overload regarding the issue—leads to avoidance of the issue on different levels.

With regards to avoidance during the media selection process, we assume that when news users are fatigued from an ongoing news issue, they expect negative emotions and cognitions when discovering a report is about the issue and thus do not select it in the first place, but avoid it.

H1:   The more news users perceive issue fatigue, the more they avoid selecting media content on that issue.

With regards to avoidance during media exposure, users can decide to select a media report on the issue, which during exposure gives rise to their anger and annoyance, decreases the motivation to process the information because of a lack of novelty, and fosters feelings over information surplus on the issue. This can lead users to avoid these perceptions by behavioral and cognitive countermeasures during exposure.

H2:   The more news users perceive issue fatigue, the more they apply avoidance strategies during exposure to media information on that issue.

In addition to media selection and exposure, avoidance can also concern conversations with others. Similar to avoidance during the media selection process, when individuals lack the motivation and capacity to engage with the ongoing news issue, they are likely to avoid talking with others about it.

H3:   The more news users perceive issue fatigue, the more they avoid interpersonal conversations about that issue.

Method

Data

To analyze the causal order of issue fatigue and different forms of avoidance behavior, we conducted a representative three-wave online panel survey in Switzerland. Respondents were recruited from the online access panel of LINK, a social and market research company. Quota sampling was applied with respect to age, gender, and language region. The first wave (n = 1,338; 50% female; M_{age} = 48.27 years, SD = 16.02; education: 44% higher education[2]) took place April 11–24, 2019; the second wave (n = 985; 49% female; M_{age} = 49.31 years, SD = 16.04; education: 44% higher education) took place May 9–20, 2019; and the third wave (n = 800; 48% female; M_{age} = 49.42 years, SD = 16.03; education: 43% higher education) took place May 29–June 11, 2019. The retention rate was 74% for Wave 2 and 81% for Wave 3. For this study, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Brexit) was chosen as an ongoing political news issue during the period of investigation, as the media covered it extensively over the

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[2] Tertiary education.

investigation period with a thematic focus on several postponements of the Brexit and negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union. The Brexit has an impact on the Swiss economy and its relation to the United Kingdom. Thus, the issue allows for some degree of involvement with the issue but does not concern the Swiss population as a strong national issue. It is therefore a suitable issue for studying fatigue and its potential behavioral consequences.

Measures

Dependent Variables

To measure avoidance strategies, we asked respondents to indicate how often they did the following things during the past week. Response alternatives ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Avoidance during selection was measured by two items (Wave 1: $M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.15$, $r = .68$; Wave 2: $M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.21$, $r = .66$; Wave 3: $M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.24$, $r = .74$): "Concerning an article or report, I . . ." "did not even read it or look at it, when I noticed it was the Brexit issue" and "(I) ignored it and instead I read or looked at something else." Avoidance during exposure was measured by three items (Wave 1: $M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.00$, $α = .73$; Wave 2: $M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.02$, $α = .73$; Wave 3: $M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.00$, $α = .72$): "Concerning an article or report, I . . ." "stopped reading it or looking at it before it was finished," "(I) kept following it, but I was inwardly disconnected," and "(I) kept following it while doing something else." Interpersonal avoidance was measured by one item (Wave 1: $M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.19$; Wave 2: $M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.21$; Wave 3: $M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.28$): "I avoided discussing the issue with others." Comparative measures have been used in previous research (Geiss, 2015; Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2019; Speck & Elliott, 1997).

Time-Varying Independent Variables

Nine items used in previous research for the processing involvement, information overload, and negative emotion dimensions were averaged to form a composite measure of issue fatigue (Wave 1: $M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.79$, $α = .81$; Wave 2: $M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.77$, $α = .82$; Wave 3: $M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.82$, $α = .85$). Response alternatives ranged from 1 (*I totally disagree*) to 5 (*I totally agree*). Processing involvement was measured by three items (all recoded): "I follow this issue with attention," "It is important to me to know all arguments of this issue in detail," and "The more information I get on this issue, the better" (Matthes, 2013; Schemer et al., 2008). Information overload was measured by four items: "I currently feel overloaded by the amount of news available on this issue," "I receive more information on this issue than I can actually process," "I am confronted from too much information on this issue," and "I feel overloaded from the amount of news on this issue" (Lee et al., 2019; Schmitt et al., 2018; Song et al., 2017). The negative emotions were measured by one item each: "This issue gets on my nerves" and "This issue makes me angry" (Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016).

As discussed previously, issue predispositions are influential for selective approach and avoidance to information. To compare the potential effects of issue fatigue on avoidance with established predictors, we included issue-specific control variables into the analysis. Issue importance was measured by two items (Wave 1: $M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.97$, $r = .47$; Wave 2: $M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.94$, $r = .51$; Wave 3: $M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.94$, $r = .52$): "I personally think that this issue is important" and "This issue is important to Switzerland" (Matthes,

2013). Response alternatives ranged from 1 (*I totally disagree*) to 5 (*I totally agree*). Interest in the issue was measured by one item (Wave 1: M = 3.17, SD = 1.10; Wave 2: M = 2.99, SD = 1.10; Wave 3: M = 2. 98, SD = 1.10): "How interested are you in the Brexit issue?" Response alternatives ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) to 8 (*I have never heard of that issue*). Self-perceived knowledge was measured by two items (Wave 1: M = 3.15, SD = 1.01, r = .67; Wave 2: M = 3.11, SD = 0.97, r = .71; Wave 3: M = 3.17, SD = 0.99, r = .76): "I know the main arguments of the various parties involved in this issue" and "I know the main facts about this issue" (Geiss, 2015). Response alternatives ranged from 1 (*I totally disagree*) to 5 (*I totally agree*). Negative attitude toward the issue was measured by four items (Wave 1: M = 2.97, SD = 0.98, α = .73; Wave 2: M = 2.97, SD = 0.93, α = .74; Wave 3: M = 2.95, SD = 0.89, α = .73): "Brexit is the correct political decision for Great Britain" (recoded), "Brexit carries negative consequences for the Swiss economy," "Brexit endangers stability in Europe," and "Brexit would improve relations between Great Britain and Switzerland" (recoded). Response alternatives ranged from 1 (*I totally disagree*) to 5 (*I totally agree*).

Time-Invariant Variables

Furthermore, political interest and the perceived duty to keep informed are motives for general news exposure and could thus lead to exposure to information on the issue (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). We included these control variables into the analysis: Political interest was measured by one item at Wave 1 (M = 3.57, SD = 0.97): "How interested are you in politics in general?" Response alternatives ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Duty to keep informed was measured by three items at Wave 2 (M = 4.20, SD = 0.78, α = .69): "It is important to be informed about news and current events," "We all have a duty to keep ourselves informed about news and current events," and "So many other people follow the news and keep informed about it that it doesn't matter much whether I do or not" (recoded; Poindexter & McCombs, 2001; Schmitt et al., 2018). Response alternatives ranged from 1 (*I totally disagree*) to 5 (*I totally agree*). In addition, age, gender, and education were included.

Data Analysis

First, a dropout analysis revealed that those respondents who dropped out after the first wave and were not included in the analysis (n = 349) were significantly younger than those who participated in all waves. Furthermore, t tests for all issue-specific time-varying variables revealed that they avoided the issue more during media selection, were more issue fatigued, had lower self-perceived knowledge and less interest in the issue at Wave 1, and were generally less interested in politics.

To test the effect of issue fatigue and other issue predispositions on different avoidance forms, we ran fixed effects (FE) regressions. When the research interest is in the effects from time-varying explanatory variables, such as issue fatigue, and there is within variation in the dependent and independent variables over time, FE models using only within variation are most suitable as they come closest to causal tests in experimental studies (Allison, 2009). FE models study the causes of changes within individuals and produce estimates of the independent variables' average effects within units over time. The effects from individuals' stable characteristics, whether measured or not, are controlled for; thus, FE regression's advantage is that, by using within variation only and eliminating all time-invariant differences between individuals from the estimation, it reduces bias resulting from omitted and confounding variables more effectively than random

effects (RE) or pooled ordinary least squares regressions. FE estimates produce smaller coefficients and larger standard errors, causing higher p values than estimates based on both within and between variance (Allison, 2009; Wooldridge, 2010). Clustered standard errors in FE models account for the assumption of heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation of the residuals, leading to larger standard errors. Thus, in the first step, the time-varying independent variables' effects were analyzed only in an FE model.

To compare issue fatigue's effects with those from time-invariant individual characteristics influential in the use of media for information on current issues, in the second step, we also needed to include time-invariant predictors. Considering that all individual characteristics are controlled for in the FE model, their effect cannot be estimated (Allison, 2009). Thus, we ran RE models based on within- and between-units differences. According to the Hausman test, the estimates are biased systematically in our RE models. Therefore, we did not interpret the RE estimates' size, but compared only the order of their strength to see whether time-invariant individual characteristics exerted a stronger or weaker effect on avoidance of the issue than issue fatigue.

Interitem correlations at each wave ranged from nonexistent to moderate and confirmed that the predictors were different phenomena. The sample comprised 796 individuals giving answers to the relevant variables in at least Waves 1 and 2, resulting in 2,186 observations. Forty-three observations were deleted for reasons of data cleansing. The sample (n = 796; M_{age} = 50.69 years, SD = 16.07; 45% female; education: 50% higher education) differed from the original sample only slightly. To avoid a further decrease in the number of observations, we conducted a within-mean imputation at the wave level, averaging the available variables of a scale and replacing every missing value with the individual mean of the available variables from the same scale in the same wave, which is acceptable if the scales are homogenous (Graham, 2012).

Results

Table 1 shows the results from the FE and RE regressions for predicting avoidance of the issue during media selection. The FE results indicate that issue fatigue was associated the strongest with avoidance of the issue during selection, followed by interest and self-perceived knowledge. The positive coefficient of issue fatigue implies that a within-subject increase in issue fatigue led to a within-subject increase in avoiding the issue during media selection. The more audience members perceived issue fatigue, the more they avoided the issue during the selection of news media content. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Higher levels of interest and self-perceived knowledge predicted lower levels of avoiding the issue during selection. The model explained 4.6% of the variation avoidance of the issue during a person's selection over time. The remainder was produced by other factors that changed over time, but not by time-invariant individual characteristics, as these were controlled for in the FE model. The results from the RE model indicate that issue fatigue was a stronger predictor of avoidance during selection than the time-invariant individual characteristics of political interest and the perceived duty to remain informed.[3] Differences in the time-varying coefficients of the FE and RE model indicate the systematic bias in the RE model.

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[3] We tested all models including avoidance of news in general as a control variable. Despite a weak significant effect on avoidance during selection and exposure, issue fatigue remained the strongest predictor; other coefficients changed slightly. Because avoidance of news in general was measured in Wave 3 only, we did not include it in the analyses so as to not reduce further the sample.

***Table 1. Fixed Effects and Random Effects Regression Model Predicting Avoidance
of the Issue During Selection.***

Independent variable	Fixed effects		Random effects	
	b	Clustered SE	b	SE
Issue fatigue	.280***	.060	.541***	.034
Interest	−.114**	.041	−.162***	.028
Issue importance	−.068	.046	−.052	.029
Negative attitude	−.006	.047	−.055*	.026
Self-perceived knowledge	−.085*	.042	−.060*	.029
Political interest			−.100**	.035
Duty to keep informed			−.077*	.039
Age			.003	.002
Gender (female = 1)			.006	.057
Education (higher = 1)			−.080	.056
Constant	2.478***	0.353	2.506***	0.217
Within R^2	.046		.043	
Between R^2	.455		.478	
Overall R^2	.334		.350	
σ_u	.834		.585	
σ_e	.765		.765	
ρ	.543		.369	
N (observations)	2,186		2,186	
n (individuals)	796		796	

Note. σ_u = the time-invariant individual residual; σ_e = the time-varying residual; ρ = the proportion of variance due to time-invariant differences across individuals; Within R^2 = the proportion of variance in the dependent variable within an individual captured by the model; Between R^2 = the proportion of variance in the dependent variable between individuals captured by the model; Overall R^2 = the weighted average of the within R^2 and between R^2.
p < .05. **p* < .01. ***p* < .001.

        A similar picture emerged for avoidance during exposure to media content on the issue. Table 2 shows that issue fatigue had a significant effect on avoiding the issue during news media exposure, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2. None of the other issue predispositions significantly affected avoidance during exposure to information on the issue. The results from the RE model show that greater political interest and higher education led to less avoidance of the issue during exposure. However, issue fatigue was a stronger predictor than the time-invariant characteristics (the same holds true with standardized coefficients).

***Table 2. Fixed Effects and Random Effects Regression Model Predicting Avoidance
of the Issue During Exposure.***

Independent variable	Fixed effects		Random effects	
	b	Clustered *SE*	*b*	*SE*
Issue fatigue	.213***	.056	.393***	.033
Interest	−.016	.036	−.046	.026
Issue importance	−.021	.042	−.003	.027
Negative attitude	−.037	.042	−.056*	.025
Self-perceived knowledge	−.030	.040	.016	.028
Political interest			−.070*	.033
Duty to keep informed			−.022	.036
Age			.004**	.002
Gender (female = 1)			.096	.053
Education (higher = 1)			−.162**	.052
Constant	2.275***	0.315	1.886***	0.205
Within R^2	.017		.016	
Between R^2	.237		.269	
Overall R^2	.162		.182	
σ_u	.755		.552	
σ_e	.729		.729	
ρ	.517		.364	
N (observations)	2,186		2,186	
n (individuals)	796		796	

Note. σ_u = the time-invariant individual residual; σ_e = the time-varying residual; ρ = the proportion of variance due to time-invariant differences across individuals; Within R^2 = the proportion of variance in the dependent variable within an individual captured by the model; Between R^2 = the proportion of variance in the dependent variable between individuals captured by the model; Overall R^2 = the weighted average of the within R^2 and between R^2.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The third hypothesis presumed that issue fatigue leads to avoiding interpersonal conversations about the issue. The FE regression results (see Table 3) show that issue fatigue did not significantly predict avoidance of interpersonal discussions on the issue. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was rejected. None of the other issue predispositions exerted a significant effect either. Although not significant, avoidance of interpersonal discussions was associated more strongly with issue fatigue than with the other issue predispositions. In the RE model, issue fatigue was related the strongest to avoidance of interpersonal discussions. However, the differences in the time-varying coefficients of the FE and RE model indicate the systematic bias in the RE model. In addition, the perceived duty to remain informed, age, and education exerted a significant effect.

Table 3. Fixed Effects and Random Effects Regression Model Predicting Avoidance of Interpersonal Discussions.

Independent variable	Fixed effects		Random effects	
	b	Clustered SE	b	SE
Issue fatigue	.105	.071	.412***	.041
Interest	.033	.044	−.001	.034
Issue importance	−.062	.055	−.029	.034
Negative attitude	−.041	.060	−.041	.031
Self-perceived knowledge	−.024	.055	−.002	.035
Political interest			−.069	.040
Duty to keep informed			−.099*	.044
Age			.006**	.002
Gender (female = 1)			.090	.065
Education (higher = 1)			−.149*	.064
Constant	2.069***	0.386	1.560***	0.252
Within R^2	.005		.003	
Between R^2	.170		.234	
Overall R^2	.098		.141	
σ_u	.949		.644	
σ_e	.945		.945	
ρ	.502		.317	
N (observations)	2,186		2,186	
n (individuals)	796		796	

Note. σ_u = the time-invariant individual residual; σ_e = the time-varying residual; ρ = the proportion of variance due to time-invariant differences across individuals; Within R^2 = the proportion of variance in the dependent variable within an individual captured by the model; Between R^2 = the proportion of variance in the dependent variable between individuals captured by the model; Overall R^2 = the weighted average of the within R^2 and between R^2.
p < .05. **p* < .01. ***p* < .001.

Discussion

The results from the panel analysis show that when an ongoing political news issue fatigues news users, they avoid selecting media content on that issue. When already exposed to media content on the issue, they apply strategies to stay away from it. Issue fatigue affects avoidance during selection slightly more extensively than during exposure. Thus, the dimensions of issue fatigue, that is, higher levels of information overload and negative emotions—annoyance and anger—as well as lower levels of motivation to process information on the issue, lead to behavioral consequences concerning the issue during media use. However, issue fatigue does not affect interpersonal discussions on the issue significantly according to the FE regression producing unbiased estimates. In contrast to research on avoidance based on cross-sectional data, this study investigated relations between issue fatigue and avoidance using panel data.

The findings confirm that cognitive and behavioral strategies during exposure and behavioral strategies during selection (Schramm & Wirth, 2007) apply to the use of media content on a particular issue. Similar to avoidance of advertising (Speck & Elliott, 1997) and selective avoidance and scanning (Lee et al., 2019), ignoring the issue, stopping exposure, and distracting oneself are cognitive and behavioral strategies of avoidance during exposure that are related to issue fatigue. Thus, this study points to more active avoidance behavior concerning the issue beyond nonselection of information.

That issue fatigue affects avoidance during media use but not interpersonal avoidance can have several reasons. When turning to news media for current information, it is possible that users are exposed to the issue unintentionally (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018); perceive it as intrusive, such as with forced exposure to ads (Edwards, Li, & Lee, 2002); and avoid it consequently. Given that users can choose among a variety of news reports and other media content, it is relatively easy to sort out unwanted content (Bode et al., 2017), such as information on an issue. Furthermore, it is possible that issue fatigue is particularly associated with media coverage on the issue; characteristics of the media coverage, such as recurring images or keywords in headlines, cause a particularly strong perception of issue fatigue (i.e., of anger and annoyance) that motivate action and lead to avoidance (Newhagen, 1998; Scherer, 2005). In interpersonal discussions, visual stimuli are absent, which is why the perception of issue fatigue and the need to take countermeasures could be weaker. Furthermore, fatigued individuals could see interpersonal discussions as an opportunity to learn about the issue from others who are informed by the news media (Bandura, 2001) if they consider being informed as socially desirable and do not learn about the issue themselves from the news media because of avoidance. Finally, fatigued individuals could vent on their negative state concerning the issue when talking with others, which could be a compensation strategy when fatigued by it and thus a reason not to avoid conversations about the issue. For further research, it would be promising to analyze relationships among different avoidance forms among news users. So far, it remains unclear whether news users avoid the issue entirely or not (i.e., during media selection, exposure, and interpersonal discussions) or show only one avoidance form.

Issue fatigue differs from other approaches to avoidance in the news media environment. In contrast to general news overload (Song et al., 2017) and news avoidance (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2019), it focuses on single issues and concerns those who are not generally overloaded and avoiding news. It differs from the attitude toward the issue, which is central in selective exposure research (Stroud, 2008), because it is, first, a negative effect from overly frequent exposure, as opposed to a rather stable attitude (Ajzen, 2001), and can emerge whether an individual fears challenging views or not. Issue fatigue also emerges only after a prior period of exposure to information on the issue. Issue fatigue is a stronger predictor of avoidance of the issue during media use than other issue predispositions. Despite issue importance, interest, a negative attitude, a lack of self-perceived knowledge, political interest, and the perceived duty to remain informed about current affairs, users avoid information on the issue when they perceive fatigue. Thus, the emergence of fatigue from ongoing news issues needs to be viewed as an independent concept affecting selection of and exposure to media information on ongoing political news issues. It represents a further theoretical approach to avoidance of media content on an issue level and adds to extant research on avoidance of news media content.

If individuals avoid exposure to information on the issue, learning about current developments and different positions concerning the issue can be impeded. This undermines the news media's information function and can be detrimental to political discourses that are key in the functioning of modern democracies (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Scheufele, 2002), especially if occurring repeatedly. Turning away from media content on ongoing political issues is also problematic against the backdrop of the general public increasingly tuning out news media, a phenomenon observed in several countries over the past few years (Blekesaune et al., 2012). Thus, issue fatigue that leads to avoidance behavior stands to elicit further potential consequences on political communication and news media's role in democratic societies.

Limitations

The findings come with some limitations. Relations between issue fatigue and avoidance behavior were investigated only for the Brexit issue in Switzerland and should be validated for other issues and country contexts. Furthermore, avoidance of interpersonal discussions was measured using only one item, which should be extended in future studies. In addition, this study investigated avoidance forms in general. It would be promising to investigate different avoidance strategies that involve different media types (e.g., print, social media, or TV)—as done in advertising research—in further studies. To better account for active avoidance, it would be promising to measure avoidance intentions (Howell & Shepperd, 2016) in addition to avoidance strategies.

Furthermore, the results may be biased because of dropout from the panel survey. Dropout after Wave 1, and thus exclusion from the analysis, goes in hand with a more negative stance toward the issue initially. The results were based on a sample overrepresenting those who were on average more positive toward the issue. Effects of issue fatigue on avoidance could thus be underestimated in our models. In addition, the effects could be stronger if intervals between the waves were longer.

On the data analysis level, FE regressions' disadvantage in not being able to estimate effects from time-constant predictors limits the preciseness of results for time-invariant predictors. In the RE models, we identified time-invariant predictors, but could not interpret their values thoroughly compared with issue fatigue and other time-varying predictors, as the estimates are biased in our RE models. FE models produce unbiased estimates of the time-varying predictors, which we prioritized in this study. The possible disadvantage of FE models relying on only within variation—and, thus, causing potential inferential problems (Bell, Fairbrother, & Jones, 2019)—can be compensated for through the sample's representativeness.

Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of fatigue from ongoing news issues and different forms of issue avoidance. The findings from a three-wave panel survey on the Brexit issue in Switzerland show that issue fatigue does not lead to avoiding interpersonal discussions on the issue, but does lead to avoidance of the issue during media selection and exposure. Issue fatigue is more influential than other issue predispositions, as well as general political interest and the perceived duty to remain informed about current affairs. Thus, the study adds to research on avoiding news media content by offering an approach to avoidance on the issue level while simultaneously distinguishing between different avoidance forms. The findings indicate that

enduring media coverage of political issues can exert negative effects on the public. Thus, a need exists to study the causes of issue fatigue among the news audience to avoid users tuning out ongoing political issues covered in news media.

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