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Perceived negativity of news, news distrust, and news overload as predictors of intentional news avoidance in preadolescents and their parents

Abstract: People are avoiding news more and more. To better understand which factors predict intentional news avoidance in preadolescents and their parents, we tested perceived negativity of news (H1), news distrust (H2), and news overload (H3) as statistical predictors. We also explored the interrelations between preadolescent- and parent-reported variables (RQ1, RQ2). Using cross-sectional survey data of 192 preadolescents (mean age = 10.4 years; 57 % female) and 214 parents (mean age = 43.0 years; 89 % female), we found that perceived negativity of news predicted preadolescents' intentional news avoidance. For parents, news overload predicted intentional news avoidance. We found positive correlations between preadolescent- and parent-reported variables. None of the parent-reported predictor variables predicted preadolescents' intentional news avoidance, but parents' own news avoidance did. We offer solutions for preadolescents, parents, as well as news agencies.

Keywords: news consumption, news avoidance, survey research, preadolescents, parents

1 Introduction

News consumption is seen as an important contributor to youths' development into well-informed citizens (York & Scholl, 2015). Current trends showing that not only adults (Newman et al., 2022) but also youth (Edgerly et al., 2018; Shehata, 2016)

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are turning away from news are therefore worrying. News avoidance is defined as "low news consumption over a continuous period of time caused either by a dislike for news (intentional) or a higher preference for other content (unintentional)" (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020, p. 463). Intentional news avoidance is most problematic: When youth and adults deliberately turn away from the news, democracy loses the foundation for well-informed citizenship (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to understand which factors predict intentional news avoidance in both youth and adult audiences.

Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) identified three main reasons for intentional news avoidance in the literature: "(1) the news is too negative, (2) the news cannot be trusted, and (3) there is too much news to navigate" (p. 465). While most research on news avoidance has focused on adults and some on adolescent samples, no studies have investigated predictors of news avoidance among preadolescents (8–12 years old). This age group is important because news media aimed at preadolescents exist in several countries, meaning that preadolescents can already seek out or actively avoid the news. In one of the few studies on preadolescents' news experiences, Alon-Tirosh and Lemish (2014) showed that youth as young as 8 years old are already interested in and thinking about the news, but also avoiding it when it does not suit their needs. Furthermore, patterns of youth news media consumption and avoidance can persist over time (Shehata, 2016; York & Scholl, 2015), indicating that developing early news consumption habits (and preventing early news avoidance) can have important longer-term consequences. The first goal of this study is therefore to empirically test whether perceived news negativity, news distrust, and news overload are related to news avoidance in preadolescents.

News consumption is strongly socialized by parental behaviors (York & Scholl, 2015). Shehata (2016) found that news consumption by Swedish parents was the most consistent predictor of their adolescent child's news consumption. Given that news avoidance increases, it is important to study whether parents are avoiding news and how that relates to their child's news avoidance. Therefore, the second goal of this study is to investigate news avoidance in preadolescents' parents to understand how parental news avoidance and predictors are related to that of their children.

Using cross-sectional data from Dutch parent-preadolescent dyads, this study adds to knowledge about news avoidance in a younger sample than previously studied, thereby helping to identify ways to prevent early news avoidance. Moreover, it adds to developing work on intentional news avoidance and its predictors in a parent sample, by investigating ways in which news avoidance transmits from parents to children.

2 Predictors of intentional news avoidance

Literature indicates three key reasons for intentional news avoidance (Skovs-gaard & Andersen, 2020). First, news often presents negative content which affects users' moods. Such negative experiences have been reported for preadolescents and adults alike (e.g., Kleemans et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2022) and can there-fore be important drivers of news avoidance in both younger and older audiences. Second, people may intentionally avoid the news because they do not trust the news. Beliefs in biased media or uncertainty what to believe can drive adult users to avoid the news (Newman & Fletcher, 2017; Toff & Nielsen, 2018). As far as we know, no research has investigated news distrust as predictor of news avoidance in youth. Third, intentional news avoidance may be the result of news overload. Given the ubiquitous nature of the current media landscape, adults can feel overloaded with information and this may drive them to avoid news media (Song et al., 2017). Twelve to 16-year-olds also connected the omnipresence of news to news avoidance in an interview study (Tamboer et al., 2022). This body of research shows some empirical support for the three predictors of intentional news avoidance in adult samples, and some evidence for perceived negativity of news as predictor in youth audiences.

However, two clear gaps remain. First, to the best of our knowledge, no study has combined these three predictors in one study, and we therefore do not know their relative importance. Second, we found no research that has tested these pre-dictors among preadolescents. We therefore test three hypotheses and expect that there are positive relationships between news avoidance and perceived negativity of news (H1); news distrust (H2); and news overload (H3), in both (a) preadolescents and (b) their parents.

3 Relationships between preadolescent and parent-reported variables

Family communication patterns and parental behavior are important predictors of news use and political socialization (e.g., Edgerly et al., 2018; Shehata, 2016; York & Scholl, 2015). However, existing research has only focused on adolescents (12 to 18-year-olds). Given that adolescence is marked by a decline in parental influ-ence and concomitant increase in peer influence, it is reasonable to expect that for *pre*adolescents, parental news-related behavior is relatively strongly related to that of their children. We know of no research that has investigated interrelations between parental and preadolescent-reported perceived news negativity, news dis-

trust, news overload, or news avoidance. We therefore ask two research questions: How are parental perceptions of (a) perceived negativity of news, (b) news distrust and (c) perceived news overload related to preadolescents' perceptions of these variables? (RQ1), and to what extent are the parent-reported predictors related to preadolescent-reported dependent variable news avoidance? (RQ2).

4 Method

Participants and Procedure

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee Social Sciences of the Radboud University and preregistered (https://osf.io/89mx7). We collected survey data from parents and preadolescents between April and August 2021. Participants were contacted via primary schools. Parents who provided active consent received an email with separate links to a parental and preadolescent online questionnaire. In those questionnaires, parents and preadolescents individually provided consent to participate in the study, after which they individually completed questions on the same set of variables formulated identically across samples.

Our pre-registered *a priori* power analysis indicated a required sample of N = 177 preadolescents and parents to test our hypothesized model (effect size f^2 = .08, power = .80, and α = .05, with 6 predictors). Our final sample consisted of 214 parents (88.8 % female; age: M = 43.0 years, SD = 4.83, range = 25–59 years) and 192 preadolescents (56.8 % girls; age: M = 10.4 years, SD = 0.83, range = 8–12 years), indicating sufficient power. Participating parents reported finishing higher vocational education (43.5 %), university (28.0 %), lower vocational education (25.1 %), or high school (3.3 %).

Measures

For all scales, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity indicated that factor analysis was suitable for the items used. Principal Factor Analyses (PFA) with oblique rotation (oblimin) based on the scree plot criterium indicated 1-factor solutions for all scales.

Intentional news avoidance. The dependent variable was measured on a 6-point scale (1 = *never*; 6 = *very often*) with six items. We used Van den Bulck's (2006) scale with five specific items such as "When the news comes on, I switch to another channel". To also be able to capture other, more general news avoid-

ance behaviors, we added one general statement ("I try to actively avoid the news"; Kalogeropoulos, 2017). These six items were combined into a mean score (preadolescents: factor loadings .61-.84; α = .83, M = 2.87, SD = 1.00; parents: factor loadings .61-.82; α = .82, M = 2.46, SD = 0.78).

Perceived negativity of news. The first predictor was measured on a 6-point scale (1 = *never*, 6 = *very often*) with four items (cf. Kalogeropoulos, 2017): "The news has a negative effect on my mood" (preadolescents: M = 1.95, SD = 0.94; parents: M = 2.70, SD = 0.86), "The news upsets me" (preadolescents: M = 1.78, SD = 0.85; parents: M = 2.28, SD = 0.82), "I don't feel there is anything I can do about the news" (preadolescents: M = 3.09, SD = 1.66; parents: M = 3.84, SD = 1.33). We added "News covers negative topics too often" (preadolescents: M = 3.40, SD = 1.33; parents: M = 4.10, SD = 1.06). Factor loadings were .53-.76 for preadolescents and .55-.80 for parents. Internal reliability was insufficient in both samples (α = .53 and .63 respectively). As removing items would not improve reliability, we included the four items as individual predictors in our analyses.

News media distrust. The second predictor was measured on a 6-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 6 = *completely agree*) with four items from the News Credibility Scale (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986), such as "News media can be trusted". Values were recoded (1 = 6, 2 = 5, etc.) and mean scores were calculated so that a higher score indicated higher news media distrust (preadolescents: factor loadings .77-.86; α = .82, M = 2.94, SD = 0.92; parents: factor loadings .87-.92; α = .91, M = 3.37, SD = 0.96).

Perceived news overload. The third predictor was measured on a 6-point scale (1 = *never*; 6 = *very often*), using three items for perceived news overload (e.g., "I feel overloaded with the amount of news", Song et al., 2017) and three for news fatigue (e.g., "I feel exhausted due to too much news", Oppenheim, 1997). For item "I face too much news considering my limited time", factor loadings for both preadolescents (.49) and parents (.38) were too low. After removing this item, factor loadings were satisfactory (preadolescents: .65-.84; parents: .73-.84). The remaining five items were combined into a mean score (preadolescents: α = .79, M = 1.82, SD = 0.82; parents: α = .86, M = 2.37, SD = 0.86).

Analytic Approach

Analyses were performed in R. We checked all surveys for careless response patterns, but no data had to be excluded from the analysis. Inspection of the residuals confirmed that we could proceed with parametric tests of our hypotheses.

Although we preregistered to first test the hypotheses with regression analyses and subsequently – for interpretation purposes – test the complete models

using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), this first step felt redundant. We only report the results from SEM in the current paper, because these models are more complete with additional paths added to the model. We tested H1-H3 for preadolescents and parents separately, with the three predictors in one model using SEM (Lavaan package). Participants' biological sex, age, and level of education were included as covariates. Full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimations and a robust estimator (MLR) were used. The fit of each model was assessed with the following Goodness-of-Fit indices: RMSEA (cut-off value of < .08 and p-close > .05), CFI (cut-off value of > .90), and χ^2/df ratio, with a cut-off value of < 3.0. Two correlations/covariances needed to be added to the parental model, and one to the preadolescents' model, after which the data fit the model well.

Our preregistration also included hypotheses H4–6 and RQ1d for the (moderating) roles of parental mediation in the relationship between the three predictors and news avoidance. Results showed that almost none of these interactions were significant. To enable a clear focus of this research in brief, we share the results for these hypotheses online (https://osf.io/tqr5y/files/osfstorage).

5 Results

Predictors of intentional news avoidance (H1-H3)

For preadolescents, our model predicted 28.3 % of the variance in news avoidance (see Table 1). News avoidance in preadolescents was significantly predicted by the item "I don't feel there is anything I can do about the news" and by "News covers negative topics too often". The other items of perceived negativity of news (H1a), news media distrust (H2a) and perceived news overload (H3a) did not significantly predict preadolescents' news avoidance. Thus, only H1a is partly supported.

Table 1: Perceived Negativity of News, News Media Distrust, and Perceived News Overload as Predictors of News Avoidance.

	Preadolescents		Parents	
News avoidance	β	p	β	p
H1: Perceived negativity of news (items)				
The news has a negative effect on my mood	−.075	.337	−.099	.181
The news upsets me	.050	.579	.097	.184
I don't feel there is anything I can do about the news	**.080**	.046	.045	.242
News covers negative topics too often	**.280**	< .001	.078	.158
H2: News media distrust (scale)	.043	.535	.089	.105
H3: Perceived news overload (scale)	.110	.219	**.316**	< .001

Note. Significant relationships are in bold.

For parents, our model predicted 24.4 % of the variance in news avoidance (see Table 1). Only perceived news overload significantly predicted news avoidance. This indicated that more perceived news overload is positively related to greater news avoidance in parents (H3b). Neither the items for perceived negativity of news (H1b) nor news media distrust (H2b) were significantly related to news avoidance (see Table 1).

Relationships between preadolescent and parent-reported variables (RQ1–2)

Table 2 presents zero-order Pearson's *r* correlations between parental and preadolescents' perceptions of negativity of news, news distrust, news overload, and news avoidance (RQ1). All correlations were positive (*r*'s between .137-.403) and significant (*p*'s < .05), except for one of the items for negativity of news ("I don't feel there is anything I can do about the news"; *p* = .065).

Table 2: Pearson's *r* correlations between preadolescent and parental variables.

	Pearson's r	p
News avoidance	.398	<.001
Perceived negativity of news (items)		
The news has a negative effect on my mood	.282	<.001
The news upsets me	.315	<.001
I don't feel there is anything I can do about the news	.137	.065
News covers negative topics too often	.177	.014
News media distrust (scale)	.393	<.001
Perceived news overload (scale)	.403	<.001

To test whether the parent-reported predictors were related to preadolescent-reported news avoidance (RQ2), we added the parental predictors and news avoidance to the preadolescents' model. Although we did not preregister to include parental news avoidance as predictor in the preadolescent model, in retrospect we felt this addition was warranted based on literature showing relationships between parental and adolescent news avoidance (e.g., Shehata, 2016). This model fit adequately, χ^2/df = 1.930, p < .001, RMSEA = .066, 90 % CI [.052, .079], p = .030, CFI = .908, and predicted 32.3 % of the variance in preadolescents' news avoidance (see Table 3). None of the parental predictors significantly predicted preadolescents' news avoidance. Parental news avoidance was a significant predictor for preadolescents' news avoidance, indicating that news avoidance in parents is positively related to their child's news avoidance.

Table 3: Results of Regression predicting Preadolescents' News Avoidance on both Preadolescents and Parental predictors.

News avoidance (Pre) ~	β	p
Preadolescent predictors		
Perceived negativity of news (items)		
The news has a negative effect on my mood	-.145	.058
The news upsets me	-.019	.830
I don't feel there is anything I can do about the news	**.089**	**.021**
News covers negative topics too often	**.247**	**<.001**
News media distrust (scale)	.052	.481
Perceived news overload (scale)	.112	.210
Parental predictors		
News avoidance	**.380**	**<.001**
Perceived negativity of news (items)		
The news has a negative effect on my mood	-.043	.633
The news upsets me	.096	.307
I don't feel there is anything I can do about the news	-.007	.884
News covers negative topics too often	-.018	.793
News media distrust (scale)	.027	.722
Perceived news overload (scale)	-.003	.974

Note. Biological sex and age of the preadolescent and educational level of parents were included as covariates. Significant relationships are in bold.

6 Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to empirically test three theorized predictors of intentional news avoidance in preadolescents (8–12 years) and their parents. Based on Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020), we included negativity of news, news distrust, and news overload as predictors in our model (H1-H3). Furthermore, we investigated the relationship between parent- and preadolescent-reported predictors (RQ1), and whether parent-reported predictors and news avoidance were related to their child's intentional news avoidance (RQ2).

Results showed that preadolescents' and parents' intentional news avoidance were related to different predictors. For preadolescents, intentional news avoidance was predicted by two items measuring negativity of news (partly confirming H1a), but not by news distrust or news overload (rejecting H2a–3a). For parents, intentional news avoidance was predicted only by perceived news overload (confirming H3b), but not by negativity of news or news distrust (rejecting H1b-H2b). We found weak to moderate positive correlations between parental and preadolescent reports of the predictors of intentional news avoidance (RQ1). Parental perceptions of news negativity, news media distrust, and perceived news overload did not predict preadolescents' intentional news avoidance, but a parent's own news avoidance did predict their child's level of news avoidance (RQ2).

Our study indicates that the three potential causes of intentional news avoidance (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) are not necessarily simultaneously present or equally important for preadolescents versus parents. First, news negativity was the most pronounced reason to avoid the news for preadolescents, whereas it played no role for parents. Adults might be less affected by negative news due to desensitization or being better able to cope with negative news than preadolescents. Second, perceived news distrust was not a contributing factor of intentional news avoidance for either preadolescents or parents. A more representative, diverse sample is necessary to further explore this. Additionally, preadolescents might not yet be capable enough to critically evaluate the trustworthiness of news due to developing news literacy levels (cf. Tamboer et al., 2022). Finally, news overload predicted news avoidance in parents but not in their children. It is possible that preadolescents are less exposed to the news via various media platforms in a continuous manner, and therefore do not yet feel overwhelmed by it.

The results suggest different courses of action to decrease intentional news avoidance (cf. Shehata, 2016; York & Scholl, 2015). It would be nearly impossible to make the news less negative or less omnipresent, but news agencies could consider more constructive news for preadolescents (Kleemans et al., 2017). Moreover, negative feelings due to news use may be remedied by advising parents and preadolescents to use specific coping strategies (Causey & Dubow, 1992). Parents may reduce

their perceived news overload by choosing one or a few platforms to obtain news from or choosing to consume news at specific moments of the day. Future research should investigate effective coping strategies for different predictors of news avoidance and different age groups. Additionally, news agencies could implement slow journalism (i.e., less focus on the speed of news, but more on the quality of and gratification with the use of stories).

In line with previous research on news consumption (Shehata, 2016), we found that parental news avoidance was an important predictor of preadolescents' news avoidance. We thus should not underestimate the influence of parents as models for their children, also in the context of news use and avoidance. This calls for future research into news consumption in the family context, ideally employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches to do justice to youth's various ecological contexts of news use.

It is important to acknowledge that our results are based on cross-sectional data from a non-representative Dutch sample, with parental data mostly reported by mothers. Replicating this study in countries with different degrees of polarization and omnipresence of specific news subjects (such as news about specific wars or politicians) may result in other patterns that provide more insights into the nature of intentional news avoidance. Methodologically, this study highlights the need for reliable and valid measures of the predictors of news avoidance, especially for perceived negativity of news. Improving measures should go hand in hand with careful conceptualizing of theorized concepts. For example, is negativity of news about the content of the news itself or (also) about the negative effect of news on users' moods (which would then make it a mediating variable)? Although the review of Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) is highly helpful in discerning different types of news avoidance and predictors, future research should focus on taking both theoretical and methodological steps to fine-tune their model.

Overall, this study aimed to understand what contributes to preadolescents' and parents' intentional news avoidance and the role parents play in their child's news avoidance. Our findings provide input for news avoidance interventions in the family context, as well as suggestions for news agencies to consider alternative news formats to keep their audiences engaged. Given the central role of news in today's society, more work that helps understand what keeps young and old attracted to (or away from) news is vital.

Conflict of interest statement: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability: The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the Open Science Framework at http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/TQR5Y.

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