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AVOIDING NEWS WITH VISUAL CUES:

situational news avoidance and audience-side gatewatching in online news browsing

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ABSTRACT – This study examines how format-indicating visual cues shape situational news avoidance during online news browsing. Focusing on a camcorder icon signaling video availability, it investigates how such cues interact with individual predispositions to influence browsing-level disengagement. Drawing on selective exposure, psychological reactance, and audience-based news-ness, the study adopts an audience-centered perspective. Using an experimental design, time spent with news items was analyzed as an indicator of situational avoidance. Results show that camcorder-indicated news elicits reduced engagement under specific conditions, particularly among users with higher trait reactance and higher news media literacy. These findings conceptualize situational news avoidance as an audience-side gatewatching practice.
Keywords: Situational news avoidance. Gatewatching. Visual cues. Selective exposure. Reactance.

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EVITANDO NOTÍCIAS COM PISTAS VISUAIS: evasão situacional de notícias e gatewatching da audiência na navegação online

RESUMO – Este estudo investiga como indicadores visuais de formato moldam a evasão situacional de notícias durante a navegação em ambientes de notícias online. Com foco em um ícone de câmera que sinaliza a disponibilidade de vídeo, é analisado como esses indicadores interagem com predisposições individuais para influenciar a desvinculação no nível da navegação. Ancorado na exposição seletiva, na reatância psicológica e na noticiosidade (news-ness) sob a perspectiva da audiência, é empregado um delineamento experimental no qual o tempo de permanência nas notícias foi utilizado como indicador de evasão situacional. Os resultados indicam que notícias acompanhadas por um ícone de câmera apresentam menor engajamento sob condições específicas, particularmente entre usuários com maior reatância de traço e maior letramento midiático em notícias. Esses achados conceituam a evasão situacional de notícias como uma prática de gatewatching exercida pela audiência.
Palavras-chave: Evasão situacional de notícias. Gatewatching. Indicadores visuais de format. Exposição seletiva. Reatância.

EVITANDO NOTICIAS CON PISTAS VISUALES: evasión situacional de noticias y gatewatching de la audiencia en la navegación de medios en línea

RESUMEN – Este estudio examina cómo los indicadores visuales de formato configuran la evitación situacional de noticias durante la navegación en entornos de noticias en línea. Centrándose en un ícono de videocámara que señala la disponibilidad de video, analizamos cómo estas señales interactúan con predisposiciones individuales para influir en la desvinculación a nivel de navegación. Con base en la exposición selectiva, la reactancia psicológica y la noticiosidad (news-ness) desde una perspectiva centrada en la audiencia, adoptamos un diseño experimental en el que el tiempo de permanencia con las noticias se utilizó como indicador de evitación situacional. Los resultados muestran que las noticias marcadas con un ícono de videocámara suscitan menor involucramiento bajo condiciones específicas, particularmente entre usuarios con mayor reactancia como rasgo y mayor alfabetización mediática sobre noticias. Estos hallazgos conceptualizan la evitación situacional de noticias como una práctica de gatewatching ejercida por la audiencia.
Palabras clave: Evitación situacional de noticias. Gatewatching. Indicadores visuales de format. Exposición selective. Reactancia.

1 Introduction

In contemporary media-saturated online environments, individuals are daily exposed to a vast number of media messages on a wide range of topics. Given this abundance of content, it is unlikely that media users receive all messages equally. Instead, selective exposure occurs when individuals choose to engage with particular media messages rather than others, reflecting systematic biases in media choice (Luong et al., 2019). Contemporary online environments are therefore characterized by wide choice, fragmentation, and

rapid change. They are increasingly saturated with visual cues such as headlines, photographs, graphic illustrations, and layout-based signals that indicate prominence or relevance. This is particularly evident in online news environments, where visual cues have become integral to how news items are presented and encountered. Previous research consistently shows that visual cues accompanying news stories tend to increase the likelihood of selection (Graber, 1988; Rosenstiel, 2016; Zillmann et al., 2001). However, while much of this literature has focused on the role of textual cues in news selection, the expanding role of visual cues – often serving as emphasizing or framing elements for textual information – has received comparatively less attention in studies of news selection (Fahmy et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2019), particularly regarding their potential to prompt news avoidance (Kósa et al., 2020).

This theory-driven research addresses this gap in the context of a contemporary media environment in which news avoidance appears to be more prevalent than in earlier periods (Park, 2021; Sunstein, 2007; Zhu et al., 2017). Drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives – including the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the Information Utility Model, and Psychological Reactance Theory – and incorporating individual-level differences in news media literacy, the study examines how visual and textual cues jointly shape selective news use during browsing. Instead of conceptualizing news avoidance as a uniform or stable disposition, the study focuses on how individual characteristics interact with format-indicating cues at the moment of exposure, thereby contributing to a more differentiated understanding of avoidance in online news contexts.

Previous research offers several precedents for understanding how visual elements may contribute to news avoidance, even though these studies are not always directly concerned with online news selection. Early research on news recall, for example, identified what were later described as "avoidance responses" triggered by visual material associated with important news items. Katz et al. (1977) and Booth (1970) found that participants recalled televised news more effectively when visual material accompanied less important stories than when it accompanied highly important stories. More recent work likewise suggests that visuals in high-choice, multimodal media environments can foster selective avoidance, particularly in the context of political and cross-cutting news (Powell et al.,

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2019). Together, these findings indicate that visual cues do not uniformly enhance engagement but may also contribute to selective disengagement under certain conditions.

Earlier studies, building on this line of research, have identified interactions between the perceived importance of news items and the presence of format-indicating visual cues. Ambrus et al. (2011), for instance, found that attaching a camcorder icon – indicating the availability of related video material – to news items perceived as important reduced the selection frequency of those headlines. Subsequent work by Kósa et al. (2020) reported a similar pattern, showing increased avoidance of high-utility news headlines accompanied by camcorder icons among participants scoring high on both verbal and visual processing scales. Relatedly, Bálint and Kósa (2022) demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of trait reactance exhibited stronger avoidance responses to news items marked by camcorder icons.

Extending these findings, the present study conceptualizes such avoidance not as a general rejection of news or visual content, but as a situational response that emerges during browsing. Drawing on Kahneman's (2011) dual-process theory, the study interprets format-indicating visual cues – such as camcorder icons – as interpretive signals that shape rapid evaluations at the moment of encounter. From this perspective, visual cues may prompt immediate expectations about effort, relevance, or persuasive intent, thereby influencing whether users engage with or bypass a news item. By framing avoidance as situational and context-dependent, the study aims to contribute to ongoing debates on news avoidance by integrating cognitive processing dynamics with individual predispositions and visual design features in online news environments.

2 Theoretical background

Throughout this article, visual cues refer to concrete, format-indicating interface markers (e.g., camcorder icons), whereas signals denote exclusively the interpretive function these cues acquire in audience-side evaluation, rather than a distinct category of visual elements. We distinguish between news values, as professional criteria guiding editorial selection, and news-ness, as an audience-level perception of whether content qualifies as news. Furthermore,

situational news avoidance is conceptualized as a momentary, context-dependent decision to bypass specific news items during browsing, rather than sustained disengagement from news over time. These distinctions are consistently maintained across the theoretical, empirical, and discussion sections of the article.

2.1 Gatekeeping, gatewatching, and news values in platformed journalism

Classic theories of gatekeeping conceptualize news selection as a predominantly professional process shaped by editorial norms, organizational routines, and institutional constraints. In this view, journalists and news organizations act as primary gatekeepers who determine which events become news and how they are presented to the public (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). News-ness is traditionally understood as a function of professional judgment guided by shared news values, such as relevance, conflict, timeliness, and prominence (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

While this framework remains foundational to journalism studies, it is increasingly challenged by the conditions of digital and platform-based media environments. News is no longer encountered primarily through direct use of individual news outlets but circulates across social media platforms, where visibility is shaped by algorithmic ranking, user interaction, and platform-specific affordances. In such environments, gatekeeping does not disappear; instead, it becomes distributed across multiple actors and stages of the news lifecycle.

Harcup and O'Neill (2017), in their updated formulation of news values, explicitly identify arresting audio-visuals as a news value in their own right, reflecting the growing importance of visual and audiovisual elements in editorial selection and online circulation. Their analysis shows that visually striking content is more likely to be selected by news organizations and to gain visibility on social media. However, recognizing visual appeal as a contemporary news value primarily captures production – and distribution – level logics. It does not, in itself, explain how such visual elements are interpreted or evaluated by audiences.

To account for audience agency in digital news circulation, Bruns (2005, 2018) introduced the concept of gatewatching, emphasizing that users actively observe, select, and amplify news

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content produced elsewhere. Audience influence operates after publication, shaping information flows through sharing, ignoring, or suppressing content. Importantly, recent clarifications emphasize that gatewatching should not be understood in techno-deterministic terms. While platform algorithms shape visibility, they do not replace human judgment; instead, they operate as algorithmically informed systems that act on content already selected and circulated by users (Bruns, 2025).

Empirical research on platform journalism further illustrates how gatekeeping has become distributed among professional journalists, non-professional actors, and platform infrastructures. Studies of citizen journalism on TikTok show how post-publication gatekeeping practices emerge through selective amplification, stylistic adaptation, and users' implicit assumptions about algorithmic preferences (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2024). These findings highlight that contemporary news circulation is governed by hybrid systems in which editorial intent, platform logics, and audience practices intersect.

2.2 From news values to news-ness: audience-based evaluation

While gatekeeping and gatewatching describe how news enters and circulates within media systems, they do not fully explain how individuals decide whether specific content is worth engaging with. At the audience level, this evaluative process differs from professional news values and is conceptualized here as news-ness. Edgerly and Vraga (2020) define news-ness as the extent to which users perceive an item as legitimate, relevant, or worthy of attention as news (newsworthiness).

Unlike traditional news values rooted in professional norms, news-ness reflects an audience-oriented evaluative process shaped by context, format, and surface features. In platform environments characterized by information abundance and limited attention, these judgments are often made rapidly and with minimal cognitive effort. Users typically rely on heuristics to categorize content efficiently, rather than engaging in detailed content analysis.

From this perspective, news-ness can be understood as a perceptual bridge between gatekeeping and gatewatching. Editorial and platform-level decisions determine which cues are present, but

it is audience-based assessments of news-ness that give these cues behavioral consequences. Whether content is clicked, shared, ignored, or actively avoided depends on how users interpret these signals in light of their expectations, preferences, and prior experiences.

2.3 Visual cues as socio-technical signals

Visual cues play a central role in these evaluative processes. In digital journalism, visual elements should not be treated merely as aesthetic or representational additions to text. Recent scholarship on visual journalism emphasizes that contemporary journalistic images and visual markers are platform-embedded, software-mediated objects shaped by convergence, circulation, and modes of use (Vasconcelos & Barbosa, 2024). From this perspective, visuals function as socio-technical signals that convey not only content but also format, engagement demands, and expected modes of use.

Indicators of format – such as video thumbnails or camera icons – translate editorial decisions and platform logics into immediately perceptible cues. These markers can serve as heuristics in audience assessments of news-ness by signaling multimedia content, immediacy, or experiential richness. However, empirical research suggests these signals are ambivalent. Studies of online news video use show that while some users associate video with authenticity and emotional engagement, others perceive it as demanding greater temporal commitment or cognitive effort to process, particularly because of its multimodal structure (Koliska et al., 2021).

Research on visual dominance suggests that images may complicate or override textual interpretations, particularly when visual and textual messages are incongruent (McIntyre et al., 2018). These dynamics underscore the capacity of visual cues to influence evaluative judgements at very early stages of news exposure. Importantly, the effects of visual cues are not uniform across audiences. Research on visual heuristics indicates that identical visual cues can function as interpretive signals, with effects that depend on individual predispositions. In political communication contexts, visual cues have been shown to operate as identity-related heuristics, increasing engagement for some users while triggering avoidance or negative evaluation in others (Dan & Arendt, 2025). Although situated outside journalism studies, these findings reinforce the broader claim

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that visual cues interact with audience characteristics rather than exert universal effects.

2.4 Visual cues, news-ness, and intentional news avoidance

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that visual cues occupy an ambivalent position within contemporary news ecosystems. As elements of news values, they are deployed by news organizations to enhance visibility and align with platform logics. At the same time, they provide audiences with rapid signals that support gatewatching practices, including selective engagement and avoidance.

In this sense, visual cues become part of a feedback loop between editorial strategy and audience agency. While intended to facilitate engagement and circulation, they may also enable users to identify and filter content preemptively. Our study builds on this framework by showing that for specific audience segments – particularly those with higher media literacy or trait reactance – visual cues associated with specific formats can serve as reliable indicators of intentional news avoidance. Instead of signaling relevance, such cues may reduce perceived newsworthiness and prompt disengagement.

By integrating gatekeeping, gatewatching, news-ness, and visual cue research, this framework highlights how news selection and avoidance emerge from the interaction of professional practices, platform infrastructures, and audience interpretations. Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond assumptions of universal attention-grabbing effects and toward a differentiated account of how visual cues structure contemporary news use by operating as interpretive signals.

While theories of gatekeeping, news values, and platformed circulation explain how visual cues are embedded into news production and distribution processes, they do not fully account for how individuals respond to these cues at the moment of exposure. To understand why the same visual cues may attract some users while functioning as avoidance-triggering signals for others, we must turn to individual-level mechanisms of media selection. The following section, therefore, draws on selective exposure research to examine how personal traits and evaluative processes shape responses to visual cues during news browsing.

2.5 Selective exposure

Research on selective exposure examines how media users choose among available messages and sources (Sude & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2022). Over several decades, this literature has drawn on diverse theoretical frameworks to explain information-seeking behavior in complex media environments. Some approaches emphasize individual motivations in news selection, such as rational choice, uncertainty reduction, or informational utility. In contrast, others focus on socio-psychological factors, including social position, identity, or contextual constraints (Mukerjee & Yang, 2021). An exhaustive mapping of all determinants of selective exposure, however, lies beyond the scope of the present study.

The present research builds on the selective exposure paradigm articulated by Knobloch-Westerwick (2015). It draws on multiple theoretical perspectives to account for patterns of news avoidance linked to format-indicating visual cues and individual predispositions. Rather than offering a comprehensive theory of news selection, the study focuses on how specific combinations of content characteristics and personal traits shape avoidance decisions during browsing.

Following Luong et al. (2019), selective exposure is defined as media users' choice to engage with specific media messages rather than others, reflecting systematic biases in media selection. Importantly, engagement and avoidance represent two sides of the same process: selecting one item often implies bypassing others (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). While journalism research typically conceptualizes news avoidance as a longer-term pattern of disengagement from news use (e.g., Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020; Villi et al., 2022), this analysis adopts a more fine-grained perspective. Here, news avoidance refers to the situational avoidance of specific news items during browsing, operationalized as reduced engagement with news, indicated by a visual cue, within a bounded time frame.

This situational understanding of avoidance aligns with the broader theoretical framework outlined above, which emphasizes audience-side evaluation and post-publication filtering rather than sustained withdrawal from news.

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2.6 Perceived information utility and selective exposure

Information, including mass media content, serves an adaptive function by helping individuals orient themselves in their environment and cope with potential opportunities and threats (Atkin, 1973). From this perspective, news may be viewed as having informational utility that supports practical problem-solving and decision-making (Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017). The Informational Utility Model (IUM; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015), which underpins the present research, conceptualizes utility as an individualized, situational assessment of the relevance of information to a specific person at a given moment.

According to the IUM, informational utility increases with (a) the perceived magnitude of potential challenges or gratifications, (b) the perceived likelihood of their occurrence, and (c) their perceived temporal proximity or immediacy (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). A fourth dimension, efficacy – introduced later into the model (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2005) – refers to individuals' perceived ability to cope with or influence the outcomes reported in the news. Higher perceived efficacy tends to increase engagement, as individuals feel capable of managing threats or exploiting opportunities.

From this perspective, high-utility news items are more likely to elicit strong evaluative reactions, making them particularly sensitive to format-indicating visual cues that may amplify or counteract perceived relevance at the moment of exposure.

2.7 Cognitive style and selective exposure

A growing body of research points to neurological and behavioral differences associated with cognitive style, including systematic variation in attention allocation and information processing (e.g., Jawed et al., 2018; Koć-Januchta et al., 2019; Höffler et al., 2017). Eye-tracking studies further suggest that verbalizers and visualizers differ in how they attend to textual and visual elements in media content (Höffler et al., 2017; Luo & Wang, 2019).

Among the theoretical models addressing such differences, dual-coding theory (DCT; Paivio & Harshman, 1983) remains particularly influential. DCT posits two partially independent systems for processing verbal and visual information (Clark & Paivio, 1991).

For the present study, the central implication of DCT is that cognitive style may shape how users respond to visual versus textual elements during news browsing.

Empirical evidence directly linking cognitive style to news selection remains limited. To the best of our knowledge, Kósa et al. (2020) provide the only study explicitly examining the alignment between media users' cognitive style and their responses to format-indicating cues. Although the overall dataset showed a general tendency to avoid camcorder-marked headlines, visualizers selected such headlines under specific conditions, namely when only low-utility news items were associated with camcorders. These findings suggest that cognitive style may moderate responses to visual cues, but that such effects are contingent on contextual factors, including informational utility.

2.8 Perception of the camcorder and trait reactance

Trait reactance offers a complementary explanation for avoidance behavior in response to format-indicating cues. Although Brehm initially defined reactance as a psychological state, he did not rule out the possibility that individuals might respond differently to threats to their freedom. In later work, reactance was identified as a dispositional variable (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Subsequent research has increasingly demonstrated that individuals differ in their propensity for reactance, leading to its conceptualization as a trait (Hong & Faedda, 1996).

Individuals higher in trait reactance tend to show stronger resistance when confronted with perceived threats to autonomy (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Empirical studies further indicate that trait reactance moderates responses to communication style, with highly reactant individuals reporting greater irritation and resistance to perceived persuasive attempts (Lee et al., 2015).

In the context of news browsing, these findings suggest that format-indicating visual cues may trigger reactance among certain users, particularly when they are perceived as signaling unwanted influence or manipulation.

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2.9 News media literacy and the interpretation of visual cues

News media literacy is part of the broader domain of media literacy, encompassing digital and civic competencies for evaluating mediated information (Ashley et al., 2013; Maksl et al., 2017). It refers to individuals' capacity to analyze news content critically, distinguish between facts and opinions, and assess the credibility of information sources (Weintraub Austin et al., 2002). Individuals with higher levels of news media literacy typically approach media messages with greater skepticism and engage in more effortful, reflective processing (Austin et al., 2016).

Although such critical processing is often conceptualized as a situational response – most notably within the central route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model – news media literacy may also function as a relatively stable individual characteristic that shapes responses across contexts. Personality-related factors, including the need for cognition (NFC) and the need for affect (NFA), are closely linked to media-literate practices (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Individuals high in NFC are more likely to engage in analytical processing and persuasion resistance, whereas NFA-oriented individuals tend to rely more on affective and heuristic modes of evaluation (Austin et al., 2016).

In the present study, this critical orientation toward media messages is reflected in individuals who score high on both news media literacy and trait reactance, avoiding high-utility news items marked by camcorder icons. Higher levels of news media literacy may thus amplify the likelihood that such visual cues are interpreted as manipulative signals, increasing the probability of situational avoidance.

2.10 News value, utility, and selective exposure

The impact of camcorder icons on news avoidance is also likely to depend on the perceived news value and utility of the content. Previous research suggests that negative or threatening stimuli often exert stronger effects on selective exposure than positive stimuli, a pattern commonly attributed to heightened vigilance and the vividness of such content (Kósa et al., 2020). However, these approaches often rely on simplified distinctions between positive and negative stimuli and therefore provide only a partial account of selective exposure processes.

By incorporating the efficacy dimension of informational utility, the present framework highlights how perceived consequences and self-efficacy shape decisions about situational avoidance, particularly when format-indicating visual cues accompany high-utility news items.

Finally, dual-process models of information processing consistently distinguish between rapid, affect-driven evaluations and slower, more elaborative modes of judgement (Baum & Rahman, 2021). Taken together, these models reinforce the notion that responses to camcorder-indicated news depend not only on the presence of visual cues but also on the perceived value of the news item and the processing mode activated during browsing.

2.11 Hypothesis

Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, which integrates gatekeeping, news values, audience-based news-ness, and selective exposure, we formulate the following hypothesis about how format-indicating visual cues interact with individual characteristics to shape situational news avoidance during browsing:

H1: Highly news media-literate individuals who score high on trait reactance are more likely to avoid high-utility news items accompanied by camcorder icons.

This hypothesis is examined using an experimental design that models online news browsing. By manipulating the presence of format-indicating visual cues and measuring individual differences in trait reactance and news media literacy, the study captures situational news avoidance as a context-dependent outcome of news selection.

3 Methodology

3.1 Experimental design

The experimental manipulation followed a 2 (camcorder news vs. without camcorder news) X 2 (informational utility intensity: low vs. high) X 4 (informational utility dimension: magnitude, likelihood, immediacy, efficacy) between-group factor design.

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3.2 Prestudy

A pre-study was conducted in February 2021 to select the news items for the experiment. The research team formulated news headlines and corresponding stories based on current, realistic news content, following the Integrated Utility Model (IUM; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). Using the IUM's four utility dimensions (magnitude, likelihood, immediacy, and efficacy), we created news items that represented high and low utility in both positive and negative contexts.

From an initial pool of 55 items, 16 news items were selected across four utility categories (high-utility positive, high-utility negative, low-utility positive, low-utility negative), with thematic diversity ensured (e.g., education, personal development, services, applications). Two additional distracting news items were included in each experimental condition. The selected items were pretested with two student groups. Participants rated each item on a five-point Likert scale across four utility dimensions and overall valence. Mean scores were calculated, and news items were classified as high or low utility relative to the average scores of the distracting news items.

Based on these criteria, eight target news items (two per utility category) and two distracting items were retained for the main experiment.

3.3 Ethical issues

Participation was voluntary, and incentives were offered to encourage participation. Personal data used for prize allocation was kept confidential and deleted after completion of the study. Participants were informed about the conditions of participation at entry and were debriefed at the end of the study, including notification that the news items were constructed for research purposes.

3.4 Participants

Participants were undergraduate and master's students recruited from two faculties at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Romania), representing social sciences and engineering. Data collection was conducted over two days to minimize potential

spillover effects between experimental conditions (Babbie, 2000).

Data were collected in an online classroom setting to maintain researcher control while emphasizing voluntary participation. During the data collection period, more than 600 individuals accessed the research portal, and 432 completed the questionnaire. After excluding 34 cases with unusable news selection data, the final sample comprised 398 participants.

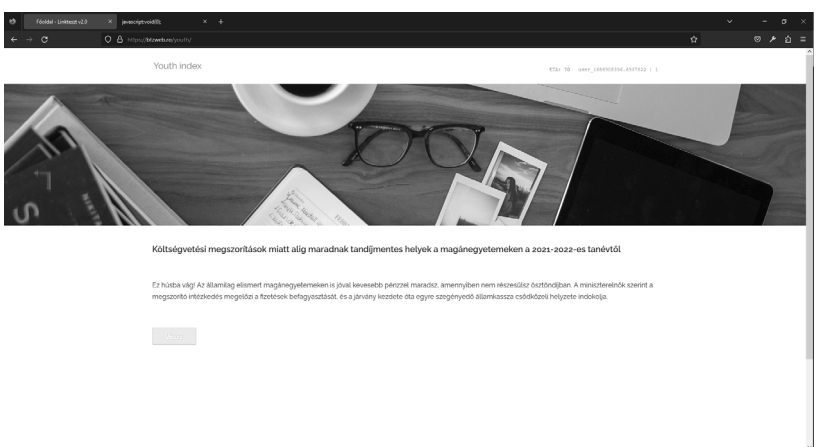
More than half of respondents were female (57.8%), and slightly more than half lived in rural areas (53.0%). The average age of respondents was 22 years.

3.5 Procedure

Students participating in the research were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups upon entering the study's news portal. After random assignment, participants could browse ten news headlines selected during the pretest and click any headline to read the corresponding news story (see figure 1).

Figure 1

As soon as a participant selected a headline by clicking on one of the ten headlines, a two-line subtitle appeared below it



Source: authors' own elaboration.

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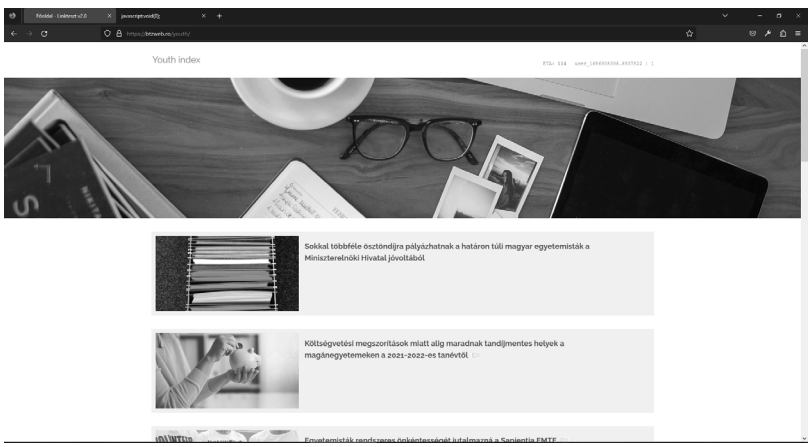
Participants had two minutes to browse the news, a time limit communicated in advance that encouraged them to prioritize items of interest. Reading time for each news item was automatically recorded by a custom-built program developed by a university programmer and later merged with the questionnaire data.

Participants in both groups encountered the same news items, with the difference that in the experimental group, a camcorder icon appeared next to four headlines (one from each utility category), indicating the availability of visual material (see figure 2).

Figure 2

Stimulus material for the experimental group



Source: authors' own elaboration.

In contrast, the control group (figure 3) only encountered news items without a camcorder.

Figure 3

Stimulus material for the control group

Source: authors' own elaboration.

To control for order effects, the presentation order of news headlines was randomized. The browsing interface was designed to resemble a real news website, with freely usable images accompanying each news item.

After the browsing phase, participants were automatically redirected to an online questionnaire that included the measures described below.

3.6 Measures

We used the following accepted scales from the literature to measure the variables specified in the hypothesis.

3.7 Reactance as a personality trait

Trait reactance was measured using the refined Hong Psychological Reactance Scale (HPRS; Hong & Page, 1989; Hong & Faedda, 1996), comprising 11 items.

Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale has been widely

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used in reactance research, including studies with young adult samples (Shen & Dillard, 2005; Moreira et al., 2020).

3.8 News media literacy

News media literacy was assessed using the News Media Literacy Scale (NMLS) developed by Ashley et al. (2013), a youth-focused instrument explicitly designed for news-related contexts. The 15-item scale has demonstrated reliability and validity among student populations and has been employed in several empirical studies (e.g., Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Responses were measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

All scales were adapted into Hungarian using a standard two-step translation and back-translation procedure. The translated items were content-equivalent to the original English versions.

4 Results

4.1 Preliminary analyses

Reliability analyses indicated satisfactory internal consistency across both scales. Cronbach's alpha was .743 for the News Media Literacy Scale (NMLS) and .700 for the Hong Psychological Reactance Scale (HPRS).

Independent samples t-tests showed that the experimental and control groups did not differ significantly in mean reactance or news media literacy scores (see table 1), indicating successful randomization across conditions.

Table 1

Comparison of Scale Scores Between the Two Conditions

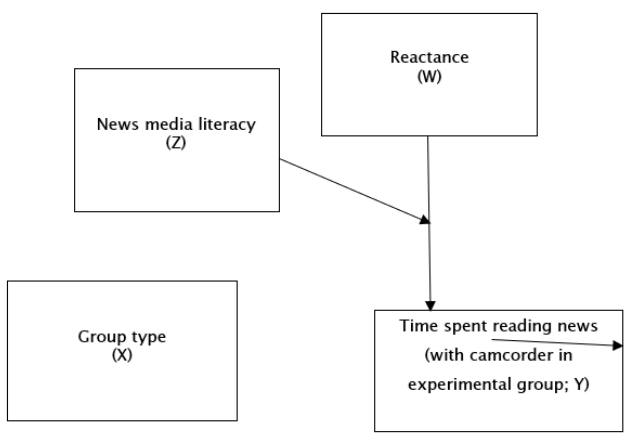
	Experimental group	Control group	*F* (1, 396)	*p*
The average score on the HPRS	32.67	32.71	.79	.95
The average score on the NMLS	82.41	83.22	.26	.87

4.2 Exposure to news as a function of reactance and news media literacy

To examine how format-indicating visual cues interact with individual characteristics during news browsing, we tested a moderated moderation model using Hayes' PROCESS macro (2018, Model 3). The dependent variable was the time spent reading news items accompanied by a camcorder icon. Group type (camcorder vs. no camcorder) was the focal predictor, with trait reactance and news media literacy (NML) as moderators. Year of birth was included as a covariate, and robust HC0 standard errors were used to account for potential heteroscedasticity (see figure 4).

Figure 4

Conceptual model of moderation applying Hayes' 3rd Model (2018)



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The overall model was statistically significant, explaining approximately 3.5% of the variance in time spent reading camcorder-indicated news items ($R^2 = .0353$, $F(8, 378) = 3.32$, $p < .001$). Importantly, the camcorder icon did not have a uniform main effect on news exposure. Instead, its impact varied according to how users with different predispositions evaluated the cue.

The three-way interaction among group type, reactance, and news media literacy was marginally significant ($p = .065$), indicating that avoidance behavior emerged only under specific combinations of these variables (see table 2). This pattern suggests that the camcorder icon does not function as an inherently attractive or aversive design element. Instead, it acquires meaning through audience interpretation.

Table 2

Results of Moderated Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor	Un-standardized B	HC0 SE	*T*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	-1678.06	940.815	-1.783	0.075	-3527.95	171.82
Group type	-1.958	1.597	-1.225	0.221	-5.100	1.183
Reactance	0.513	0.398	1.289	0.198	-0.269	1.296
Group type x Reactance	-0.432	0.249	-1.733	0.083	-0.923	0.058
NML	0.037	0.286	0.130	0.895	-0.525	0.600
Group type x NML	0.042	0.172	0.246	0.805	-0.296	0.380
Reactance x NML	-0.042	0.038	-1.115	0.265	-0.118	0.032
Group type x Reactance x NML	0.038	0.021	1.847	0.065	-0.002	0.080
Birth year	0.853	0.470	1.813	0.070	-0.071	1.777

Note: Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95.

4.3 Conditional effects and regions of significance

To clarify the nature of this interaction, we examined conditional

effects at different levels of reactance and news media literacy. The results show that, among individuals with high trait reactance, the effect of the camcorder icon varies systematically with news media literacy.

Johnson–Neyman analyses identified a region of significance for the interaction between group type and reactance at lower levels of NML. Specifically, when news media literacy values fell below -1.99, the effect of the camcorder icon on time spent reading news became statistically significant. In this range, higher reactance was associated with reduced exposure to camcorder-indicated news items (see tables 3 and 4, figure 5).

By contrast, at higher levels of news media literacy, the interaction between reactance and the camcorder icon was no longer significant. This pattern indicates that avoidance is not driven solely by reactance or by the visual cue in isolation. Instead, situational news avoidance emerges when high reactance coincides with evaluative frameworks shaped by lower news media literacy.

Taken together, these results partially support the hypothesis. Although individuals high in both reactance and news media literacy were expected to avoid high-utility news featuring camcorders, the findings show that avoidance is conditional and context-dependent rather than categorical. The camcorder icon functions as a trigger for avoidance only when it is interpreted as signaling unwanted engagement or manipulative intent within a specific evaluative context.

Table 3

Interaction Effects of Group Type and Reactance at the Value of NML

Reactance	NML	Effect	HC0 SE	*T*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
-5.9423	-9.4677	2.3988	2.4419	0.9823	0.3266	-2.4026	7.2002
-5.9423	0	0.6122	2.0524	0.2983	0.7656	-3.4233	4.6477
-5.9423	9.4677	-1.1743	2.8908	-0.4062	0.6848	-6.8584	4.5098
0	-9.4677	-2.3602	2.3629	-0.9988	0.3185	-7.0063	2.2860
0	0	-1.9585	1.5978	-1.2258	0.2210	-5.1002	1.1831
0	9.4677	-1.5569	2.1981	-0.7083	0.4792	-5.8789	2.7651
5.9423	-9.4677	-7.1191	3.6757	-1.9368	0.0535	-14.3464	0.1083
5.9423	0	-4.5293	2.3001	-1.9692	0.0497	-9.0518	-0.0068
5.9423	9.4677	-1.9395	2.7216	-0.7126	0.4765	-7.2908	3.4118

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Note: The second and third rows show the values for people with high reactance (5.9423) and for people with average and low NML scores. Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95,00.

Table 4

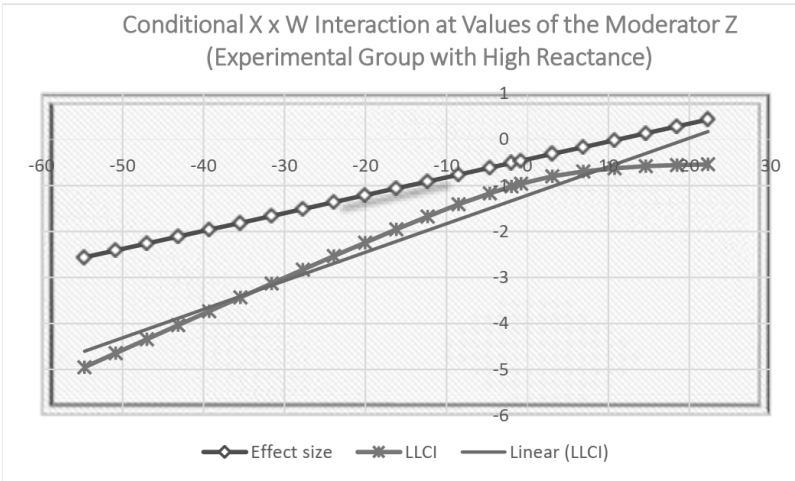
Conditional interaction of group type and reactance at different levels of NML

NML_sum	Effect	se(HC0)	*T*	*P*	LLCI	ULCI
-54.6951	-2.5599	1.2161	-2.105	0.036	-4.9511	-0.1687
-50.8451	-2.4102	1.1368	-2.1201	0.0347	-4.6455	-0.1748
-46.9951	-2.2604	1.0578	-2.1368	0.0333	-4.3404	-0.1804
-43.1451	-2.1107	0.9792	-2.1556	0.0317	-4.036	-0.1854
-39.2951	-1.961	0.901	-2.1765	0.0301	-3.7325	-0.1894
-35.4451	-1.8112	0.8233	-2.2	0.0284	-3.43	-0.1924
-31.5951	-1.6615	0.7463	-2.2262	0.0266	-3.1289	-0.194
-27.7451	-1.5117	0.6703	-2.2552	0.0247	-2.8298	-0.1937
-23.8951	-1.362	0.5957	-2.2864	0.0228	-2.5333	-0.1907
-20.0451	-1.2123	0.523	-2.3181	0.021	-2.2405	-0.184
-16.1951	-1.0625	0.4531	-2.3452	0.0195	-1.9534	-0.1717
-12.3451	-0.9128	0.3876	-2.3552	0.019	-1.6748	-0.1507
-8.4951	-0.763	0.329	-2.3189	0.0209	-1.41	-0.116
-4.6451	-0.6133	0.2819	-2.1753	0.0302	-1.1676	-0.0589
-1.9921	-0.5101	0.2594	-1.9663	0.05	-1.0202	0.0
-0.7951	-0.4635	0.2527	-1.8345	0.0674	-0.9604	0.0333
3.0549	-0.3138	0.2477	-1.2669	0.206	-0.8008	0.1732
6.9049	-0.1641	0.2683	-0.6114	0.5413	-0.6917	0.3636
10.7549	-0.0143	0.3095	-0.0463	0.9631	-0.6229	0.5943
14.6049	0.1354	0.3643	0.3717	0.7103	-0.581	0.8518
18.4549	0.2852	0.4276	0.6669	0.5052	-0.5556	1.1259
22.3049	0.4349	0.496	0.8767	0.3812	-0.5404	1.4102

Note: shows the effect of the independent variable across NML values. At NML values of -1.9921 and below, the effect is significant ($p < .05$). Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output: 95,00.

Figure 5

Relationship between NML and Effect Size



Note: The figure uses the data in table 4. The yellow lines in it – from minus 60 to plus 30 – represent the NML values; the vertical numbers from plus 1 to minus 6 are the Effect size values.

5 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that avoidance of camcorder-indicated news is not a generalized reaction to visual content but a situational phenomenon emerging under specific conditions. Format-indicating visual cues do not operate as deterministic triggers; rather, their effects depend on how users evaluate them in light of individual predispositions such as trait reactance and news media literacy at the moment of encounter.

By integrating selective exposure research with reactance theory and audience-based conceptions of news-ness, the findings highlight a gap between production-side news values and audience-side evaluations. Visual cues designed to enhance visibility and engagement may simultaneously reduce perceived news-ness for certain users, prompting disengagement rather than attention.

Interpreted through gatewatching, situational news avoidance can be understood as an audience-side filtering practice occurring after publication. In this sense, visual cues embedded to facilitate circulation may also enable users to rapidly identify and

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bypass content they anticipate as misaligned with their preferences, capacities, or situational constraints. These results underscore the importance of accounting for audience heterogeneity when assessing the role of visual design elements in contemporary news use.

6 Discussion

This study examined how format-indicating visual cues shape situational news avoidance during browsing, understood as a momentary, context-dependent response rather than long-term disengagement from news use. The findings indicate that a camcorder icon functions as an interpretive signal whose effects depend on users' evaluations shaped by individual dispositions and expectations.

The same visual design element can therefore elicit markedly different reactions across users. While production-side logics often treat multimedia indicators as signals of relevance or engagement, individuals high in trait reactance and news media literacy may interpret the camcorder icon as signaling anticipated effort, intrusion, or persuasive intent rather than added value, leading to faster disengagement from such news items.

This tension highlights a gap between news values guiding editorial and platform design decisions and the news-ness perceived by audiences. Visual cues intended to enhance visibility and engagement may simultaneously signal selective disengagement among specific audience segments, as users make rapid judgments about whether a particular item is worth their attention at a given moment.

While the Elaboration Likelihood Model helps situate these findings within dual-process theories of information evaluation, Kahneman's framework more directly captures the dynamics observed here. During fast, intuitive processing, users may quickly associate a camcorder icon with prior experiences of overload or manipulation; when contextual information is limited, such impressions may be endorsed rather than corrected by reflective processing, resulting in situational avoidance during browsing.

Interpreted through gatewatching, these findings suggest that situational news avoidance functions as an audience-side filtering practice occurring after publication. Visual cues designed to increase engagement may therefore unintentionally enable users to identify and bypass content they anticipate as misaligned with their preferences or perceived capacities.

7 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study, particularly those related to the experimental design and sample composition.

A primary methodological consideration concerns the operationalization of visual cues. The present study focused exclusively on a single format-indicating visual marker – the camcorder icon accompanying news headlines – to isolate audience-side evaluative processes under controlled conditions. While research on visual journalism often examines a broader range of visual elements, such as photographs or graphic illustrations, our design deliberately restricted the manipulation to a monosemic format cue. This decision was motivated by the need to examine selective exposure and avoidance without introducing ambiguity about the meaning or function the cue conveys.

During the design phase, alternative approaches were considered, including the use of identical photographs or graphics across different news items. These options were ultimately rejected because they would have compromised ecological validity. In real-world news environments, the same photograph or graphic is not typically reused across unrelated news stories, and imposing such uniformity would have created an artificial browsing context. Similar concerns applied to more complex symbols or graphics, whose meanings may shift depending on the accompanying content. By contrast, the camcorder icon conveys a clear, context-independent message about the availability of video material, allowing its use across multiple headlines without distorting the naturalistic appearance of the news interface.

While this design choice strengthened internal and ecological validity by providing a consistent and interpretable cue, it also limited the study's scope. Specifically, the findings cannot be generalized across all forms of visual elements used in digital journalism. Future research could extend this approach by developing methods to unobtrusively examine a broader range of visual cues – such as photographs, thumbnails, or graphic styles – while preserving the ecological realism of news browsing environments.

As with most experimental research, the observed patterns reflect situational responses and do not capture long-term behavioral tendencies. The study focused on momentary selection and avoidance decisions during browsing, rather than on sustained patterns of

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news use over time. In addition, the experiment was conducted in a controlled online environment, as opposed to an entirely naturalistic setting, and participants were unable to access the video content indicated by the camcorder icon. Although this constraint was necessary to maintain experimental control, future studies could benefit from designs that allow full multimedia interaction in more naturalistic contexts, particularly on social media platforms that serve as primary news access points for younger audiences.

Finally, the sample consisted exclusively of university students, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Although this group is theoretically relevant given their intensive engagement with digital news environments, future research involving more diverse age groups and socio-demographic backgrounds would be necessary to assess the robustness of the observed effects.

Importantly, these limitations do not suggest that visual cues inherently reduce engagement with news. Instead, the findings underscore that the effects of format-indicating cues are situational and contingent on individual evaluations, highlighting the role of audience heterogeneity in shaping responses to visual design elements in contemporary digital journalism.

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I hereby certify that I have carried out an English language review of the manuscript entitled *„Avoiding News with Visual Cues: situational news avoidance and audience-side gatewatching in online news browsing"* by István Kósa and Blanka Bálint prior to its submission for publication.

The review included a thorough check of spelling, grammar, and general language use. I have corrected all identified errors, and revised the text to ensure clarity, academic adequacy, and linguistic accuracy.

To the best of my professional judgement, the manuscript is written in correct and appropriate academic English and is suitable for submission to an international scholarly journal.

László-Attila Hubbes

executive editor

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