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Social Distance and Information Avoidance in Public Security Events: A Dual Involvement Perspective

Completed Research Paper

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Abstract

With the large spread of information thanks to ICT, public security events are increasingly focused on by the public. But meanwhile, the phenomenon of people's information avoidance in these events still exists and even becomes more prominent. However, existing studies on information avoidance have ignored such an important context (i.e., public security event) and the influence of people's perceptions of social relationship. To fill the gaps, we develop a model to explore the influence of social distance on information avoidance through two opposite mechanisms from a dual involvement perspective, perceived relevance and negative affect, in the context of public security events. We also consider self-efficacy's moderating role to identify the boundary conditions. A scenario-based survey with college students was conducted to test the proposed research model. Finally, theoretical contributions and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Public security events, information avoidance, social distance, dual involvement, self-efficacy

Introduction

With the development of interactive online platforms and information communication technology (ICT), much information of public security events is disseminated and consumed through various online means, bringing to the events more attention and transparency (Wang et al., 2017). For example, the police killing of George Floyd in the United States and the Russia-Ukraine war have been largely focused on and taken seriously. Research has found that people prefer seeking information on interactive online platforms over static media (Sultana et al., 2023), particularly during public security events (Procopio & Procopio, 2007). However, negative information and misinformation are also easily spread on the interactive platforms, which makes people worried (Bunker, 2020; Wang et al., 2017). For instance, people's psychological well-being will be affected by fearful news and information (Ko et al., 2020). In this way, people may avoid them

for cognitive or affective protection. Take the George event for example. Some black people were likely to avoid the relevant information, such as the detailed description of how George was persecuted, which was cruel to them. According to the cross-national data from the Reuters Institute in 2022, the phenomenon of news avoidance has gradually become more prominent in the past five years (Newman, 2022). On social network sites, there are also more and more people who will choose to avoid information for some reasons (Guo et al., 2020).

Information avoidance has attracted much attention in IS field. Wilson (1999) notes that people may not seek information due to the pressure from some of it. Case et al. (2005) also notice the phenomenon of information avoidance and believe it results from information stimuli. In public security events, the phenomenon may be more prominent. Public security events are high-impact negative events. They can cause heavy casualties and serious social impact in a short time (Ding et al., 2022), during which people are worried and concerned (Bunker, 2020). In this case, negative information and misinformation can easily shape the public's misperceptions about the events (Wang & Zhuang, 2018). Moreover, they may even disturb those who cannot bear so much affective or cognitive pressure to get close to the truth. Therefore, information avoidance is viewed as an increasing problem to be solved (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). If we cannot figure out the drivers of it and help people regulate their online information behavior accordingly, they will remain blinded by uncertainty and lose objective perception of the society. It is detrimental to their future lives (e.g., being insensitive to potential danger or lacking awareness and ability of self-protection). Hence, there is an increasing need to identify the influencing factors of information avoidance in the context, helping people get a better understanding of the society in a suitable way and managing the network environment.

To better understand the mechanism of online information avoidance in public security events, the risk information-seeking and processing model (RISP) may help. RISP provides a framework to explore the sociopsychological factors that might lead to people's behavior of seeking or avoiding risk information (Yang & Kahlor, 2013). Drawn from Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), RISP agrees on the dual forms of human processing of information, heuristic and systematic (Griffin et al., 1999). The systematic processing can be motivated by cognitive factors, while the heuristic processing relates to affect and emotions (Griffin et al., 1999). RISP also introduces demographic and sociocultural variables, considering the influence of social relationship and environment (Griffin et al., 1999). Deline and Kahlor (2019) also emphasize the necessity of considering the three major areas for explanation: the sociocultural, the cognitive and the affective. Accordingly, we will try to propose a model developed from social factors through affective and cognitive aspects for a comprehensive understanding of information avoidance in public security events.

First comes the social factor. Prior studies suggest that the strength of ties between people has become an important factor in determining the spread of crisis information (Wei et al., 2014). In other words, the social network should not be ignored in information avoidance research. However, the underlying mechanism is still not clearly explained. It leads to an increasing need to answer the questions about how people know about the events through information and whether the perception of the relationship between audiences and victims in the events has an impact on shaping information avoidance. Based on these, we introduce "social distance" as the social factor, which is defined as the extent to which people perceive others online are psychologically close and similar to them (Yan et al., 2023). Nowadays, ICT has shortened the distance between individuals. People can easily know the events around the world and feel what others go through (Zhang et al., 2022). Then social distance becomes an important factor that well describes people's relationships on online information platforms and influences people's information behavior (He et al., 2021). Studies have found that social distance plays an important role in online information systems and platforms, such as social referral systems (Hong et al., 2017) and live streaming platforms (Zhou et al., 2019). While, there may be two opposite mechanisms to explain the relationship between social distance and information avoidance. On the one hand, a more proximal social distance may make people feel themselves related to the events. And they tend not to avoid the self-relevant information (Lee & Koo, 2022). On the other hand, the proximal social distance may also lead people to avoid the information as a way of escaping from unpleasant feelings triggered by it (Brashers, 2001). In this case, people often need to decide between obtaining and avoiding crisis-related information (Brashers et al., 2002). Existing studies provide less insight into these two mechanisms. Hence, here comes our first research question:

RQ1: How does social distance affect information avoidance in the context of public security events?

According to RISP, people process information in affective and cognitive way during risk situations (Yang et al., 2012). To answer the questions we mentioned above, we introduce affective and cognitive factors as mediators. Bowen and Chaffee (1974) suggest that more important issues are more involving. They reveal that involvement is a common state and response when people know about public security events. Involvement includes affective and cognitive dimensions. It also has an impact on people's information behavior (Peacock et al., 2021). Therefore, introducing the dual involvement can well fit our research. Most of the related studies have found the influence of negative emotions from the affective aspect on information avoidance (Sultana et al., 2023), while that from the cognitive aspect is still relatively ignored, let alone considering them both at the same time. Involvement signals that people psychologically interact with messages from cognitive and affective aspects (Levy & Windahl, 1984; Perse, 1990). Thus, dual involvement may well explain how social distance works through people's interaction with the events. Accordingly, the second research question follows:

RQ2: How does involvement (from cognitive and affective dimensions) mediate the relationship between social distance and information avoidance in the context of public security events?

Further, the boundary conditions of the two mechanisms should also be figured out. According to social cognitive theory, people's behavior is affected not only by environmental factors, but also by their own psychological factors (Li & Hua, 2022; Middleton et al., 2019). Then individual traits shouldn't be ignored when explaining online information avoidance (Sultana et al., 2023). Among the individual traits, self-efficacy is frequently discussed in the research topic. RISP recognizes the important role of self-efficacy in risk information processing (Griffin et al., 1999). People may avoid information if they feel themselves low efficacy when sensing threat (Witte, 1994). Previous studies have also found that self-efficacy can influence the relationship between the environment and behavior in cognitive and affective processes (Park, 2019). Therefore, we introduce it to our model as a moderator for a more comprehensive aspect. Then our third research question is:

RQ3: How does self-efficacy play a moderating role between social distance and information avoidance in the context of public security events?

In general, our study attempts to explore the underlying mechanism driving information avoidance from social distance in public security events. Specifically, we figure out the two opposite mechanisms of social distance by introducing affective and cognitive involvements as mediators, and identify their boundary conditions by considering the moderating effect of self-efficacy. Our research is expected to advance the theoretical understanding of information avoidance, and provide advice for the government and emergency organizations to utilize online platforms to reach audiences for disseminating information and controlling public opinion in a suitable way.

Literature Review

Public Security Events

The public security event is a kind of public emergency, referring to an emergency that occurs suddenly and can cause heavy casualties, property losses and serious social damage, such as terrorist attacks and demonstrations (Ding et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2017). Existing studies mainly focus on the development of information systems such as detection systems (Wang et al., 2017) from a technological perspective, and provide specific guidance for practical management in the face of public security events (Yin, 2020). As to the research topic of information avoidance, previous studies mainly focus on public health emergencies affected by the COVID-19. They have identified some influencing factors of information avoidance, such as information overload (Soroya et al., 2021) and negative emotions (Buneviciene et al., 2021).

Compared with the public health emergency, the public security event causes serious social impact in a relatively shorter time (Xie et al., 2017). And the biggest problem in the context is the loss of the sense of security (Yang & Xu, 2018). Further, public security events are more likely to elicit public opinion than public health emergencies (S. Y. Li et al., 2020). In that case, people are more vulnerable and easier to be influenced by negative information and misinformation (S. Y. Li et al., 2020; Wang & Zhuang, 2018). With more pressure from emotions and perceptions, they are more possible to avoid information. Besides, in public security events, the relationship between related individuals is a complex social network composed of multilayer interaction (H. B. Li et al., 2020). And based on RISP, social factors are important in

influencing information avoidance during the risk. Therefore, it's necessary to consider the influence of social networks in explaining the mechanism of information avoidance in public security events, while research on public health emergencies ignores it.

Information Avoidance and News Avoidance

Information avoidance is widely defined as any behavior aimed at preventing or delaying the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information (Sweeny et al., 2010), a strategy to avoid the information that may lead to affective discomfort and cognitive dissonance (Nelissen et al., 2015). It can be divided into active avoidance and passive avoidance (Sweeny et al., 2010). In our study, we will focus on active information avoidance, which may reflect more individuals' thoughts and cognition for a certain issue without considering their ability to search or read. Any information avoidance that meets the following two criteria is within our research scope: first, people know that the information is available, and then they have free access to it or would avoid it even if the access were free (Golman et al., 2017).

Information avoidance is an important research topic in many fields, ranging from health (Soroya et al., 2021), academic research (Fuertes et al., 2020), consumption (Song et al., 2021) to social networks (Guo et al., 2020), where its influencing factors are widely discussed. Previous studies have shown that information overload (Guo et al., 2020), fatigue (Dai et al., 2020), etc. are associated with information avoidance. However, we have found that these studies are still unable to answer the questions about how people perceive and know the events and others through information in today's social world, and whether the perception of the relationship influences their information avoidance. Ignoring the social network and interpersonal relationships, to some extent, will limit the research innovation and inspiration.

Particularly, news avoidance is one kind of information avoidance. And the news report is also important and common in public security events. Therefore, we will also review the studies on news avoidance for reference. Related studies have mainly examined the factors influencing news avoidance, such as news overload (Park, 2019). However, they still don't consider the impact of the social network and can't show how and when people avoid news about public security events or similar incidents.

In general, our study will attempt to research in the context of public security events from a new perspective, considering the background of the social relationship to meet the needs and fill the gaps.

Social Distance

Social distance, a psychological distance from the construal level theory, refers to the extent to which people perceive others online are psychologically close and similar to them (Yan et al., 2023). It explains that people have different levels of mental representation according to how close they are to others in the social network, which can further affect their thoughts and behavior (Liberman et al., 2002; Sung et al., 2020). It can be simply divided into a distant and a proximal level. When people find that they have more in common with others, such as identity and age, it means a proximal social distance. Conversely, they will feel a distant social distance. For distant objects, people tend to pay attention to the central and superordinate features, while for proximal objects, the detailed and specific features are more salient (Trope & Liberman, 2003).

Previous studies have found the influence of social distance on people's emotional states and behavioral decisions (Huang et al., 2021). It can also influence people's susceptibility to misinformation and its spread in threatening situations (Valecha et al., 2021). For example, those who share a similar social identity with the witness of the event are more likely to be more anxious, to believe the witness's claim and to share it with their own social circle (Valecha et al., 2021). Moreover, people's evaluations of the same moral act will be different due to their different social distance from the event (Eyal et al., 2008). These studies have found that social distance is an important driver of people's thoughts and behavior. Through the perspective of social distance, we will be able to figure out why and how people choose to avoid information when public security events occur without ignoring the influence of social association.

Dual Involvement

Involvement refers to the personal and psychological connections people make with media content, including cognitive and affective aspects (Perse, 1990). Cognitive involvement reflects people's attention to, recognition of and elaboration on media content, a motivational state that arises when new information is

related to their knowledge, interests and goals (Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Perse, 1990). Affective involvement then refers to people's emotional responses to media content (Peacock et al., 2021; Perse, 1990).

Dual involvement has been mainly discussed in the context of consumption (Ma et al., 2021), advertising (Lu et al., 2019) and social media (Li et al., 2017). They find that cognitive involvement has a positive influence on people's behavior. When it comes to affective involvement, most of the studies focus on either positive or negative affective involvement based on the needs of their research questions. Positive affective involvement often motivates people's positive behavior such as purchase intention (Ma et al., 2021), while the negative one is more associated with negative behavior (Lee & Kim, 2021).

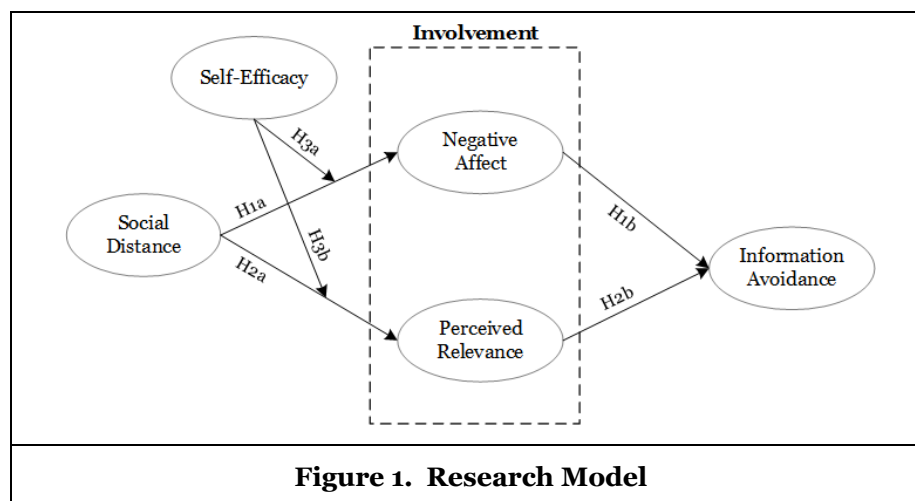
Research on information avoidance mainly focused on negative affective involvement. Previous studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between the two. People are more likely to avoid information if they think it might make them feel anxious, embarrassed or uncomfortable (Karim et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2023). In contrast, cognitive involvement is ignored. Perse (1990) suggests that people both think and feel when they're involved. It indicates that it is necessary to take affective and cognitive involvement both into consideration. In this way, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of information avoidance.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is one of the core constructs of social cognitive theory. It refers to an individual's ability to judge, believe or feel whether he or she can complete a certain event (Bandura, 1977). Studies have found that self-efficacy has an influence on people's thinking, emotions and behavior (Wood & Bandura, 1989). It is an important construct in information avoidance research (Sultana et al., 2023). RISP emphasizes that self-efficacy can help for a more comprehensive understanding in information avoidance (Yang & Kahlor, 2013). People with low self-efficacy tend to escape from the burdensome information (Park, 2019). Besides, self-efficacy can stimulate deep cognitive processing of information (Hopp, 2022), and also impact the regulation of emotions. Those with high self-efficacy are less likely to assign negative emotions to target behavior (Bandura, 1989) and are more likely to be motivated to engage with problems (Hopp, 2022). Accordingly, in public security events, the different levels of people's self-efficacy may lead to their different perception and understanding of the same events, which further influences their emotions and cognition. Therefore, it's reasonable and necessary to figure out how self-efficacy, as a moderator, impacts the influence of social distance on information avoidance through the dual involvement.

Research Model and Hypotheses

We propose a research model based on RISP, as shown in Figure 1. Our study explores the influence of social distance on information avoidance from a dual involvement perspective in public security events, together with the moderating role of self-efficacy. Dual involvement includes negative affect (affective aspect) and perceived relevance (cognitive aspect), which play the mediating effects between social distance and information avoidance (H1a, H1b, H2a, H2b). Then self-efficacy moderates the relationship between social distance and involvement (H3a, H3b). Specific explanations and hypotheses are as follows.



Social Distance and Information Avoidance: Positive and Negative Mechanisms

Involvement can be divided into affective and cognitive dimensions. Affective involvement refers to people's emotional reactions to media content (Peacock et al., 2021), and in public security events, negative emotions are often the main emotions of public opinion, such as anger and sadness (Yang & Kahlor, 2013). Therefore, we define it as "negative affect" in this paper, which means the intensity of people's negative emotional reactions to the information about public security events (Perse, 1998). Previous studies have shown that social distance is related to negative affect. When the social distance is more proximal, people will have stronger negative emotions for negative events (Valecha et al., 2021). For example, some black people are more emotional than others when they know about the George event. The more proximal social distance makes them easier to feel what fellows feel. In addition, negative affect is also an important construct influencing information avoidance. Studies have found that fear is associated with online information avoidance (Sultana et al., 2023). And people will prefer to avoid information if they think it will cause negative emotions (Maslow, 1963). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H1a: In public security events, social distance negatively affects negative affect.

H1b: In public security events, negative affect positively affects information avoidance.

Cognitive involvement refers to a motivational state which arises when new information connects to the people's knowledge, interests and goals (Johnson & Eagly, 1989). We specifically define it as "perceived relevance" here, for perceived relevance is the essential cognitive characteristic of involvement (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Wang et al., 2019). That is, people's level of cognitive involvement with a situation is determined by how much they perceive themselves to be personally related (Celsi & Olson, 1988). In public security events, perceived relevance refers to the degree of people's perception of the correlation between the public security event and themselves (Havitz & Dimanche, 1999), while social distance focuses on the similarity between the traits of people. According to the construal level theory, when people find more similar features with cognitive objects, more detailed content will be focused on, leading to more cognitive associations alongside the higher perceived relevance (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Take the George event for example again. After the event, many black people launched mass protests, because they thought they were related and feared the same tragedy would happen to them. In addition, perceived relevance can also stimulate communicative actions and information processing. Diakopoulos et al. (2011) find that cognitive motives can increase people's willingness to comment. Zaichkowsky (1985) also believes that people will spend more time on detailed processing of information if they perceive more relevance. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2a: In public security events, social distance negatively affects perceived relevance.

H2b: In public security events, perceived relevance negatively affects information avoidance.

Moderating Role of Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a context-specific construct that influences people's cognition and affect in a given context (Bucy & Tao, 2007; Wang et al., 2021). In public security events, people with higher self-efficacy will have greater confidence in their ability to deal with similar events and believe that they can effectively reduce injuries or avoid risks. And according to the social cognitive theory, self-efficacious individuals will psychologically coordinate internal resources to protect themselves from negative affective outcomes (e.g., fear and anger) (Hopp, 2022), and then show enhanced resiliency when facing problems (Bandura, 1982). In other words, when they face the same public security event, compared with people with lower self-efficacy, they may believe that they can do better than the victims, and then their negative affect and perceived relevance may be less sensitive to the influence of the social distance between them and the victims in the events. Also take the George event for example. Some people with higher self-efficacy may think they are different and believe in their ability to avoid harm. They may get fewer negative emotions than those with lower self-efficacy. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: In public security events, self-efficacy weakens the relationship between social distance and negative affect.

H3b: In public security events, self-efficacy weakens the relationship between social distance and perceived relevance.

Research Methodology

Research Design

To validate the hypotheses, a scenario-based survey was conducted with college students. College students were selected as the target population because of their strong abilities to process information. Besides, they have a strong sense of identity and can easily resonate with other fellows, which can help us manipulate social distance in the study well. Then, the questionnaire used in the survey mainly consisted of three parts: the first part was to collect the demographics, the second part showed the randomly assigned scenario and the third one was for the measures.

Scenario Design

This study was conducted online with two different scenarios (social distance: proximal vs. distant), and each participant would read a report about a public security event. The prototype of the event is the stabbing incident in Henan, China on August 8th of 2022. Social distance was manipulated by adjusting the identity of the victims in the scenarios according to the target groups. It means that "passer-by" was used to describe the victims for distant social distance group while "college student" (the same identity as that of the participants) for the proximal one (See details in Table 1).

Groups	Scenarios
Distant Social Distance	<p>At 23:05 PM on July 6, 2022, there was a criminal case of a suspect chasing and slashing several passers-by.</p> <p>Several videos from the scene showed that the suspect in a white T-shirt and black pants grabbed some passers-by by their clothes, pulled them to the ground and then slashed their bodies several times with a knife. The passers-by all fainted with large sections of their clothes stained red with blood. According to witnesses, the suspect's behavior was an indiscriminate attack.</p> <p>Police arrived at the scene at 23:13, controlled the suspect with the help of the masses on the spot, and took the injured to the hospital for treatment. So far, the case is still under investigation.</p>
Proximal Social Distance	<p>At 23:05 PM on July 6, 2022, there was a criminal case of a suspect chasing and slashing several college students.</p> <p>Several videos from the scene showed that the suspect in a white T-shirt and black pants grabbed some college students by their clothes, pulled them to the ground and then slashed their bodies several times with a knife. The college students all fainted with large sections of their clothes stained red with blood. According to witnesses, the suspect's behavior was an indiscriminate attack on college students.</p> <p>Police arrived at the scene at 23:13, controlled the suspect with the help of the masses on the spot, and took the injured to the hospital for treatment. So far, the case is still under investigation.</p>

Table 1. Experimental Scenarios

Measures

All measures in our research model were adapted from previous studies. Participants first had to indicate their views on the 4-item manipulation of social distance with a seven-point Likert scale revised from Yang (2019) for manipulation check. Then came the measures, all of which were also rated on a seven-point Likert scale. The measures of negative affect and perceived relevance were all developed from Ziegele et al. (2018). And the 4-item measures of self-efficacy were based on Li et al. (2022). The 5-item measures of information avoidance were derived from Yang and Kahlor (2013) (See details in Appendix A).

Procedure and Participants

We conducted the survey on the professional online questionnaire platform "Credamo", which provides the service to help reach the target population. Each participant would get paid if his or her questionnaire was valid. All participants in our study were reached in this way. From December 4th to 7th in 2022, a preliminary survey with 90 valid samples passed the reliability and validity tests. The formal survey was conducted from December 20th in 2022 to January 18th in 2023, with a total of 357 questionnaires collected. Invalid questionnaires were eliminated according to the criteria: (1) the answer duration is too long or too short; (2) the answer is obviously regular; (3) more than 10 consecutive items are rated the same; (4) each IP address can only access once. Finally, 320 valid samples were obtained. Among all the participants, 151 male (47.2%) and 169 female (52.8%) college students were surveyed. 54.4% of them were aged 19-21. More details are shown in Table 2.

Category	Item	Count	Percentage
Gender	Male	151	47.2%
	Female	169	52.8%
Age	≤18	16	5.0%
	19-21	174	54.4%
	22-24	87	27.2%
	≥25	43	13.4%
Table 2. Demographics of Participants (N=320)			

Data Analysis and Results

Manipulation Check

We used SPSS 25.0 to conduct the manipulation check on social distance. The results of the one-way analysis of variance in Table 3 show that there is a significant difference in scores between the distant social distance group and the proximal one ($F=14.375$, $p<0.001$), so our manipulation is effective.

Social Distance	Mean	Standard Deviation	F
Distant	3.285	1.316	14.375***
Proximal	2.753	1.189	
Table 3. Manipulation of Social Distance			

Note. *** $p<0.001$

Measurement Model

We adopted smartPLS 3.0 to analyze the reliabilities and validities. The results in Table 4 show that Cronbach's α and composite reliability (CR) values of all variables are greater than 0.7, and average variance extracted (AVE) values are all greater than 0.5, indicating that these constructs are with good reliabilities and convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hsu & Lin, 2008). Table 4 also shows the path coefficients among variables. The boldfaced elements on the diagonal are the square roots of AVE values of each variable, all of which are greater than the corresponding path coefficients (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In addition, the cross-loadings in Table 5 also indicate that all constructs have good convergent validity and discriminant validities (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Jiang et al., 2002).

	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	Mean	SD	SDC	NA	PR	SE	IA
SDC	0.897	0.929	0.766	3.024	1.281	0.875				
NA	0.85	0.9	0.692	5.779	1.005	-0.392	0.832			
PR	0.889	0.919	0.695	4.967	1.223	-0.481	0.45	0.834		
SE	0.911	0.936	0.787	4.977	1.318	-0.147	0.28	0.201	0.887	
IA	0.903	0.928	0.721	2.775	1.216	0.191	-0.25	-0.271	-0.123	0.849

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities and Correlations

Note. CR= Composite reliability, AVE= Average variance extracted, SD=Standard deviation, SDC=Social distance, NA=Negative affect, PR=Perceived relevance, SE=Self-efficacy, IA=Information avoidance. The boldfaced diagonal elements are the square roots of the AVEs.

Items	SDC	NA	PR	SE	IA
SDC1	0.787	-0.298	-0.333	-0.11	0.093
SDC2	0.875	-0.351	-0.42	-0.12	0.18
SDC3	0.92	-0.356	-0.457	-0.102	0.202
SDC4	0.914	-0.364	-0.461	-0.178	0.179
NA1	-0.324	0.885	0.381	0.283	-0.212
NA2	-0.277	0.858	0.357	0.249	-0.187
NA3	-0.335	0.777	0.374	0.199	-0.188
NA4	-0.362	0.802	0.381	0.198	-0.239
PR1	-0.434	0.238	0.744	0.118	-0.091
PR2	-0.288	0.287	0.763	0.149	-0.179
PR3	-0.458	0.435	0.899	0.21	-0.326
PR4	-0.398	0.442	0.86	0.142	-0.236
PR5	-0.407	0.436	0.89	0.202	-0.256
SE1	-0.044	0.209	0.082	0.859	-0.036
SE2	-0.13	0.286	0.175	0.906	-0.129
SE3	-0.108	0.203	0.183	0.88	-0.133
SE4	-0.2	0.273	0.237	0.902	-0.118
IA1	0.145	-0.124	-0.129	0.003	0.713
IA2	0.203	-0.251	-0.285	-0.192	0.875
IA3	0.14	-0.173	-0.228	-0.085	0.88
IA4	0.189	-0.246	-0.22	-0.078	0.876
IA5	0.125	-0.227	-0.245	-0.111	0.887

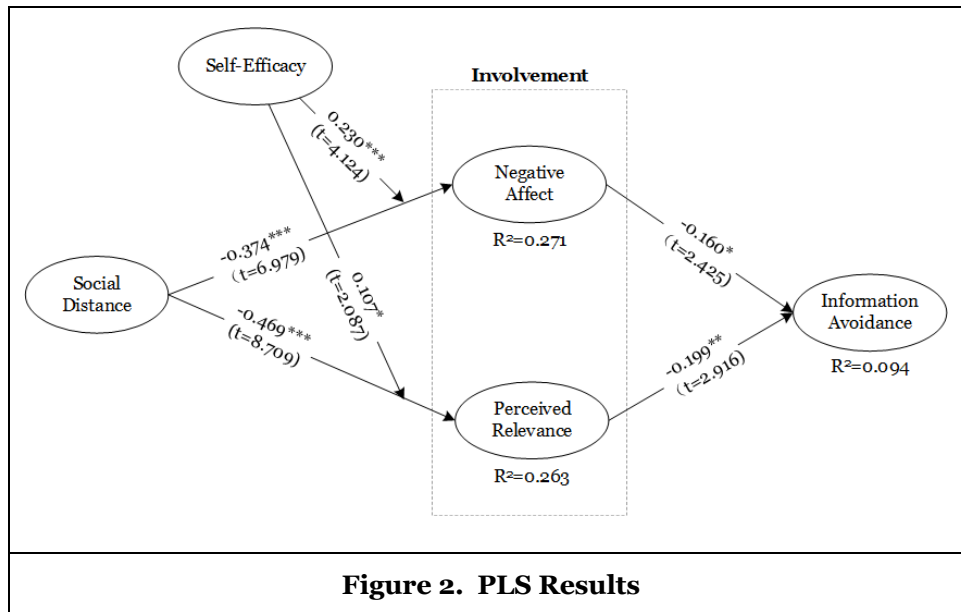
Table 5. Loadings and Cross-loadings

Note. SDC=Social distance, NA=Negative affect, PR=Perceived relevance, SE=Self-efficacy, IA=Information avoidance. The bold numbers in the diagonal row are item loadings on their own construct.

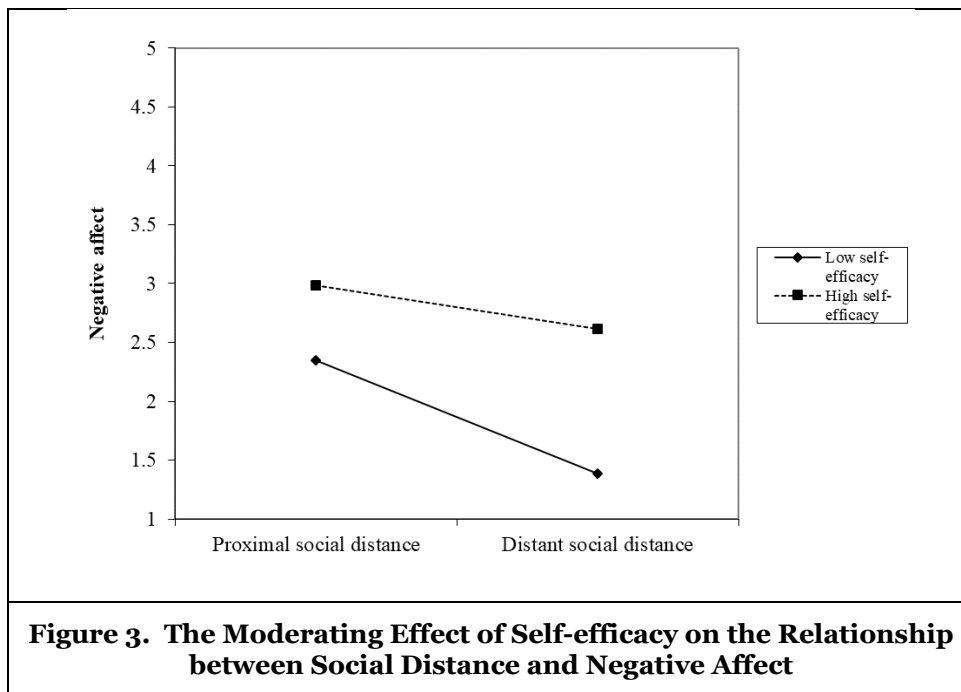
Structural Model

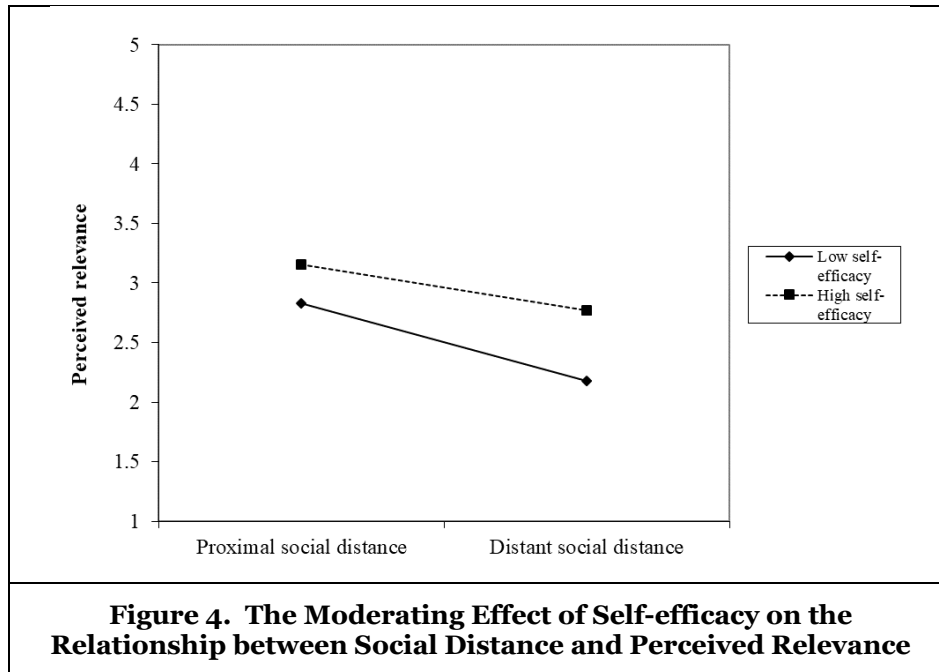
In this study, smartPLS 3.0 bootstrapping was used for structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis. Figure 2 shows that social distance has a significant negative influence on "negative affect" and perceived relevance ($\beta < 0, p < 0.001$), which supports H1a and H2a. And perceived relevance negatively influences information avoidance ($\beta < 0, p < 0.01$), supporting H2b. However, "negative affect" also has a significant negative influence on information avoidance, which contradicts H1b ($\beta < 0, p < 0.05$).

Besides, Figure 2 also shows that self-efficacy has negative moderating effects on the influence of social distance on "negative affect" and perceived relevance, which supports H3a and H3b. Figure 3 and Figure 4 illustrate the moderating effects of self-efficacy with graphs.



Note. ns $p > 0.05$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$





Discussion

Through the scenario-based survey, we explored the influence of social distance on information avoidance from a dual involvement perspective with self-efficacy playing moderating roles. The specific findings are as follows:

First, it is found that social distance negatively influences "negative affect" and perceived relevance in public security events, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Valecha et al., 2021). Nowadays, ICT makes the social relationship between individuals that is formed through online information closer than before. Then social distance becomes crucial to information processing (Yan et al., 2023). In public security events, college students will tend to have strong negative emotions towards those who have a proximal social distance with them, and to believe that they have more to do with the events, even though they don't know each other in real lives.

Second, the research suggests that perceived relevance negatively influences information avoidance. It indicates that college students tend not to avoid the information related to themselves. The finding is also in line with those of previous studies that perceived relevance stimulates information processing (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011).

However, H1b is not supported. Results suggest that "negative affect" has a negative influence on information avoidance, which contradicts our hypothesis and the findings of previous studies. Most views believe that "negative affect" is an important motivation that leads to information avoidance (Sultana et al., 2023). The possible reason may be that for college students, such negative emotions, especially anger, may stimulate their desires to further browse information instead (Weber, 2014). Therefore, in the context of public security events, the specific types of negative emotions may have different influences on information avoidance. Further studies can try to consider different kinds of negative emotions' impact.

Last, we have also found that self-efficacy negatively moderates the influence of social distance on "negative affect" and perceived relevance. The high self-efficacy indicates that college students are more confident in how to solve the problem or to avoid the harm in public security events. They believe that they will do better than the victims, and thus their "negative affect" and perceived relevance will be reduced. On the contrary, those with lower self-efficacy are more sensitive to emergencies and the victims' situations. They may get more involved with increased "negative affect" and perceived relevance. It is consistent with the previous study that self-efficacious individuals show enhanced resiliency and are able to face bad news and problems (Bandura, 1982).

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The findings of our study can contribute to the current theoretical research in the following aspects.

First, this study develops RISP in the context of public security events and information avoidance, advances our understanding of information avoidance through social distance and enriches research achievements in IS field. The repaid development of ICT makes the world smaller. Through information, people can easily know what others go through and feel closer to them (Zhang et al., 2022), as if they were together in real lives. Thus, the online relationship's influence on people's information behavior becomes more significant (Yan et al., 2023). But previous studies ignored the significance of online social relationship (e.g., Deline and Kahlor (2019) suggest embracing social factors in risk information avoidance research and appeal to a relevant and lean model considering public relations). Then we select social distance to focus on that, which lays more emphasis on the connection with the events behind the information. Hence, our study fills the gap of the lack of consideration of online social relationship in information avoidance research.

Second, we develop the application of both affective and cognitive involvement in information avoidance research. It indicates that dual involvement is an appropriate perspective to help understand the mechanism of information avoidance. To be specific, negative affect and perceived relevance can well explain how social distance works through affective and cognitive aspects, then on information avoidance in public security events. A proximal social distance implies connection that will make people focus more on the details and situational features. Then it will make them more empathetic and more emotional towards those who share more similarities, together with the cognition that what they are suffering is self-related. Understanding this kind of mechanism can help with the wider application.

Third, this study also helps us better understand self-efficacy's impact in such situations. Self-efficacy is recognized as an important personality trait that influences information avoidance in risk contexts (Sultana et al., 2023). RISP also agrees with that (Griffin et al., 1999; Jin & Lane, 2022). Our study has responded to the insight and found evidence for its negative influence on the relationship between social distance and involvement. Our finding also reveals that individual traits do make a difference in people's perception and information behavior in public security events, laying the theoretical basis for more attention on the influence of people themselves.

Practical Implications

The research also offers some practical implications to the information dissemination and public opinion control in public security events. First, we find that social distance influences negative affect, and information avoidance through perceived relevance. Accordingly, writers or publishers can adopt a more abstract description of the victims in news reports. It can well reduce the negative emotions of the public to prevent social panic. Moreover, in case of misinformation's large spread, the government or organizations should utilize the advanced ICT, such as controlling personalized recommendation algorithms, to prevent information from reaching more related people. If the events need more attention, the opposite measures can also be taken. Besides, we have also found that self-efficacy can weaken the influence of social distance on dual involvement. Therefore, the government can educate people on how to cope with public security events in their daily lives to help improve their self-efficacy. When emergencies take place, some targeted advice is also needed to inform the public.

Limitations and Future Research

There is still some room for improvement in our study, together with relevant advice for future studies as follows. First, we only selected college students as subjects, which might limit the universality of the results. Then it is necessary to see whether our findings still work in other populations. Second, the accumulative effect of several public security events may also make a difference. People often make associations with similar events, which outstands when they occur in succession. Considering the accumulative effect in the study, the mechanism of information avoidance will be better revealed. Besides, comments' influence is also a significant research topic. Emotional expressions in comments may also make people feel disgusted and avoid information. Those phenomena are common in social media and therefore deserve further research.

Conclusion

In this study, we propose a model to identify the relationship between social distance and information avoidance in public security events. Specifically, we figure out dual involvement's mediating role from the affective and cognitive aspects, namely negative affect and perceived relevance. We also find self-efficacy's negative moderating role in the relationship between social distance and dual involvement. Our findings offer some deeper insights into the theoretical understanding of information avoidance in today's social world, and provide practical suggestions for managing news dissemination and public opinion.

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Appendix A. Measures

Variables	Manipulation/Measures	Sources
Social Distance (SDC)	Participants were asked how much they agreed with the following statements: (SDC1) They could have similar viewpoints to mine. (SDC2) They could have similar values to mine. (SDC3) I could belong to the same group. (SDC4) I am a similar person to them.	(Yang, 2019)
Negative Affect (NA)	Participants were asked whether they felt after reading the scenario: (NA1) angry, (NA2) annoyed, (NA3) discontent, (NA4) sad.	(Ziegele et al., 2018)
Perceived Relevance (PR)	Participants were asked whether they perceived the public security event as: (PR1) personally relevant, (PR2) interesting, (PR3) important, (PR4) meaningful, (PR5) necessary.	(Ziegele et al., 2018)
Self-Efficacy (SE)	Participants were asked how much they agreed with the following statements: (SE1) I can protect myself from the public security event. (SE2) I know how to protect myself from the public security event. (SE3) I know what to do if I face the public security event. (SE4) I know how to protect others if I face the public security event.	(Li et al., 2022)
Information Avoidance (IA)	Participants were asked how much they agreed with the following statements: (IA1) I avoid information about the public security event. (IA2) When it comes to the public security event, I don't want to know more. (IA3) I refuse to listen to information about the public security event. (IA4) I tune out information about the public security event. (IA5) I ignore information about the public security event.	(Yang & Kahlor, 2013)

Table 6. Manipulation and Measures

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