

# Information avoidance: A critical conceptual review

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## Abstract

Information avoidance has long been in the shadow of information seeking. Various seen as undesired, maladaptive, or even pathological, information avoidance has lacked the sustained attention and conceptualization that has been provided to other information practices. It is also, perhaps uniquely among information practices, often invoked to blame or censure those who engage in it. However, closer examination of information avoidance reveals nuanced and complex patterns of interactions with information, ones that often have positive and beneficial outcomes. We challenge the simplistic tenor of this conversation through this critical conceptual review of information avoidance. Starting from an examination of how information avoidance has been treated within information science and related disciplines, we then draw upon the various terms that have been used to describe a lack of engagement with information to establish seven core characteristics of the concept. We subsequently use this analysis to establish our definition of information avoidance as practices that moderate interaction with information by reducing the intensity of information, restricting control over information, and/or excluding information based on perceived properties. We consider the implications of this definition and its view of information avoidance as a significant information practice on information research.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In writing this paper, we started to wonder whether information avoidance may be one of information science's (IS) most prominent anomalies. On the one hand, information avoidance has long been acknowledged as playing a key role within information research with calls for further research long-standing: Pettigrew et al. (2001, p.68) ended their own 2001 ARIST review on conceptual information behavior frameworks by calling for "...rich insights [to] be obtained regarding such novel concepts as...the non-use of information or information blunting."

Unlike other information practices, information avoidance has also attracted attention from scholars across disciplines, including health, economics, communication, sociology, and psychology (e.g., Donohew & Tipton, 1973; Sweeny et al., 2010).

On the other hand, our understanding of information avoidance has remained fragmentary with little sustained or coordinated study of its manifestations. Information avoidance continues to lag behind information seeking; while we have many conferences, books, and journal issues devoted to information seeking, there is none devoted to information avoidance. Many models of the

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information-seeking process do not even consider that information seeking may *not* take place (Case et al., p.354), nor do we have theories and models of information avoidance that compare to those of information seeking. A lack of cohesive scholarship has additionally resulted in a range of terms for avoidance. Case et al. (2005) noted this terminological morass 20 years ago and the situation has not improved since: “[w]e view the concept of information avoidance as related to, but not synonymous with, earlier concepts invoked in investigations of selective exposure, ignorance, cognitive consistency, fear appeals, uncertainty reduction, uncertainty management, coping, and monitoring and blunting behaviors.” Leading to calls to phase out the term, concern over ambiguity has since caused Manheim (2014) to position non-seeking as a more appropriate moniker. However, as we will show, information avoidance is not just limited to “not seeking” information. Instead, it also relates to “not creating,” “not using,” and “not accepting” what is informative. In effect, information avoidance contrasts with many information practices, rather than just information seeking.

It is hard to pinpoint the reasons for these aberrations. One explanation may be found in the deeply embedded Western assumption that people *should* want information (Case et al., 2005), beliefs that have led to the favoring of active and intentional information-seeking behavior in conceptual frameworks. In turn, these ideas have led to the positioning of the human tendency to avoid information as an undesired behavior that should be corrected. Contributions from outside of IS may have further confused the issue because they position the avoided information as factually true and relevant, and thereby capable of leading to an increase in knowledge and/or decrease in uncertainty. It is understandable that they frame avoidance as a form of denial.

Manheim (2014) identified three distinct streams of research on non-seeking behavior:

1. Strategies of escape: satisficing and termination of search (satisficing)
2. Strategies of reduction: filtering and narrowing of search (overload)
3. Strategies of omission: avoidance of search (avoidance)

Within this framing, information scientists have contributed most heavily to satisficing and avoidance with some attention to overload while psychology has tended to focus on avoidance, particularly in relation to monitoring, blunting, and uncertainty. In contrast, contributions from communication scholars have emphasized the use of information in communication processes. Given these

differences, it is perhaps not surprising that these literature have rarely been examined together (Manheim, 2014), with most research studying non-seeking behavior in the context of the corresponding seeking behavior.

Since Manheim's review, however, research in information avoidance has started to integrate satisficing and information overload into the discussion, emphasizing the need for a revision of existing frameworks (Klaus, 2021, p.7). A further spur to the examination of avoidance has been its increasing prominence in everyday discussions of information seeking and use: the COVID pandemic raised many questions about what information we can trust, and therefore what information should be avoided, while concepts such as the digital detox position the avoidance of information as a useful strategy for successful living. The listing of mis/disinformation, which refers to information that is best avoided, as the biggest short-term global risk (World Economic Forum, 2024) provides a further impetus for a more focused examination of how information is avoided and what is needed in terms of systems or strategies to help avoid misinformation successfully. The resonance of information avoidance outside of IS further illustrates that it is the application of the term that is problematic rather than the term itself.

In his examination of the current trends and research in information avoidance from an IS perspective, Klaus (2021) concluded that the understandings and expressions of information avoidance vary too much across researchers and disciplines “...to give a single coherent definition of what information avoidance actually is.” (2021, p.45). In this article, we take on this challenge to present a critical conceptual review and conceptualization of information avoidance. Our review examines prior coverage of information avoidance in a variety of disciplines and critically conceptualizes the term in relation to related concepts.

Previous reviews of information avoidance, such as Golman et al., 2017; Klaus, 2021; Manheim, 2014, have taken focused looks at specific aspects of avoidance, such as strategies for information avoidance or avoidance within specific disciplines. Other contributions discussed below identify avoidance practices in distinct contexts. We do not present a detailed account of each of these terms and their contexts; rather we identify and analyze significant concepts related to information avoidance from a variety of disciplines and uncover their informational nature. In taking this approach, our goal is to conceptualize information avoidance as an instance of human information practice, distinct from, yet co-existing with information seeking. We argue that conceptualizing information avoidance in this way opens the

door to new ways of studying and understanding information practices in IS.

In doing so, we answer the following research questions:

1. How has information avoidance been treated within the literature and within models of information behavior and seeking? In answering this question, we point to an almost universally negative view of information avoidance, to a narrow interpretation of information itself, and to a very limited treatment of information avoidance within information behavior models and frameworks.
2. What terms have been used to describe information avoidance? Here, we uncover a wide range of terms that have been used to describe practices of non-engagement with information.
3. How can we conceptualize the practice of information avoidance? Here, we establish a new conceptualization of information avoidance based on a set of seven characteristics of information avoidance derived from the terms identified in answering question 2. This then leads to a new definition of information avoidance.
4. What are the implications of this new conceptualization of information avoidance? Here we address system design, methods for studying information avoidance, and how we conceptualize information avoidance as an information practice.

## 2 | METHODS

We originally set out to undertake a more conventional literature review of information avoidance, a concept that we considered to be both underexplored and poorly treated within empirical and review literature. We sought to examine historical and current research literature in a variety of disciplines to show how the concept of information avoidance has been treated.

As our work progressed, however, we started to recognize the value in shifting our focus from simply reviewing to shared theorizing (cf. Sonnenwald, 2016, p.3), in which we sought to explain how, when, where, and why information avoidance occurs. This approach calls for a critical conceptual review methodology, which “goes beyond mere description of identified articles and includes a degree of analysis and conceptual innovation. An effective critical review presents, analyses and synthesizes material from diverse sources. Its product perhaps most easily identifies it—typically manifested in a hypothesis or a model, not an answer. The resultant model may constitute a synthesis of existing models or

schools of thought, or it may be a completely new interpretation of the existing data” (Grant & Booth, 2009, p.93).

A strength of critical reviews is their ability to engage in deep analysis and evaluation of prior research and provide a “‘launch pad’ for a new phase of conceptual development and subsequent ‘testing’” (Grant & Booth, 2009, p.93). Critical reviews take a less structured approach than do other forms of literature review. Grant and Booth (2009, p.94) note that “there is no formal requirement to present methods of the search, synthesis and analysis explicitly.” Rather than employing systematic search criteria, a critical review seeks to identify the most significant items. The analysis is interpretive and therefore “necessarily subjective and the resulting product is the starting point for further evaluation, not an endpoint in itself.” (Grant & Booth, 2009, p.93).

We proceeded abductively, working backwards from existing information avoidance concepts to uncover how they came into existence and then creating an explanatory framework. “Abductive logic is used to characterize and understand similarities and differences; it does this by starting with the way social actors conceptualize and understand their social world and then transforms these everyday typifications into social scientific types, typologies and theories” (Blaikie & Priest, 2019, p.93). This approach directly challenges both the methods and the typical processes of IS theoretical and conceptual development (Hicks et al., 2022; Hicks et al., 2024).

To achieve our goals, we engaged in two parallel stages of iterative and collaborative conceptualization of information avoidance; (1) an initial search and mapping review of the literature, which allowed us to identify how IA has been treated within literature to date, and (2) the critical mapping and categorization of key information avoidance terms. Together, this work has led us to conceptualize the guiding characteristics of information avoidance.

### 2.1 | Search and literature review

The first stage of our collaborative conceptualization process was an ongoing search and conceptual review of relevant research literature. We began by consulting published reviews on the topic (e.g., Case et al., 2005; Costello & Veinot, 2020; Golman et al., 2017; Klaus, 2021; Sweeny et al., 2010). As these reviews show, phenomena related to information avoidance have been described and defined by many researchers from many disciplines, resulting in multiple related concepts and different terms. As a result, and consistent with our abductive approach and our critical review methodology, we

did not begin with a pre-determined search strategy. Rather, we engaged in several strategies to identify the most significant items. We began by searching for relevant concepts from published reviews (e.g., news avoidance, stress and coping, selective exposure), using pearl growing and citation chaining to capture the range of terms and nuances.

Next, we individually and collaboratively searched the empirical IS literature for the phrase “information avoidance.” Reviewing the IS literature helped us to gain a sense of further related terms in the field as well as to identify the problematic themes. The frequent references to literature from outside of IS led us to follow citations and expand our search to Psychology, Journalism, and Health, three disciplines that have made substantial contributions to the topic (e.g., Sweeny et al., 2010) as well as carrying out interdisciplinary searches in cognate areas, for example, related to stress or coping. At this stage, we also expanded our keyword searches to include terminology that is favored in other disciplines, such as “news avoidance.” Throughout this process, we consistently brought our findings back to the full team for ongoing review and collaborative identification of gaps. This approach gave an additional layer of scrutiny to the elaboration of our dataset. At this stage, we reviewed English-language material from any publication date.

The third step was to address research question two by identifying the terms, concepts, and definitions that authors from the identified literature used to refer to information avoidance. As Case et al. (2005, p.360) have argued, the concept of information avoidance should not be considered directly synonymous with earlier terms, including ignorance, selective exposure, and coping. However, the huge range of related concepts that we found in the literature meant that we saw value in putting terms in dialog rather than in isolation from each other as we sought to unpack the scope and breadth of the concept. Alongside recording the specific terms that authors used to refer to information avoidance activity, we noted the author's definition of the concept as well as a representative citation. This initial process produced a set of terms that we took as the basis for our collaborative conceptualization of information avoidance.

## 2.2 | Critical conceptualization

The second stage of our collaborative conceptualization process involved a series of mapping exercises that would help us to disentangle identified concepts and draw out the connections and disparities between them. This mapping was carried out using Google Jamboard, a

collaborative digital tool that enables participants to create virtual sticky note pages and move the notes around in real time individually or collaboratively. We found that the simplicity of Jamboard as well as the interactive, visual elements made it a useful tool for our collaborative conceptualizing work.

For the first iteration of the mapping, we created individual Jamboard pages for each group member within which one sticky note was allocated to each of the initial information avoidance concepts. We each then individually mapped these concepts into categories that we labeled. While each group member had access to the others' mapping, we encouraged an individual exploration of ideas at this stage. We then met to compare and discuss our maps. As part of this discussion, we identified the value of thinking about avoidance in relation to three periods of the information process at which it could occur: seeking and/or engaging with information sources, selecting, and evaluating information from a source, and engaging with the information itself (e.g., interpretation or use).

We each then returned to our individual maps for a second iteration, in which we explored how and whether our initial Jamboard conceptualizations worked in relation to this categorization. The second iteration produced mixed results. Some of us saw value in the process model identified above while others preferred to retain Sweeny et al.'s (2010) “5 Ws” (Who, What, When, Where, and Why) structure. The ongoing ambiguity subsequently led to our final Jamboard iteration in which we reflected on these categorizations to consider how we might draw out analytical depth. This final reflexive period subsequently led to the establishment of seven initial guiding characteristics of information avoidance.

In the final step of our collaborative conceptualizing process, we broke into small groups and returned to working in parallel. One group drew on our developing analysis to expand our literature search and review to produce a final list of information avoidance concepts. Another group re-examined the seven initial characteristics of information avoidance considering the expanding table of concepts. We brought both analyses back to the full team for discussion.

## 3 | TREATMENT IN THE LITERATURE AND IN MODELS

Our analysis of stage one addressed our first research question. We revealed three major ways in which IA has been treated in the literature: a reliance on a narrow definition of information, an overwhelming negative depiction of avoidance, and omission of avoidance from



relevant IS information models. We present these themes in this section.

### 3.1 | Narrow definition of information

The first treatment that became visible in our review of the literature was the narrow way in which information being avoided has been typically conceptualized. Information is generally quite poorly represented within information avoidance literature, rarely being defined or examined in any level of detail. When the term does become the focus of attention, claims that environmental stimuli “contribute to... knowledge or beliefs” (Barbour et al., 2012, p.213) position information as automatically “relevant, helpful and desirable” (Klaus, 2021, p.9) as well as of long-term benefit to the recipient. The sense of perplexment that often accompanies research exploring why patients reject medical tests (e.g., Lambert et al., 2009) or the news (e.g., Lee et al., 2017) further establishes information as unquestionably credible while reference to how our “complex brains [are] capable of acquiring and handling massive amounts of information” (Sweeny et al., 2010, p.350) brings in an inevitable naturalness to these considerations. Linked to ongoing disciplinary preoccupation with uncertainty reduction (Case et al., 2005, p.6), the “power” of knowledge (Sweeny et al., 2010, p.340) is also premised upon the historic instrumental positioning of information as shaped in relation to the problem (Capurro & Hjørland, 2003) or the solution (Talja & Nyce, 2015) that it will satisfy. As Buckland (1991, p.351) points out, information serves to inform. Concern about the avoidance of health information also bears traces of neoliberal ideologies, in which responsibility for wellbeing is premised upon the accumulation of biomedically approved knowledge (Henwood et al., 2011).

Yet, in failing to acknowledge the dynamics of how we become informed, this very fixed understanding of information denies broader engagement with information avoidance. The typical association of information with extractive value (Costello & Floegel, 2021), for example, is challenged through the recognition that information can also be *unhelpful*, with social support networks seen to encourage “unhealthy” behavior, such as needle sharing, and detract from attending to diabetic symptoms (Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011, p.338). The presence of outdated, conflicting, or incomplete information within governmental or public sector messaging further indicates how traditional authoritative knowledge cannot be seen as consistently credible (Ruokolainen et al., 2023), while a lack of available treatment demonstrates that the accumulation of health knowledge may

not always translate into “improved outcomes” (Manheim, 2014). Alongside these concerns, a focus on individual betterment ignores the violence of power relations, including how health information may be weaponized by insurers (Lipsey & Shepperd, 2019) or employers (Dali, 2018). It also neglects to account for the costs or risks of engaging with information, such as how structural and interpersonal racism cause harm for teens and tweens of color when they interact within library and information spaces (Gibson et al., 2023). Lastly, the typical emphasis on the tangibility of information impedes a broader consideration of what people may consider to be informative, including how emotions, memory, and the corporeal shape ways of knowing (e.g., Oliphant, 2021). Challenging the positioning of information as facts that are given by others, the sidelining of different information modalities also limits understanding of how sensory cues are avoided in practice.

### 3.2 | Prior negative depiction

A second treatment that we noted in literature is the tendency to position information avoidance as a maladaptive (Manheim, 2014) or abnormal (Klaus, 2021) activity. While this approach is starting to be challenged within more recent literature reviews (e.g., Klaus, 2021), the negative judgment associated with information avoidance is still prevalent and little scope is given for alternative explanations.

One common way in which this censure plays out is through blaming individuals for their actions. Thus, non-users of information are perceived to be people who are unable to deal with information that “might demand a change in beliefs” (Sweeny et al., 2010, p.342), whether this is due to an inability to cope with “uncomfortable conflict” (Narayan et al., 2011, p.2), “unpleasant emotions” (Sweeny et al., 2010, p.342) or threats to personal autonomy (Howell & Shepperd, 2013, p.258). Clearly situated within a cognitive paradigm, in which emotional impulses are seen to be controlled by the self-disciplined, monologic subject, information avoidance is also blamed on user inefficiency, including over-confidence (Klaus, 2021), a lack of conscientiousness (Heinström, 2003), procrastination (Fuertes et al., 2020), or as a simple inability to manage quantities of relevant information (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). Information avoidance is further blamed upon individual psychological flaws that are thought to impede rational behavior, with information avoiders being variously described as “anti-social” (Costello & Veinot, 2020, p.10), depressed (Sweeny et al., 2010, p.347), anxious (Golman et al., 2017, p.107; Klaus, 2021), lonely (Sweeny et al., 2010, p.347), or

wishing to avoid liability or judgment for unethical conduct (Golman et al., 2017, p.124). Challenging the rationality of inquiry, in which research depends upon taking account of all available relevant information (Wilson, 1995, p.46), the association of information avoidance with disorder and disease (cf. Manheim, 2014) further reinforces its positioning as a symptom of a pathologically (Bawden & Robinson, 2009) weak and unregulated state.

Another frequent way in which information avoidance is censured is through stressing the costs or negative consequences of disengaging with information. One of the most frequently cited consequences of information avoidance is poor decision-making, especially over health concerns (Case et al., 2005) where avoidance may be presented as a coping mechanism that makes the situation worse (Manheim, 2014). Information avoidance has further been blamed for the provision of poorer medical advice (Gigerenzer et al., 2007), preventing useful legislation against climate change (Marshall, 2014), and increasing the likelihood of successful terrorist attacks (Krohne, 1993). For other authors, the danger lies in social degeneration with information avoidance being linked to “pseudo-epistemic” thinking that makes one more susceptible to conspiracy theories (Heiss et al., 2021) and which leads to political polarization (Kahan et al., 2012) and the creation of divisive media environments (Golman et al., 2017). Avoiding information has further been linked with psychological states, with Costello and Veinot (2020) reporting that people who shun information are “disengaged and disillusioned about their condition” or, as Chatman (1996) points out, “unable to solve a critical worry or concern.” Speaking to the variety of threats that are associated with withdrawal from informational contexts, the common theoretical thread that links these concerns is adherence to models of uncertainty, wherein the building of understanding (and the reduction of fear and anxiety) is assumed to only come about through engaging with new information (Klaus, 2021, p.18; Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010). Literature also reflects an engagement with cognitive dissonance, self-deception, or selective exposure theory, which proposes that people avoid information that is inconsistent with or challenges their beliefs (Klaus, 2021; Sweeny et al., 2010).

At the same time, the underlying cognitive premise of this literature neglects how information avoidance might also be used as a coping mechanism, particularly in the face of stressful or tense situations. Emotional motivations, such as fear responses or desires for “comfort,” are often seen as evidence for the irrationality of information avoidance. However, self-care and psychological protection are critical human needs and avoidance may be part

of an overall system of prioritization when faced with distressing certainties (Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010) or the ongoing impact of trauma (van der Kolk, 2015). Moreover, the typical emphasis on uncertainty reduction disregards the “productive and constitutive” (Smithson, 2015, p.387) roles that information avoidance plays within knowledge construction (also see Hovious, 2022); as Wenger (1999, p.164) points out, we define ourselves as much by the information with which we don’t engage as by the information with which we do. Lastly, literature also neglects to account for the impact of changing social and technological mores upon activity, including slow news (Andersen, 2022), surveillance (Newell, 2023), and digital detoxes (Aharoni et al., 2021) in the attention economy (Kozyreva et al., 2023). Changing social mores might also include the expanding emphasis that is placed upon personal responsibility within healthcare, including how experiential knowledge and evolving medical awareness might mean that information avoidance seems sensible when it comes to diagnoses that feel incorrect.

### 3.3 | Omission from models

The third treatment that we observed in our literature review relates to the mixed treatment that information avoidance has received in information behavior models and theoretical frameworks, both within IS and beyond. As Case et al. (2005, p.356) point out, the typical assumption that people choose to seek information means that the idea of avoiding information is rarely discussed within theoretical work. When information avoidance does feature, it normally only appears in discussions of research models (e.g., Bates, 2017; Case et al., 2005; Case & Given, 2016; Wilson, 1999, 2017, 2022) rather than in the models themselves. Furthermore, models rarely establish the connection between information avoidance and information seeking, but generally assume that avoidance implies the lack of seeking or the rejection of information. More recent research has claimed that information seeking and information avoidance are inversely related, but not in such a way, though, that we can predict the level of one from the other (Link et al., 2023). While suggesting a more complex relationship between the two concepts, this ongoing ambiguity also illustrates the limited theoretical treatment that these ideas have received to date. The uncertainty surrounding the role and place of information avoidance is more clearly illustrated when examining some of the dominant models and frameworks of information behavior in IS (Case & Given, 2016; Ruthven, 2024; Wilson, 2017) as well as beyond IS (see Tables 1 and 2).

TABLE 1 Information avoidance in selected models and frameworks in IS. Presented chronologically/alphabetically.

| Presence of information avoidance in IS models and frameworks       |                               |                             |   |
|---|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Model/framework   | Present in model/theory (Y/N) | Present in discussion (Y/N) | Conceptions and terms used  |
| Model of Information Seeking Behavior<br>Krikelas (1983)            | N                             | Y                           | Discusses two types of needs (immediate and deferred) and associated information strategies (information given and information gathering), where collecting information to satisfy deferred needs resembles instances of “delaying information” or “blunting” (Baker, 2005, p.240)  |
| Information Search Process<br>Kuhlthau (1991)                       | N                             | Y                           | Acknowledges that the Information Search Process (ISP) in support of knowledge construction, hence, uncertainty reduction may sometimes also result in frustration and dissatisfaction. Information may in certain situations increase uncertainty, implying that information is not always considered “good” (Kuhlthau, 2005, p.230)   |
| Comprehensive Model of Information Seeking<br>Johnson et al. (1995) | N                             | Y                           | Discusses how “ignorance” and “failure to seek” have negative implications for the organization and to employees  |
| Model of Everyday Life Information Seeking<br>Savolainen (1995)     | N                             | Y                           | Introduces four types of “mastery of life” and their accompanying information-seeking behavior. Cognitive and affective factors may result in different mastery forms implying information avoidance: “Pessimistic-cognitive” mastery of life, “Defensive-effective” mastery of life and “Pessimistic-affective” mastery of life  |
| General Model of Information Behavior<br>Wilson (1996)              | N                             | Y                           | Acknowledges that basic situational needs influenced by cognitive, physical, and affective factors and regulated by activating mechanisms may prevent people from seeking/searching information   |
| Revised General Model of Information Behavior<br>Wilson (2022)      | N                             | Y                           | In this model, information seeking has been replaced by the broader label “information discovery” to cover both active intentional and the passive non-intentional information activities. More intervening variables have been added. Discusses mechanisms whereby information may be avoided, but information behavior is primarily reflected as an activity toward information |
| Theory of Life in the Round<br>Chatman (1999)                       | N                             | Y                           | Life in the round will, for everyday purposes, have a negative effect on information seeking. There is a simple reason for this. People will not search for information if there is no need to do so. If members of a social world choose to ignore information, it is because their world is working without it  |
| Information Shaping<br>Ruthven (2024)                               | N                             | Y                           | An important part of information use is deciding what information not to use. As the information use-process develops, Bates’ (1979) search tactics such as CUT, CLEAVE and BLOCK can be employed to reject existing information and to avoid future information that is predicted not to be of use—thus, shaping information to what matters                                     |

For this review, we investigated a selected number of models and frameworks of information behavior within and beyond IS for three issues of interest in relation to information avoidance: (1) whether instances of information avoidance were present in the model/framework; (2) whether information avoidance was discussed in accompanying text, and (3) how information avoidance was defined and/or conceptualized in this work. The IS models and frameworks of information behavior (presented chronologically in Table 1) were selected for their historical and current dominance in the field,

e.g., demonstrated by their continuing employment and appearance in reviews, articles, and encyclopedias of IS (Case & Given, 2016; Kundu, 2017; Wilson, 2017). Modifications of dominating models have been included as well. The review also centered on “process-oriented” and “explaining” models and frameworks to exclude purely descriptive approaches to IB (Wilson, 2017). While most of the selected models date from the 1980s and 1990s, the examination also includes recent theoretical models and frameworks of substantial conceptual importance to the information behavior field. Theoretical frameworks and

TABLE 2 Information avoidance in selected models and frameworks outside IS. Presented chronologically/alphabetically.

| Presence of information avoidance in non-IS fields and disciplines                          |                     |                               |                             |  |
|---|---------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Model/framework   | Discipline          | Present in model/theory (Y/N) | Present in discussion (Y/N) | Conceptions and terms used   |
| Conceptual Model of Information Seeking, Avoiding, and Processing Donohew and Tipton (1973) | Communications      | Y                             | N                           | Talks about seeking, "holding still" and avoiding information  |
| Confirmation Bias Kunda (1990)  | Psychology          | Y                             | Y                           | Confirmation bias is a cognitive bias that causes people to search for, interpret, and recall information in a way that confirms their preexisting beliefs or values. Information avoidance, on the other hand, is the act of avoiding information that challenges or contradicts one's beliefs or values. Hence, to maintain social peace or assimilate into a collection individuals may selectively avoid certain subjects or pieces of information                                       |
| Social Norms Lapinski and Rimal (2005)  | Communications      | N                             | N                           | The term social norm is used, conventionally, to refer to a normative social belief, which is an individual's beliefs about the behaviors and evaluations of others in a social setting: that is, a cognitive construct and mental representation of the actual social norm. This use distinguishes it from a more appropriate use of the term social norm, which refers to the actual reality of behaviors that are common or approved within a social group                                |
| Communication Accommodation Theory Giles and Ogay, (2007)                                   | Communications      | Y                             | N                           | Describes how individuals adapt their communicative behaviors to align with those of their interlocutors. Conversely, information avoidance refers to the deliberate evasion of potentially distressing or belief-contradicting information. Essentially, to foster social harmony or assimilate into a collective, individuals may selectively bypass certain subjects or pieces of information   |
| Elaboration Likelihood Model Neben et al. (2013)  | Information systems | Y                             | N                           | The avoidance of useful information can be considered a pathologic information behavior. A main cause of avoidance is the perception of information dissonance (Nickerson, 1998). Information is dissonant if it challenges existing beliefs. The threat of having to change existing beliefs leads to a negative affective state in the individual. Since information may be dissonant but relevant the question of how to prevent this psychological process emerges (Sweeny et al., 2010) |
| Ostrich Problem Webb et al. (2013)  | Psychology          | Y                             | N                           | People who might encounter relevant information will intentionally reject, ignore, or selectively attend to aspects of that information to avoid unpleasant emotions, prior expectations, or beliefs   |



models from outside IS (presented chronologically in Table 2) were identified during the literature search for this review and present more recent conceptualizations of information behavior including information avoidance from different disciplines.

As shown in Table 1, “information avoidance” is absent from the selected IS models and theories, but some of them discuss instances of avoiding information offering some insight into the characteristics and practices of avoidance. Krikelas’ (1983) model acknowledges that people in addition to tapping external sources seek information from personal/internal knowledge and experience, but also recognizes that people may gather information into their personal collections for later use in response to a “deferred need.” For Krikelas, then, using information from memory or a personal collection is seeking, not avoiding. Wilson’s general model, presented in Wilson (1999, p.257; 2022, p.32), acknowledges psychological factors such as self-efficacy and responses to stress and coping that may prompt not seeking, avoiding, postponing, or delegating information (2022, p.32). In contrast, Savolainen’s (1995) model addresses the right not to seek information and the cognitive and/or affective factors that may interfere with people’s need to seek. Their work shows that information avoidance can be the preferred strategy (conscious or unconscious) to master one’s life (Savolainen, 1995) and/or to cope with stress and uncertainty (Wilson, 1999) or simply to shape what matters and makes sense (Ruthven, 2024).

Models and theories from other disciplines like sociology, psychology, and communication are more likely to address avoiding or delaying interaction with information. These models emphasize that the information we seek, recall, and interpret must conform to socially accepted norms (e.g., Lapinski & Rimal, 2005) and support preexisting beliefs and values, which may involve avoidance of challenging information and confirmation of existing cognitive biases (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Kunda, 1990). These models address the motivations for avoiding dissonant information (Webb et al., 2013) and the negative consequences of doing so (Neben et al., 2013). They also explain how people may adjust their communication style to avoid presenting information that may be challenging or uncomfortable for the listener (Giles & Ogay, 2007).

In summary, prior treatment of information avoidance in information behavior research has focused too narrowly on a problematic situation of uncertainty prompting a need for information and intentional information seeking as the best—and often the only accepted—solution. In consequence, information avoidance has been negatively understood and conceptualized. This imbalance between information seeking and

avoidance has also been reflected in many of the general models and frameworks of human information behavior by explicitly conceptualizing seeking actions, while the behavior of information avoidance (or non-seeking) generally is absent or mis-conceptualized negatively as “failure.”

## 4 | CONCEPTUALIZING INFORMATION AVOIDANCE: ESTABLISHING CORE CHARACTERISTICS

The second stage of our collaborative process was to map and conceptualize the wide range of related information avoidance terms and definitions found in the literature (research question three). This was achieved through the visual mapping of 36 information avoidance terms, which we then subjected to three rounds of iterative and collaborative analysis. The goal of this stage was to establish the core characteristics of information avoidance. This process identified seven characteristics of information avoidance, which we further grouped into three overarching categories.

### 4.1 | Characteristics of information avoidance

Each of the seven characteristics that emerged through our collaborative analysis shapes information avoidance. The characteristics of information avoidance are further grouped into three categories; *information-related*, where it is the type and form of information that drives avoidance activity, *person-related*, where avoidance activity is related to individual’s values and conditions, and *person-information-related*, where avoidance is linked to both the form of information and personal values. Within these groupings, we define the seven characteristics of information avoidance as:

- Information-related
  - *Intensity*: refers to the amount, pace, or force of information
  - *Granularity*: refers to the scale of information, whether encompassing entire information sources or individual pieces of content
- Person-related
  - *Engagement*: refers to how invested or involved a person is with information, whether active, receptive, or passive
  - *Control*: refers to the extent to which the person has or believes they have command over information

- Person-information-related
  - *Relevance*: refers to the significance or importance that information has to a person, including the degree of specificity
  - *Quality*: refers to the authority or credibility that information has to a person.
  - *Timeliness*: refers to the temporal suitability or appropriateness of information to a person

We will now present the three categories and seven characteristics of information avoidance with reference to example published literature. Given the variety of terms that have been used to discuss information avoidance, literature will be used to illustrate key ideas rather than to provide a definitive list of work in this area.

## 4.2 | Information-related characteristics of information avoidance

We understand information-related characteristics to refer to qualities of information that are independent from the person. Comprising measures of *intensity* and *granularity*, information-related characteristics of information avoidance describe the material shape of information, including those related to flow and scope. The next two sections describe these characteristics more fully.

### 4.2.1 | Intensity

One of perhaps the most obvious defining characteristics of information avoidance relates to the *intensity* or the amount, pace, or force of information that a person is facing (see Table 3). Impacting the supply of information available, the growth in the quantity of information sources (Savolainen, 2007) as well as the

TABLE 3 Intensity.

| Term from the literature    | Reference(s)                             |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Avoiding overexposure       | Barbour et al., 2012                     |
| Filtering                   | Savolainen, 2007; Barbour et al., 2012   |
| Forgetting                  | Golman et al., 2017                      |
| Guarded information use     | Lambert et al., 2009                     |
| Self-regulation             | Addison, 2017                            |
| Slow (news and information) | Andersen, 2022; Poirier & Robinson, 2014 |
| Withdrawing                 | Savolainen, 2007                         |

accessibility of new information (Lambert et al., 2009) creates a sense of information overload, in which people receive too much information at any one time. Information avoidance consequently becomes a way to mediate excess related to volume. At the same time, *intensity* may also refer to emotional magnitude, in which the content or the consequences of information (Addison, 2017) lead to fatigue (Barbour et al., 2012) or a sensation of being overexposed to information at a particular point in time (Savolainen, 2007). From this perspective, information avoidance becomes linked to depth of feeling as well as physical capacity. *Intensity* may also be connected to our curiosity for new information (Lambert et al., 2009), which further risks compounding overload.

Information avoidance is consequently connected to technological development as the ease of updating material leads to higher volumes of information (Andersen, 2022; Poirier & Robinson, 2014). The emphasis that “Slow News and Information” (Andersen, 2022; Poirier & Robinson, 2014) places upon replacing quickly updated but uneven quality material with higher quality but lower quantity information further illustrates that *intensity* must also be seen as entangled with issues of *quality* and *timeliness* (explored below). At the same time, information avoidance cannot purely be seen as a technical or cognitive issue. The focus on reducing the number and type of information sources to a comfortable level (Savolainen, 2007) also illustrates that information avoidance forms an emotional coping mechanism as people juggle fears about what information may contain (Lambert et al., 2009). The recognition that people may purposefully increase the *intensity* of more positive or welcome forms of information to mediate difficult situations, as found in “Guarded Information Use” (Lambert et al., 2009) and “Forgetting” (Golman et al., 2017), further positions information avoidance as a form of self-protection. The concept of “withdrawing” (Savolainen, 2007), which takes place when people feel overwhelmed or overexposed by the sudden *intensity* of information, also illustrates how information avoidance must be seen as temporary or as taking place at a specific point in time.

### 4.2.2 | Granularity

The second information-related characteristic of avoidance relates to the *granularity* of information, which refers to the scale or level of detail of information (see Table 4). Drawing from McKenzie’s (2003, p.28) differentiation between connecting with potential information sources and interacting with sources to obtain information, *granularity* recognizes that information avoidance

TABLE 4 Granularity.

| Term from the literature               | Reference(s)                           |
|--|--|
| Comprehensive avoidance of information | Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010            |
| Concealing                             | Chatman, 1996; Mansour, 2020           |
| Disconnection                          | Light & Cassidy, 2014                  |
| Filtering                              | Savolainen, 2007; Barbour et al., 2012 |
| Hedging                                | Hicks & Lloyd, 2022                    |
| Ignorance                              | Kozyreva et al., 2023; Johnson, 2009   |
| Non-use of information                 | Wilson, 1995                           |
| Selective avoidance of information     | Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010            |
| Topic avoidance                        | Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004      |
| Withdrawing                            | Savolainen, 2007                       |

may take place on the level of the information source, when people avoid a resource in its entirety, or on the level of information content, when people shun individual topics or ideas within the broader container. While information avoidance literature has typically recognized fine-grained content-driven approaches to controlling information, technological developments related to blocking and muting have since also started to represent broad-stroke strategies that may include wholesale weeding of sources from information environments (e.g., Light & Cassidy, 2014). From this perspective, *granularity* references a spectrum of avoidance activity that ranges from absolute (Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010; Savolainen, 2007), temporary (Light & Cassidy, 2014), and tapered (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022) through to the circumvention of narrow topics and themes, such as vaccination discussions (Mansour, 2020, also see Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004).

As with many of the characteristics of information avoidance, *granularity* is connected to emotion, with the reduction of contact with specific resources most linked to a wish to avoid distressing certainty (Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010). An emphasis on vetting means that *granularity* is also entwined with questions of *quality* as people engage in “hedging” to avoid information sources that they suspect may be unreliable (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022) or “filtering” to eschew “useless” information from sources that are chosen for use (Savolainen, 2007, p.611). At the same time, the recognition that people engage in “concealing” activities, where they remain ignorant (Johnson, 2009) or refrain from

engaging with certain topics to align with social group norms and preferred behaviors (Chatman, 1996; Mansour, 2020) demonstrates that information avoidance also forms the means to combat threats to social cohesion as well as individual challenges. Research into “topic avoidance” within romantic relationships, where partners may avoid raising subjects in the hopes of maintaining intimacy (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), provides another example of how information avoidance must be seen as inseparable from broader social goals. Extending broader understanding about the protective shape of activity, an emphasis on the *granularity* of information illustrates the qualitative and quantitative shape of information avoidance, in which both broad-brush reductions of scale and information interpretation facilitate engagement.

### 4.3 | Person-related characteristics of information avoidance

We understand person-related characteristics as those relating primarily to the values, motivations, and cognitive, emotional, and social moderators of an individual. Encompassing *engagement* and *control*, person-related characteristics introduce questions of human agency to information avoidance, including related to individual resources and capacities. The next two sections describe these characteristics.

#### 4.3.1 | Engagement

*Engagement*, which refers to how invested or involved a person is with information, forms a first example of how information avoidance is linked to individual actions and responses (see Table 5). Affecting participation in or contact with a specific situation, *engagement* is often connected to information avoidance through a lack of activity, with the side-lining of information seen to happen when there is disinterest (Lambert et al., 2009), apathy, fatigue, and weariness (Barbour et al., 2012). However, information avoidance is also linked to more directed forms of *engagement* as people deliberately and intentionally work to remove themselves from a particular situation or topic, whether this is because information is somehow threatening or has potentially negative consequences (Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010). *Engagement* consequently exists on a continuum of activity, which includes active and passive forms of contact as well as being linked to caution (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022) or receptivity to the likely implications of a subject or topic of information.

TABLE 5 Engagement.

| Term from the literature           | Reference(s)                            |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Avoiding overexposure              | Barbour et al., 2012                    |
| Blunting                           | Miller, 1987                            |
| Delegation                         | Addison, 2017                           |
| Forgetting                         | Golman et al., 2017                     |
| Hedging                            | Hicks & Lloyd, 2022                     |
| Ignorance                          | Kozyreva et al., 2023;<br>Johnson, 2009 |
| Minimal information use            | Lambert et al., 2009                    |
| Minimizing                         | Vaillo et al., 2018                     |
| Selective avoidance of information | Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010             |
| Self-handicapping                  | Golman et al., 2017                     |

Varying levels of *engagement* reinforce that information avoidance may form a coping mechanism that is linked to whether a person has the cognitive and emotional resources to deal with a situation (Vaillo et al., 2018). At the same time, the deliberateness of *engagement* also demonstrates that information avoidance forms a highly reflexive activity as people create or manipulate situations that will prevent them from being confronted with unwanted information. “Forgetting,” which refers to the failure to rehearse negative information to dismiss it more easily (Golman et al., 2017), “blunting,” which centers on distracting behavior (Miller, 1987), “ignorance,” a process where we put ourselves in a position where we are not informed (Johnson, 2009; Kozyreva et al., 2023), and “self-handicapping,” in which people choose tasks that are inappropriate for them to avoid learning about their own true abilities (Golman et al., 2017), provide vivid examples of how *engagement* is shaped by considered knowledge of needs and abilities. Self-awareness is also traced at the other end of the continuum through the outsourcing of *engagement* to proxies (Addison, 2017; Lambert et al., 2009), which represents a similarly purposeful means of managing participation in a context.

#### 4.3.2 | Control

A second person-focused or individual action that is connected to information avoidance is the concept of *control* (see Table 6). Defined as the extent to which a person has or believes they have command over information, *control* underscores how information avoidance is also shaped by a person's restraining or directing influence over a situation. At times, this influence may be minimal or even

TABLE 6 Control.

| Term from the literature               | Reference(s)                |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Blocking certainty                     | Barbour et al., 2012        |
| Blunting                               | Miller, 1987                |
| Compelled non-use of information       | Houston, 2011               |
| Comprehensive avoidance of information | Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010 |
| Concealing                             | Mansour, 2020               |
| Controlling the conversation           | Barbour et al., 2012        |
| Forgetting                             | Golman et al., 2017         |
| Guarded information use                | Lambert et al., 2009        |
| Inattention                            | Golman et al., 2017         |
| Minimizing                             | Vaillo et al., 2018         |
| Non-use of information                 | Wilson, 1995                |
| Satisficing                            | Newell & Simon, 1972        |
| Self-handicapping                      | Golman et al., 2017         |

non-volitional, when others' behaviors force or result in our inability to use information that may otherwise be useful, as in “compelled non-use of information” (Houston, 2011). At other times, however, people demonstrate far more influence over a situation, including by deliberately hiding (Barbour et al., 2012), “concealing” (Mansour, 2020), or using distracting (Miller, 1987) behavior to regulate their jurisdiction over a situation. These actions, which are focused on the intentional creation of non-informative spaces, illustrate how individual *control* may be comprehensive (Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010) or selective (Lambert et al., 2009), depending on the perceived outcomes or impact of information. They also demonstrate how *control* takes place on a social level, as in “controlling the conversation” (Barbour et al., 2012) as well as in the cognitive sphere, as people avoid information by deliberately not making it a focus of information processing (Golman et al., 2017).

As with other characteristics of information avoidance, *control* becomes necessary in the face of information that gives psychological or emotional discomfort, including anxiety or fear (Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010) and threat (Miller, 1987), which centers information avoidance on the establishment of protective boundaries. Yet, “concealing” activities also highlight the less commonly recognized social shape of information avoidance by demonstrating that people also *control* information to protect themselves from hostility within a group situation, whether this is due to differences in world view or the preferred behaviors of social communities (Mansour, 2020). *Control* further introduces a focus on uncertainty, which is often seen as preferable in the face



of distressing certainty (Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010). Leading to the establishment of deliberately ambiguous situations (Golman et al., 2017), including “blocking” to prevent closure (Barbour et al., 2012), the predicating of information avoidance upon the maintenance of uncertainty raises questions about the benefits of this state (Lambert et al., 2009).

#### 4.4 | Person-information-related characteristics of information avoidance

We understand person-information-related characteristics to refer to avoidance arising from an individual's situated perspective on information. Comprising *relevance*, *quality*, and *timeliness*, person-information-related characteristics recognize that responses to information are shaped by local values and judgments. The next sections describe these three characteristics in detail.

##### 4.4.1 | Relevance

*Relevance* forms a prime example of a person-information-related characteristic of information avoidance (see Table 7). Referring to the significance or importance that information has to a person, *relevance* positions information avoidance as shaped by how humans give meaning to different tasks and situations. Typically understood in terms of use (Savolainen, 2007) or interest (Wilson, 1976) to a person, *relevance* has also been conceived in terms of the correctness of information within research exploring “rejection” (Perkins et al., 2018). Ideas such as these led Wilson (1976) to present *relevance* as functioning in exact opposition to information overload, with people using their judgment to find out more and more about less rather than vice versa. Others are quick to highlight how the importance of relevance fluctuates, with the impact on information avoidance being more pronounced at

TABLE 7 Relevance.

| Term from the literature          | Reference(s)   |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Cover                             | Woolley & Risen, 2018  |
| Filtering                         | Savolainen, 2007; Barbour et al., 2012                       |
| Information discrimination        | Wilson, 1976   |
| Rejection                         | Perkins et al., 2018   |
| Selective exposure to information | Brashers et al., 2000; Hart et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2008 |

specific times, for example, after a medical diagnosis (Perkins et al., 2018) or during intra-personal conflict (Woolley & Risen, 2018). At the same time, judgments of *relevance* may also be seen as constraining, particularly when people specifically avoid information because it does not conform to their existing beliefs (Smith et al., 2008).

##### 4.4.2 | Quality

A second person-information-related characteristic is *quality*, which refers to the authority or credibility that information has to a person and/or within a social setting or context (see Table 8). Emerging as important due to the perception that information environments are of uneven value (Savolainen, 2007), *quality* shapes information avoidance by providing a threshold for whether information is worth attention or not. For some, *quality* is predicated upon the speed with which information is updated, with high-value materials positioned as directly inverse to high quantity (Andersen, 2022; Poirier & Robinson, 2014). For others, judgments of *quality* are based upon personal experiences, including a sense of self and body, or whether information feels correct to people (Hart et al., 2009; Perkins et al., 2018). Illustrating how markers of *quality* must be seen as embodied as well as experiential, the emphasis on congruence with existing beliefs and biases (Golman et al., 2017) nonetheless also risks positioning information avoidance as the means to perpetuate fixed or unyielding viewpoints.

TABLE 8 Quality.

| Term from the literature             | Reference(s)   |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Biasing and selective interpretation | Golman et al., 2017  |
| Filtering                            | Savolainen, 2007; Barbour et al., 2012                       |
| Hedging                              | Hicks & Lloyd, 2022  |
| Maintaining boundaries               | Barbour et al., 2012   |
| Rejection                            | Perkins et al., 2018   |
| Resistance                           | Woodstock, 2014  |
| Satisficing                          | Newell & Simon, 1972   |
| Selective exposure to information    | Brashers et al., 2000; Hart et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2008 |
| Slow (news and information)          | Andersen, 2022; Poirier & Robinson, 2014                     |



Beyond these very personal markers of *quality*, information avoidance is connected to the related concept of trust. Frequently employed as a symbol of value for media (Woodstock, 2014) or governmental forms of information (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022), considerations of trust are used to selectively reduce contact with information and sources that people believe to be unreliable, misleading, or disingenuous (Hicks & Lloyd, 2022). Trust is also implicated in “maintaining boundaries,” which asserts that people are more likely to avoid information from people who are less socially close to them (Barbour et al., 2012). Impeding the sharing of information as well as its acceptance, the emphasis on social acceptability also acknowledges that, like relevance, markers of *quality* must be recognized as socially and contextually shaped rather than objective or cognitively derived. On the other end of the spectrum, “satisficing” is a reminder that considerations of quality may also be deprioritized in favor of other criteria, including speed, ease of use, and availability (Newell & Simon, 1972).

#### 4.4.3 | Timeliness

A final person-information characteristic of information avoidance is *timeliness*, which refers to the temporal suitability or appropriateness of information to a person (see Table 9). Introducing a vital yet underexplored time-related lens to information avoidance, considerations of timeliness recognize that people may reject information when it is not immediately useful to them or when there is insufficient time to make use of it (Brashers et al., 2000; Jia & Zhao, 2023). At the same time, timeliness also acknowledges that people may need space to process information, particularly if they are not psychologically ready to deal with it (Andersen, 2022; Brashers et al., 2000; Poirier & Robinson, 2014). Emphasizing the affective shape of time, a focus on timeliness also positions information avoidance as shaped by future time horizons as well as in relation to broader questions of speed and urgency.

TABLE 9 Timeliness.

| Term from the literature    | Reference(s)                             |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Digital hoarding            | Jia & Zhao, 2023                         |
| Information holidays        | Brashers et al., 2000                    |
| Not useful now              | Brashers et al., 2000                    |
| Slow (news and information) | Andersen, 2022; Poirier & Robinson, 2014 |

## 4.5 | A new definition of information avoidance

From our analysis, we can now provide a definition of information avoidance as practices that moderate interaction with information by (1) reducing the intensity (amount and/or flow) across multiple levels of granularity; (2) restricting engagement with or control over information, whether actively, passively, or receptively, and/or (3) excluding information based on relevance, quality, and timeliness criteria.

This provides a new conceptualization for information avoidance. Each term presented in Tables 3–9 is a particular instance of information avoidance, described by the seven characteristics we have presented above.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Our analysis reveals that information avoidance is far from a singular and uncomplicated act. This section describes some of the consequences of our findings for IS, including how we might think differently about information avoidance and how this approach might result in more nuanced and holistic analysis of information practices.

### 5.1 | Rehabilitating information avoidance

A holistic consideration of information avoidance shows that avoidance practices are varied and complex. IS scholarship's focus on information seeking has led us to miss (or, avoid) asking questions that allow us to understand the complexity of avoidance practices.

Avoidance is not the villain it has sometimes been portrayed to be. Refraining from seeking information does not necessarily indicate that a person is in denial about their circumstances. In effect, conducting a fulsome search and considering all the information retrieved from it is neither universally optimal nor universally possible as seeking more information may increase, rather than decrease, uncertainty. Although avoiding information may threaten our professional security as information professionals or IS researchers, it may be an appropriate, considered, and positive strategy that supports individuals in meeting their goals. Avoiding is not a passive state of non-seeking, rather it can be itself an active process and one which we may wish to include in our teaching and professional practices.

At the same time, we argue that seeking and avoiding are not either/or, but two sides of the same coin.

Although our definition describes the facets of avoidance we have identified, it fails to explain how avoidance practices operate in real life, where they are fundamentally intertwined with and inseparable from seeking practices. Together, seeking and avoidance practices moderate and filter engagement with information. For example, an individual preparing for surgery will rarely seek *all* the information (e.g., including going to medical school and becoming a surgeon themselves). By the same token, unless the surgery is an emergency and they are taken to hospital unconscious, they will rarely avoid all information, even if their seeking practices are limited to finding out and remembering when and where to appear. Rather, information seeking and avoidance practices are fundamentally entwined, working in tandem and in tension to moderate a person's encounters with information.

This relationship is most evident when we consider person-information characteristics. IS scholars have long paid attention to information users' perceptions of *relevance* (e.g., situational relevance, Saracevic, 1996; Schamber et al., 1990; Wilson, 1973) and *quality* (e.g., credibility, cognitive authority, Rieh, 2010; Rieh & Danielson, 2007; Wilson, 1983). The process of evaluating and filtering to choose information that is relevant, authoritative, and timely, must also involve not choosing or avoiding information that is irrelevant, not authoritative, and not timely. The granularity of the avoidance, whether related to engaging with sources of information, selecting information from the sources, or using the information, parallels modes of information seeking such as active seeking, active browsing, monitoring the context, or being given information by proxy (e.g., McKenzie, 2003; Savolainen, 1995; Wilson, 1995).

A more concrete example of these ideas is found in this quote from a participant who is caring for a loved one with dementia in Dalmer's (2018) PhD research. This participant had collected information and filed it away because she was not ready to think about moving her loved one into a long-term care facility:

I learned right then that it scares the heck out of me to look too far ahead and I can't manage it. I can't manage stuff that isn't relevant. So a lot of the information that I got at the course, both courses, it was too far ahead. Like, I couldn't use it then. Like long-term care? I'm only now, 3 years later, ready to go back and look at that ... I'd file under L, but I wouldn't even look at it, you know? (Dalmer, 2018, p.69).

On many of our criteria, this participant would be actively seeking information. However, she avoided engaging with and acting on the information until it was time for the loved one to be placed in long-term care. This example illustrates the interplay between seeking and avoidance in practice and shows how it may vary across characteristics and change over time. In this example, avoidance is selective, calculated, and for-now rather than for-always.

This means that the seven characteristics we used to categorize the information avoidance scholarship could equally be characteristics of information *seeking*. When we introduced the characteristics in Section 4.1, we deliberately did not use the term "avoidance." Instead, we described our characteristics using neutral terms so they can equally be used to characterize "seeking" or "avoidance."

We have also been deliberate in our choice of verbs. We have used neutral terms (e.g., filter, regulate, moderate, and focus), when discussing the characteristics in general, inclusive terms (e.g., include) when discussing information seeking, and exclusive terms (e.g., limit, exclude, restrict, and reduce) when describing avoidance. These choices have helped us distinguish the characteristics as general qualities from their application toward seeking or avoiding, including, or excluding.

We argue that, in privileging information-*seeking* practices, information scholars are open to understanding only part of the picture. Our findings provide an opportunity to interrogate IS scholarship. What would happen if we (a) recognized avoidance and seeking not as static opposites but as interrelated, complementary, dynamic sets of information practices necessary for finding relevant, credible, and timely information, and (b) conceptualized avoidance in the more dynamic ways in which we conceptualize seeking? We might ask what thinking about the yin-yang (Jarrahi et al., 2023) concepts of information seeking and avoidance in this way could tell us about our discipline and our associated professions. We might also reflect on how this lens would change what we know (or think we know) about information seeking.

## 5.2 | Implications for research

Beyond the long-term theoretical implications of this work, our analysis also allowed us to draw out several more immediate implications for IS research, including further developing the characteristics of information avoidance, reframing classic concepts, and the implications for research methods and systems. This step addressed research question four.

### 5.2.1 | Developing the characteristics and conceptualization of information avoidance

Our analysis demonstrates that one priority for future research is to continue developing the characteristics of information avoidance. *Relevance*, for example, which was one of the characteristics we found to be least addressed in the literature we examined, should be explored in relation to information's less tangible corporeal and social modalities as well as in more broadly defined everyday situations. *Timeliness*, which forms another characteristic that has been overlooked despite examples of "delayed," "postponed," or "deferred" needs within information behavior models (e.g., Krikelas, 1983), should further be explored in relation to deceleration and interruption as well as how temporary pauses are coordinated. A second clear direction for future research is to extend the social perspective on information avoidance, which our analysis demonstrates has typically been sidelined in favor of the rational application of cognitive viewpoints and structures. Future research should build upon Chatman (1996) and Mansour (2020), which form some of the few studies that consistently explore information avoidance through a social lens, to examine how characteristics of information avoidance, including the potential impact of collaborative ignorance (Alvesson et al., 2022), is negotiated through social interaction. The emphasis on social norms also calls for further research into the impact of power structures on information avoidance, including how person-related characteristics such as *engagement* or *control* may not be available to all.

We also recognize the importance of continuing to conceptualize information avoidance beyond the initial work presented in this review. While we maintain that the identification and conceptualization of information avoidance's core characteristics is a vital first step toward a more complex consideration of the term, we are also aware of the need to extend our theoretical work, including through developing a more robust understanding of its underpinnings and relationship to other theoretical constructs. Future work could draw upon practice and genre theory, among other theories and theoretical constructs, to continue the important theory development that is initiated here. We further acknowledge the need to analyze information avoidance through additional lenses, including sociomaterial approaches, information privilege, and disability. Greater engagement with the material dimension of information avoidance, for example, would extend understanding of a person's control over these activities (e.g., Haider & Rödl, 2023) while further drawing out broader questions related to surveillance and other resistant responses. We additionally note

the need to move beyond our focus on individual information avoidance practices to examine the dynamics of group-based or organizational ignorance and denial (e.g., Jalonen, 2024).

### 5.2.2 | Reframing classic information concepts

A second area for future research lies in examining how the rehabilitation of information avoidance challenges classic information concepts. The recognition that *engagement* may be linked to the prioritization of other phenomena, including contentment over informational gain (Lambert et al., 2009), for example, suggests the need for continued research challenging the dominance of information solutionism. Parallels between uncertainty and information avoidance, which are both often depicted as undesirable as well as resolvable through the addition of information, provide another illustration of the need to examine the legitimacy of non-informative positions (also see Hovious, 2022). There is additionally a need for research into how information avoidance might open up hitherto unconnected concepts, including how information gatekeepers, which include search engines (Haider & Rödl, 2023), shape how we block, ignore, or delay information. Beyond, our analysis suggests potential new areas of research interest. One such area relates to self-care, which has been surprisingly absent from IS despite the vital role that this analysis notes that it plays in shaping information avoidance. Information literacy forms another area where a focus on information avoidance is likely to be fruitful, including through drawing attention to how self-care shapes how people reconcile new and existing forms of knowledge (Lloyd & Hicks, 2022). Future work should also continue to explore how information avoidance might extend considerations of information evaluation, including through examining the role that critical ignoring plays in digital competency (e.g., Karim et al., 2019; Kozyreva et al., 2023).

### 5.2.3 | Methods and information avoidance

A third area for future research relates to research methods. Research into information avoidance has benefitted from the use of a diverse range of methodological resources, which have facilitated the examination of how individuals interact (or not) with information, manage emotional responses, and satisfy their intrinsic need for cognitive certainty and resolution. Yet, the predominant focus on scales, including the Informational

Opt-Out Scale (McQueen et al., 2014) and the Monitor/Blunter Style Scale (Case et al., 2005) has limited engagement with the affective side of information avoidance while further downplaying the contextual shape of interaction. Research is further curbed by the predominance of surveys, online experiments, and hypothetical scenarios, which often additionally focus attention on one moment in time (Klaus, 2021). Instead, the nuances that emerge from our analysis demonstrate that future research should build upon the relatively sparse use of interviews (e.g., Chatman, 1996, 1999; Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010) to examine how qualitative research methods can unpack the hidden and/or the stigmatized shape of information avoidance in more detail, as well as temporal and situated aspects. The recognition that information avoidance may be mundane or hard to put into words also indicates that future research will require thinking creatively about data collection methods that can reveal hidden and tacit information avoidance practices, for example, visual and elicitation methodologies (Hicks & Lloyd, 2018; McKenzie & Dalmer, 2020). Research examining how qualitative radial mapping techniques might be used to unpack information avoidance is currently underway (McKenzie et al., 2024) although as with all these methods, the ethics of making information avoidance more visible must be accommodated.

#### 5.2.4 | Implications for systems

A final area for future research is to examine the implications of this analysis on information systems, which are often designed to provide information rather than to avoid it. When avoidance is considered in system design it is typically either presented as the suppression of non-relevant information by the selective preference of relevant information (e.g., Robertson, 1977) or as a consequence of user choices in personalized information spaces (e.g., Plettenberg et al., 2020). In the former, systems prioritize access to information that is likely to be welcomed by the user, for example, matching a user query or profile while in the latter, personalization features result in “bubbles” in which the user only receives similarly related new information. In both cases, systems facilitate information avoidance by hiding information that is perceived as non-desirable based on algorithmic descriptions of user interests. New features, such as platforms allowing users to hide spoiler alerts (e.g., Boyd-Graber et al., 2013), or individual behaviors, such as blocking and muting practices (e.g., Brown, 2022), offer new grounds to investigate avoidance practices. Greater understanding of user goals suggests that future research

should interrogate how systems could support information avoidance, including how new classes of information access systems allow us to change our preferences for seeking and avoiding information across time, topic, and situation. Future research should also ensure that information avoidance features within IS's renewed interest in AI, including how algorithms impact *control* by affecting what the user does and does not see, as well as how machine learning shapes broader questions of ambient information delivery.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Previous literature has often sidelined the concept of information avoidance, treating it as a uniquely negative or undesired activity. Research has also tended to treat information avoidance as a monolithic concept, ignoring the growing number of terms that have been used to describe nuances related to a lack of engagement with information. In conceptualizing the wide range of related information avoidance terms and definitions found in IS literature and beyond, we have started to rehabilitate the concept, including its relationship to information seeking and as a broader information practice. By giving legitimacy to information avoidance as a meaningful information activity, we provide a new perspective of information behavior, claiming that not-seeking must also be recognized as giving shape to a rich set of information practices that have the potential to complicate our understanding of how people manage information. We argue that our work provides scholars with both the means and the methods to think about information avoidance in novel ways as well as to address its long overdue recognition in the field.

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