Moderated Mediation Between Disaster News Overload and Avoidance: The Role of Compassion Fatigue and Collectivism Value

Introduction

Before 2019, the Reuters Insititute for the Study of Journalism noted that nearly one-third of the public in 40 countries or territories worldwide said they actively avoid news (Newman et al., 2019). Presently, news avoidance remains at 32%, with the public's news avoidance being attributed to affective distress and social anxiety caused by negative newspaper subjects (Newman et al., 2023). Twenty years ago, Narayan (2011) found that users may actively avoid any form of bad news. Still, bad news as an 'umbrella term', a unifying term covering related subjects, lacks discussion of topic details. It is disaster coverage that a specific type of bad news in this regard, which has been described as the 'biggest stories' (Sood et al., 1987) at the collective level. Especially in collectivist social contexts, disaster coverage can frequently invoke the compassionate mechanisms of collectivists (Hui et al., 1986), considering the concept of 'self' is defined by 'we' rather than 'I' (Zhu et al., 2018), and so is more likely to lead to compassion fatigue, compared to individualists. However, limited research focused directly on news avoidance in disaster coverage. Furthermore, although news avoidance is a global phenomenon, it presents heterogeneous manifestations in different countries and regions (Villi et al., 2022). For instance, in Japan, a typical collective society, news avoidance does not seem to be something that is commonly recognized and explicitly on people's minds, which differs from the US where the public reflects a high level of intentionality of news avoidance (Villi et al., 2022). This may explain why Japan (11%) reported the lowest ratio of news avoiders (41% in the US; Newman et al. 2019). Consequently, research on news avoidance inevitably needs to consider the local context (Chang & Li., 2022). Between China and Western countries (e.g. the United Kingdom, and the United States), clear contrasts can be observed in the individualism versus collectivism dimension of cultural differences (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Unlike the West, China is known for its collectivism, with a historical tradition dating back to Confucianism, which highlights that 'individuals exist in relation to others' (Chen & Chen, 2004). This study adopted the Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory (Mehrabian, 1974) to explore the association between disaster news overload and avoidance, and the mediation of compassion fatigue and the moderation of collectivist values in Mainland China.

Method and Results

In this study, conducted in Mainland China in August–September 2023 (N=621), we employed structural equation modeling. Key measures included disaster news overload (α=.83), disaster news avoidance (α=.82), compassion fatigue (α=.84), and collectivism (α=.76). The findings indicated a positive association between disaster news overload and disaster news avoidance (β=.187, p<.001). Compassion fatigue mediated this relationship, indicating that higher levels of disaster news overload resulted in increased compassion fatigue (β=.120, p<.01), subsequently intensifying intentions of disaster news avoidance

(β=.284, p<.001). Additionally, collectivism positively moderated the relationship between compassion fatigue and disaster news avoidance (β_{CF*CV}=.124, p<.01) (see Figure. 1), with the association being stronger for individuals with high collectivism (M+1SD, β=.408, p<.01) compared to those with low collectivism (M-1SD, β=.159, p<.001) (see Figure. 2).
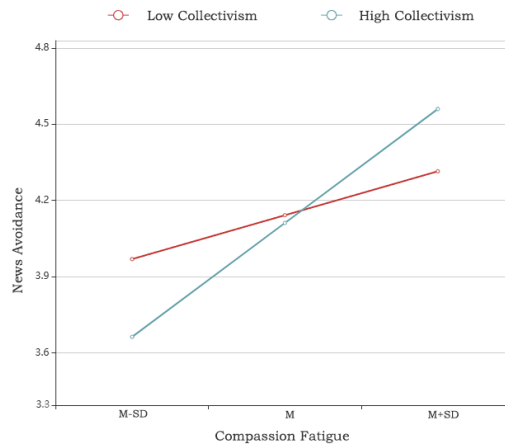

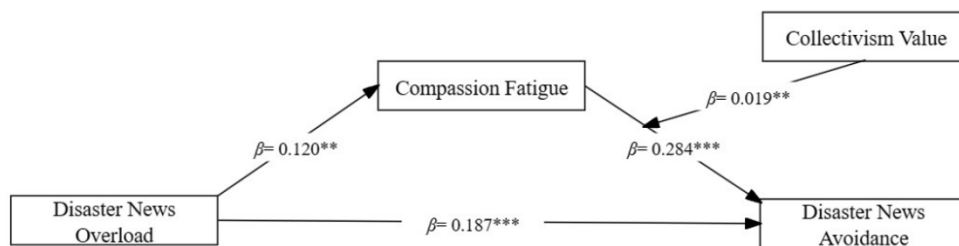**Figure. 1.** The moderating effect of collectivism

Figure. 2. Research model with path coefficients.
Note. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Contributions

This study has the following contributions to research. First, the study shows that disaster news overload is positively related to disaster news avoidance which has been proven in social media news (Song et al., 2016), health information (Link, 2021), and political information (Metag et al., 2023). But beyond the direct relation, we further find that compassion fatigue positively mediates this link in the disaster coverage context, which is rarely taken into account, but variability in cross-domain patterns of avoidance may prove a fruitful avenue for further study(Howel & Shepperd, 2016). In addition, this study finds that collectivism reinforces the relation between compassion fatigue and disaster news avoidance in the China context, which (Zhu et al., 2018). In political communication studies, previous research has consistently indicated that individuals with a collectivist orientation tend to exhibit higher levels of tolerance in political discussions, which is inversely associated with information avoidance behaviors (Zhu et al., 2018). However, the findings of this study present a contrary conclusion. Individuals with high collectivism have greater compassion for others, contributing to disaster news avoidance.

In the nutshell, this paper introduces innovative research that illuminates the mediating role of compassion fatigue in the connection between overload of disaster news and avoidance behavior. Additionally, we provide an in-depth examination of the moderating

influence of collectivism values—a crucial yet frequently overlooked cultural factor—on the relationship between compassion fatigue and the avoidance of disaster news.

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