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# Information-seeking behaviour during crisis caused by a terrorist attack in Israel

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** In an information age, individuals encounter the challenge of staying updated due to the excessive amount of information bombarding their digital devices. This challenge becomes even more pronounced during crises, as the need for immediate updates intensifies. The surprise attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7th led numerous Israelis to rely on social media or television for immediate updates. This study seeks to explore the information-seeking behaviour of Israeli citizens during the crisis and its consequences.

**Method.** The study is based on a qualitative research method. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 participants were conducted.

**Analysis.** The coding process identified three main categories: the context of information needs, sources, and barriers. Within the themes, specific subcategories were identified.

**Results.** Participants adopted three coping strategies to manage information overload and anxiety: filtering, omission/avoiding, and using multiple channels. Information anxiety both motivates and hinders information-seeking, as it prompts individuals to reduce uncertainty, yet exposure to overwhelming amounts of information can increase anxiety, leading to avoidance. These findings underscore the complex dynamics between information anxiety and information-seeking behaviour of a complicated conflict.

**Conclusion.** This study provides valuable insights into the information-seeking behaviour of Israeli citizens amid an armed conflict.

## Introduction

On October 7th, 2023, southern Israel experienced an unexpected attack initiated by Hamas, which is classified as a terrorist organisation. Terrorist acts are characterised by their unexpected, dramatic nature, and extreme violence (Keinan, et al., 2003), often attracting significant media attention and prompting heightened information-seeking behaviour among the public (Spencer, et al., 2006).

The study of Information-seeking behaviour during crises is crucial, as it provides insights into how individuals access and seek critical information under extreme conditions. Information sources play a crucial role in helping individuals comprehend the situation, adopt preventive measures, and reduce anxiety stemming from the uncertainty of a disaster (Chao, et al., 2020). However, various information sources, including mass media, print media, and online platforms, can present new challenges. Content disseminated through these channels may intensify risk perceptions and fear, particularly when individuals cannot differentiate between real and fake news, consequently impacting mental health and well-being (Laato, et al., 2020). Furthermore, research conducted during times of crisis indicated that a negative outcome of extensive information is information overload, characterised by an overwhelming abundance of information. This information overload can lead to stress, fatigue and exhaustion, and may even prompt individuals to adopt information avoidance in order to cope with the information overload (Fu, et al., 2020). While recent existing literature examines information-seeking behaviour during general crisis events and emergencies, such as pandemics (Qiong, et al., 2020) or natural disasters (Koselioren and Cakir, 2024), there is limited research that specifically focuses on how citizens seek information during acts of terrorism. This study addresses that gap by exploring information behaviour among citizens during a real-time, unexpected terrorist attack. Furthermore, this research fulfils a need to understand the outcomes of information-seeking behaviour during a terrorist attack and how citizens manage and respond to it. By analysing the abundance of information, this study provides valuable insights into how individuals navigate, manage, and cope with the influx of information during sudden, unexpected, and violent events.

## Literature review

### Information behaviour and information-seeking behaviour

In the digital era, the importance of information lies in its availability, use, and accessibility for the effective development of an information society (Pateria, et al., 2021). The term “information behaviour” was first coined by Wilson (1981) and has since become a central concept in understanding human interaction with information sources and channels. According to Savolainen (2007) the term “information behaviour” is employed to describe how individuals typically interact with information and may be conceived as an “umbrella concept” that provides a broader context for information studies. In his comparative study, Savolainen (2007) explores the evolution of information behaviour since the 1960s, suggesting that his concept gained prominence throughout the 1970s, particularly in studies focusing on information needs, seeking, and use.

Information-seeking behaviour is a core component of the broader concept of information behaviour. Wilson (1999) defines information-seeking behaviour as the purposeful search for information to satisfy a particular goal, which may involve interacting with manual and digital information systems. His model encompasses a broader understanding of information needs and their fulfilment. It involves identifying who needs information, what kind of information they need, for what purposes, how the information is found and evaluated, and how these needs are satisfied.

Wilson's information-seeking behaviour models (1981; 1999), are based on the user's perspective regarding information needs, suggesting that needs arise from individuals' physiological, affective (emotional and psychological), and cognitive needs. Wilson identifies various barriers, including personal, role-related, and environmental ones that individuals face in meeting their information

needs. To overcome these barriers, individuals engage with formal or informal information sources, which can result in either success or failure in obtaining relevant information. When successful, the acquired information is used, however, if the need remains unmet, the individual will repeat the search process (Wilson, 1999). Furthermore, Wilson suggests that basic information needs can stem from personal, interpersonal, situational, and information source characteristics. Numerous studies have applied Wilson's information-seeking model to a wide array of topics. These include educational research (Berweger, et al., 2023), psychological studies (Charpentier, et al., 2022), career acquisition (Mowbray and Hall, 2020), decision-making processes (Criado-Perez, et al., 2023), and various health-related issues (Madge, et al., 2023).

Disasters, conflicts, and terror attacks being sudden and often unexpected events, lead to information-seeking behaviour that differs significantly from typical work-related or everyday life situations (Wilson, 2000). Hong et al., (2018) suggest that during emergencies and national disasters, the information needs of citizens can vary widely across different cultures, population groups, and countries. People would like to stay updated on the economic and social impacts, government responses, and even weather updates. Research on information-seeking behaviour during disasters has identified key media sources that people rely on. For instance, Gómez (2013) examined the responses of international students at Tohoku University during the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. He found that students mainly relied on secondary sources, such as family and friends of the same nationality, who often lacked more accurate information than the students themselves did. Similarly, Rahmi et al. (2019) discovered that the primary sources of information for people during natural disasters, specifically earthquakes, were family, neighbourhood, broadcast media, and colleagues at work. Ryan (2013; 2016) studied information-seeking behaviour during slow-moving and flash floods in Queensland, Australia, and found that urban residents frequently learned about disasters through interpersonal contacts, including mobile, phones and face-to-face interactions. A previous study (Stainback, et al., 2020) suggested that increased confusion and lack of knowledge often lead to greater exposure to numerous information sources. Yavetz et al., (2023) who investigated the increased exposure to information sources during the COVID-19 pandemic, claimed that increased media consumption can raise feelings of information overload.

The way individuals cope with threatening or stressful situations can be understood through the "Monitoring and Blunting Model" (Miller, 1987; 1990), which is a psychological framework that describes two distinct coping styles: monitoring and blunting. People who adopt a monitoring approach actively seek out detailed information about the stressor, preferring to stay informed and continuously scanning their environment for relevant details. This strategy can enhance their sense of control but may also lead to increased anxiety, especially when faced with uncontrollable or ambiguous circumstances. In contrast, individuals with a blunting coping style attempt to minimise their exposure to threatening information by distracting themselves or mentally distancing from the stressor. This approach can reduce immediate emotional distress but may leave them less prepared or aware of critical details. Previous research by Rosenbaum and Benyosef (1995) explored how Israeli civilians coped with the threat of missile attacks during the 1991 Gulf War by seeking threat-relevant information. They suggested that participants were engaged in "war-monitoring" as a coping strategy, which involved actively seeking information about the war through electronic and print media, as well as by contacting friends and visiting areas hit by missiles. The extent of war-monitoring varied among individuals, with "high war-monitors" actively seeking extensive information, while "low war-monitors" sought minimal information. In a similar study, Zeidner and Ben-Zur (1993) also examined Israeli responses to missile attacks during the Persian Gulf War, noting that active information-seeking through media was among the most common coping strategies used by both men and women, helping them stay informed about the ongoing missile threats.

## Information overload

Information overload occurs when individuals are overwhelmed with more information than they can effectively process, leading to feelings of failure and negative emotions (Fan, et al. 2021). This not only reduces the efficiency of information acquisition and effectiveness of decision-making (Pero, et al., 2010) but also negatively affects individuals' physical and mental health (Matthes, et al., 2020). Information overload can subsequently result in problems such as anxiety, depression, and social fatigue (Guo, et al., 2020).

Research conducted during crises has shown that the need for information can lead to widespread concerns and information overload. During the Russo-Ukrainian war, citizens faced significant stress and fatigue due to multiple sources and an overwhelming volume of war-related data, coupled with limited time to analyse it, resulting in information overload (Skarpa, et al., 2023). Similarly, the abundance of pandemic-related information during COVID-19 hindered timely and effective decision-making for protection and increased information overload (Bermes, 2021). Information overload can lead to several negative consequences, including frustration and stress (Umeozor, 2017), as well as information anxiety (Eppler and Mengis, 2004).

## Information anxiety

Wurman et al. (2001) stated that information anxiety can manifest in various forms. Firstly, it arises from the frustration of being unable to keep up with the amount volume of data in our lives. Secondly, it stems from the frustration with the quality of the information individuals encounter, particularly what is presented as new information. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread use of the Internet and social media has intensified this anxiety due to the overwhelming amount of available information, leading to challenges in absorption and processing (Xiao, et al., 2022). Moreover, past studies presented that information anxiety adversely affects decision-making processes and prompts information avoidance (Bawden and Robinson, 2009; Soroya, et al., 2021), a strategy for coping with information overload and anxiety (de Bruin, et al., 2021).

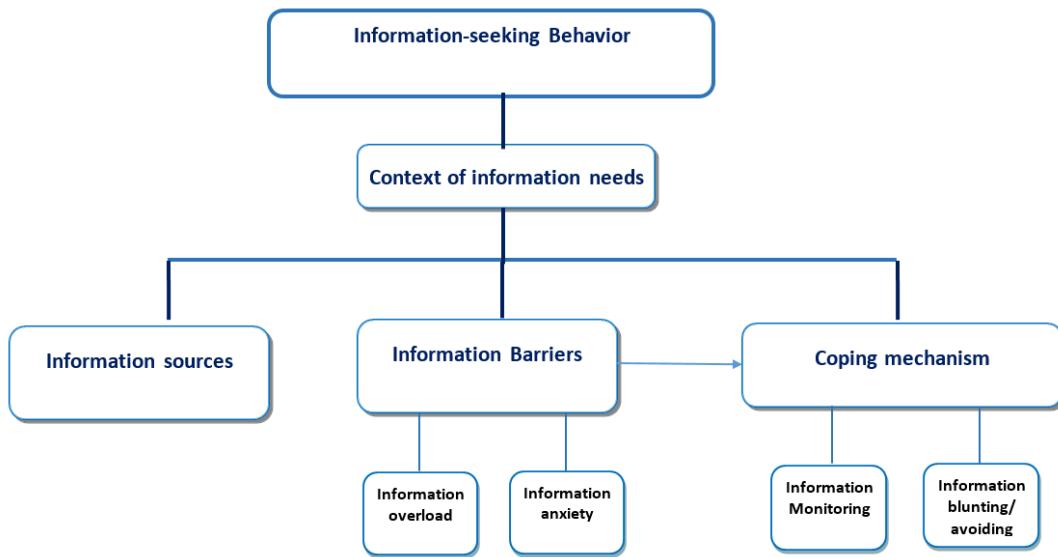
## Information avoidance

Information avoidance refers to any behaviour aimed at avoiding attention and exposure to specific available information, even if it may be personally relevant (Chae, 2016). The extent of information avoidance may vary depending on the type of content and its source (Chae, et al., 2020). This coping mechanism arises when learning or recalling information is associated with unpleasant emotions or necessitates undesirable actions, such as changes in attitude or behaviour (Sweeny, et al., 2010). These motivational responses underlying information avoidance are particularly relevant in crises, where the topic is perceived as threatening, prompting individuals to engage in self-protective behaviours that involve taking actions they would rather avoid (Link, 2021).

During crises, the constant influx of news and updates can be overwhelming, leading to information overload. This often results in information avoidance, a common reaction to the overwhelming nature of crisis news. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Qiong (2020) explored the impact of information overload on information avoidance, revealing its potential to induce negative emotions and reduce engagement with the information.

Additionally, various studies suggested that during natural disasters, people tend to avoid information to mitigate the negative effects of information overload while maintaining awareness of disaster developments. Koselioren and Cakir (2024) studied the earthquake in Turkey and found that as the density of information and news surged, people increasingly exhibited avoidance behaviour. This is consistent with recent research indicating that when news becomes too overwhelming or dense, people tend to avoid it (Mannell and Meese, 2022).

Based on the literature review figure 1 illustrates the current research conceptual framework:



**Figure 1.** The research conceptual framework

## Problem statement and research questions

Wilson (1999) states that information needs act as triggers and drivers of information-seeking behaviour. This tendency intensifies during emergencies or disasters, with information needs and sources becoming crucial for event comprehension and anxiety reduction (Chao, et al., 2020; Soroya, et al., 2021). Further, persistent information-seeking can lead to excessive news consumption, resulting in information overload (Bawden and Robinson, 2009), anxiety, and eventually, information avoidance. Previous studies focused on information-seeking during specific crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhou, 2021), terror attacks (Keinan, et al., 2003), and natural disasters (Rahmi, et al., 2019). This study aims to address information needs and sources during an unprecedented attack and focuses on information barriers such as information overload and anxiety, providing a unique perspective on information behaviour in the context of a sudden, large-scale conflict.

Based on the existing literature, the following research questions emerged:

(RQ1). What were the primary information needs that the citizens experienced regarding the unexpected crisis, and how did they fulfil them?

(RQ2). What were the primary sources of information sought by the citizens during the crisis, and why did they choose these sources?

(RQ3). What barriers did the citizens encounter with information sources? How did they cope with the barriers they faced?

## Method

### Research design

The qualitative approach (Patton, 2015) used for this research has the goal of understanding a phenomenon, rather than measuring it. Consequently, qualitative researchers often start with broad, open-ended research questions and gather data through flexible methodologies like interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. Qualitative inquiry is essentially exploratory, seeking to uncover insights within the data. This approach is chosen because it generally seeks participants who can provide deep insights into the phenomenon being investigated, thereby facilitating a better understanding of the core issues at hand. One form of

qualitative research methodology is the case study, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005). Furthermore, Yin (2018) proposes that it can explore complex issues and offer insights into practical problems. In this study, a case study approach is utilised, involving an in-depth investigation and analysis of a specific situation: a complicated conflict.

## **Data gathering**

The empirical data were gathered during the first month of the conflict. To gather data, researchers utilised social media platforms as a primary recruitment tool. They posted posts for participation on popular platforms, with a particular focus on Facebook and WhatsApp. The snowball sampling method was used to select the participants. This method is commonly employed in qualitative studies, involving relevant cases from individuals who know the subject matter (Creswell, 2013).

Before participating in the study, all interviewees were required to sign an informed consent form, which disclosed the purpose of the study and its research framework. All interviews were conducted on the Zoom platform. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and was recorded with consent. After transcription, the interviews were coded and analysed to identify significant themes.

## **The research population**

Twenty-five Israeli citizens were interviewed. The sample size of 25 interviewees is consistent with best practices in qualitative research, where the focus is on achieving sufficient data repetition rather than statistical representativeness. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a sample of 20 to 30 participants is typically sufficient for qualitative studies, as it allows for in-depth exploration of themes while also ensuring that the data is repetitive enough to reveal key insights. Moreover, Guest, et al., (2006) emphasise the importance of data redundancy or saturation, the point at which no new information or themes are discovered during the data collection process. Their research suggests that in homogenous groups, this saturation point can often be reached with as few as twelve participants, depending on the study's focus and the similarity of participants' experiences. The selection of 25 participants in this study reflects an effort to ensure that a wide range of perspectives was captured, while also adhering to the principle of saturation. This approach enhances the credibility of the findings, as it ensures that the data collected enable a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Researchers used semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The average age of the participants was 46.5 (SD=10.27), with the oldest being 72 years old and the youngest 28. Other demographic details, such as religion and education, were also noted. Among the 13 religious participants, it is important to mention that five were ultra-Orthodox. Ultra-Orthodox religiosity entails a strong dedication to Halacha and tends to prioritise the more stringent rulings (Heilman and Friedman, 1991). To protect the privacy of the interviewees, their names were omitted from the report of the findings. They are identified by a serial number attached for each interviewee (see Table 1).

Identification	Age	Religious/Non-Religious	Education
1	54	R	Academic
2	53	R	Academic
3	53	NR	Academic
4	35	NR	Academic
5	47	R	Academic
6	33	R	High-school
7	34	R	Elementary
8	53	NR	Academic
9	37	R	Elementary
10	46	NR	Academic
11	38	NR	Academic
12	40	NR	High-school
13	49	R	Academic
14	60	R	High-school
15	72	NR	Academic
16	45	NR	Academic
17	52	NR	Academic
18	38	NR	Academic
19	66	R	Academic
20	46	R	Academic
21	47	NR	Academic
22	28	R	Academic
23	44	R	Academic
24	47	R	Academic
25	46	NR	Academic

**Table 1.** Distribution of interviewees by demographic variables

### Research tools

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 participants were conducted. In-depth interviews enable the gathering of information about the experiences and significance attributed by interviewees to a particular phenomenon. The interview questions were presented as open-ended to allow interviewees to facilitate their reflection on emotions, experiences, and perspectives regarding the research topic (Onwuegbuzie and Frels, 2015). (See Appendix 1).

### Coding and analysis

The interview transcripts were coded and analysed using qualitative data analysis software (MaxQDA 2023). This software facilitated precise data recording, enabled in-depth keyword research, supported the creation of a preliminary category tree, facilitated cross-referencing between different texts, and assisted in the formation of new subcategories.

### Coding analysis

The data were collected using the Google Forms application and analysed using a “bottom-up” approach, employing thematic analysis to categorise the responses. This method enabled a comprehensive examination of the data, facilitating the identification of key categories and

allowing for the classification of interviewees' quotes to uncover common expressions and recurring themes. The analysis also aimed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Braun, et al., 2006; Yin, 2015). The coding process began with open coding of all research units, followed by the classification of significant units by one of the researchers. This analysis resulted in 307 statements, which were grouped into four main categories, each with several subcategories (see Table 2). The coding was not exclusive, meaning that the same statements could be assigned to multiple categories. To ensure inter-rater reliability, 30% of the statements were independently coded by a second rater, yielding a Cohen's Kappa of 0.86. Table 2 presents the final set of categories and subcategories based on Wilson's model.

Category	No. of statements	Description
<b>1. Context of information needs</b>	85 (28%)	Citizens' urgent need for comprehensive information and data regarding the disaster
<b>2. Information sources</b>	64 (21%)	
Sub-category: 2.1 Sources' characteristics		Sources characterised by their authenticity and transparency, including both official and unofficial channels, which present raw and uncensored information.
Sub-category: 2.2 Information validation		The process of assessing the credibility and accuracy of information through cross-referencing and comparing multiple sources.
<b>3. Information Barriers</b>	107 (35%)	
Sub-category: 3.1 Information overload and information anxiety		Citizens feeling overwhelmed due to heavy media exposure
<b>4. Coping strategies</b>	51 (16%)	
Sub-category: 4.1 Monitoring information effectively		Individuals process information and choose to either use or disregard it to strike a balance between their needs and feelings of information anxiety.
Sub-category: 4.2 Actively seeking information		Active users utilise various apps to access the latest news from diverse sources
Sub-category: 4.3 Blunting/avoiding information		Active / Passive information avoiders

**Table 2.** The research categories (no. of statements = 307)

## Findings

The first research question (RQ1) aimed to explore the main information needs citizens experienced, regarding the crisis and how they addressed them.

### Context of information need

The lack of information at the onset of the crisis prompts individuals to actively seek information through diverse sources to better understand the situation. As #20 describes, this information-seeking behaviour is driven by the urgent need for reliable updates and clarity in a chaotic situation:

*The feeling was that we urgently needed to get information right away. The lack of information was shocking to the point where people weren't taking the right actions to protect themselves. I needed to actively work to obtain quality information. We can't just wait for someone to feed us. You have to work for it, you have to dig. You need to check, you need to translate from Arabic using AI and search in Arabic on various channels to find out.*

Participants' primary focus was on seeking information regarding army activities, and the war goals. As explained by F4: 'This is what I'm checking out – it's all about what's happening here in the war, it's about where the forces are. What's going on? Where is it? I don't feel like searching for something else or reading about anything else'. Furthermore, participants expressed a strong need for information related to community support and aid, as expressed by #13: 'WhatsApp is used for communication purposes, security: alerts, and messages to residents to stay at home'. Additionally, four participants expressed a need for volunteering or assistance. #10 noted: 'I search for information in WhatsApp groups and various Facebook groups, looking for opportunities to volunteer or provide transportation for people who need to travel across the country'.

According to the interviewees, at the onset of the crisis, information was scarce, which intensified their need to seek as much information as possible from various media sources. Nevertheless, within a few days, the situation shifted to the point where information began to "find" individuals effortlessly. As #1 describes this phenomenon: 'I don't think anyone is looking for information; the information finds us'.

The following section addresses the information sources used to gather data and aims to answer the second research question (RQ2): What were the primary sources of information sought by the citizens during the crisis, and why did they choose these sources?

## Information sources

### Sources' characteristics

When participants identified their need for information, they turned to various sources to gather as much information as possible. Most participants (24 in total) utilised WhatsApp, either to obtain information about the disaster or to stay updated concerning social and family matters. New WhatsApp groups were created specifically to share updates, such as security information for emergencies, organising volunteering groups, and planning children's activities. Several participants (15) used social media applications like Facebook, X (Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram, with the most favoured platform being Telegram (10). Conversely, a small number of participants (5) cited reliance on traditional sources, such as print media, Internet sites, and discussions with friends. The majority of participants (15) reported that they kept their televisions on for long hours.

Further, interviewees reported turning to new information channels to access more comprehensive and unfiltered content, despite its potentially distressing nature. These new sources offered raw, unedited information that mainstream media might not show due to content restrictions or editorial policies, as described by #11:

*During the crisis, I used Telegram a lot. Now, I find myself joining channels I never thought I'd enter, like Al Jazeera, where you can see what's happening in Gaza from the perspective of Hamas or their supporters. I go into all kinds of uncensored channels. I see all the pictures, videos, and clips—everything.*

## Information validation

Information validation refers to the process of evaluating the accuracy, reliability, credibility, and relevance of information to determine its trustworthiness for a specific purpose or context. It involves critical assessment of the source, content, and methods of information generation to ensure its quality (Rieh, 2012). As participants encountered an overwhelming amount of

information, they recognized a new challenge: the need to verify the reliability of information, given the prevalence of fake news and misinformation. This issue stemmed from a lack of formal information, leading to significant misinformation among citizens. False information, often driven by social media algorithms, can spread rapidly, making it harder for individuals to discern credible from unreliable sources (Friggeri, et al., 2014). Interviewees highlighted the critical need to validate information through cross-referencing and comparing multiple sources, as described by #12.

*If you notice the same information popping up on different channels, it's probably reliable. You become the filter; what repeatedly come across, you end up believing. If there's a channel that keeps making mistakes and spreading misinformation, just ignore it. And if there are news channels that consistently follow a certain narrative or political bias, you may not need them anymore. I want the information: who, what, when, where, I've got my opinions, I'm not interested in yours.*

#12 addresses two key concerns related to information validation. The first is the importance of consulting multiple sources to triangulate information, enabling participants to conclude the validity of certain sources and whether to retain or discard them. This is particularly relevant in the context of misinformation, where cross-referencing is a crucial strategy to avoid falling for false claims or biased narratives (Vosoughi, et al., 2018). This issue is also echoed by #16 who shares: '*I can also open several screens at the same time on my computer and cross-reference information to compare. This allows me to access several sites simultaneously*'.

#12 also addressed a second concern regarding sources that have their agendas and are therefore not perceived as trustworthy. #5 underscores this issue: '*I try to avoid sources with political biases or a clear political agenda. I prefer to focus on those that deliver straightforward, factual information*'. Participants were sensitive to the influence of biased sources, with some emphasising the importance of choosing neutral, fact-based reporting to reduce the risk of being misled by false or biased information.

The exposure to numerous media channels and information sources at the onset of the crisis resulted in feelings of being overwhelmed, leading to information overload. This overload negatively affected participants' information-seeking, prompting them to develop coping strategies to manage this barrier.

## Information barriers

This section addresses the third research question (RQ3), which examined the barriers citizens encountered with information sources and how they dealt with these barriers. This category was derived from interviewees' descriptions of their need and desire to cope with feelings of information overload and information anxiety and can be divided into three types of coping mechanisms.

### Information overload and information anxiety

This sub-category addresses the feelings of being overwhelmed experienced by the majority of participants (15 in total) within a few days. Interviewees reported a sense of information overload due to the extensive exposure to numerous media channels and sources. This overwhelming influx of information led them to reduce both their news consumption and active information-seeking. Interviewee #9 best described it: '*You encounter a ton of information, and then you find yourself feeling stressed out, dealing with all sorts of things*'.

The feeling of overload and anxiety stems from the severity of the disaster, as described by #4: '*I feel like there's this tiredness building up, and it hits me pretty fast. It's definitely because of the intensity of the conflict which is much more tragic and painful*'. The emotional grief was accompanied by physical feelings as expressed by #6:

*It's like there's this heavy, suffocating sensation in your chest as if you can't bear the weight of everything you read. The tougher things get, the more you feel this urge to grasp what's going on, even though it hurts, you're compelled to understand, despite the pain.*

According to Wurman (1989), information anxiety can result from either information overload or a lack of sufficient information. This phenomenon was well expressed by #20, an ultra-Orthodox participant:

*I was just overwhelmed with stress, the uncertainty was the worst part. When there's at least some certainty, even if it's awful, it helps you know what you're dealing with. But on the other side, being in the dark and not knowing what happened is the hardest for me. It's the worst feeling not knowing, and I feel like many people suffered because of it.*

Since the Ultra-Orthodox participants followed Halacha's rigorous restrictions and on October 7 (Saturday), avoided using any electronic medium, they described feelings of tension and information anxiety.

From participants' interviews, it was observed that both an abundance of information and a lack of information were identified as contributing factors to information anxiety.

### **Coping strategies**

While Miller's (1987) Monitoring and Blunting Model outlines two primary coping strategies: monitoring and blunting, the current research identified a more nuanced spectrum of coping strategies, encompassing three distinct types: Monitoring information effectively, actively seeking information, and blunting/avoiding information. This expanded categorisation provides deeper insight and greater refinement into how individuals manage their information-seeking behaviours and cope with potential information overload and anxiety.

#### **Monitoring information effectively**

This group (16) represents individuals who possess the skills and strategies needed to strike a balance between satisfying their information needs and avoiding information overload. #23 addressed WhatsApp messages: 'In the beginning, I used to read every message, but now I'm only in certain groups to stay in the loop. There's just too much to read, and it's overwhelming, I can't keep up with it all'.

#2 discussed his approach to social media consumption, stating: 'I'm fine with getting updates from official media articles. I don't need to see everything, like photos. It doesn't benefit me or add anything. So, in a way, I've even cut down my time on social networks'.

#15 relates to television consumption, mentioning: 'I try not to watch TV too much. I catch the 8 pm news and sometimes listen to hourly updates, but I keep it minimal. The constant news can be overwhelming, and it's a bit too much for me'.

The second category relates to active users who utilise various apps to access the latest news from diverse sources.

#### **Actively seeking information**

This category includes three participants who actively employ multiple apps to access the most updated news from a wide range of sources, effectively managing their information seeking and consumption. As described by #1: 'I'm constantly dealing with a lot of information, more than I can handle. But I don't see it as a problem. I like getting information from 7 to 10 different sources. Seeing new material doesn't bother me, it's all my choice'.

#21 reinforces this perception by saying that, for her 'The more information I am exposed to, the more it calms me down'.

While those categorised as *Monitoring Information Effectively* often felt overwhelmed by the volume of information and experienced information overload, they chose to carefully monitor and regulate their information-seeking behaviour. This allowed them to strike a balance between meeting their information needs and avoiding further overload. In contrast, the *Active Information Seekers* pursued any available source of information, with a mindset that the more they accessed, the better they felt – even at the cost of experiencing information overload. The third category represents another extreme, consisting of six participants who avoid information. However, this group can be further categorized into two subgroups: passive and active users.

### **Blunting/Avoiding information**

Five respondents identified themselves as Ultra-Orthodox Jews known for their strict religious practices (Cahaner, 2020). On October 7<sup>th</sup>, they abstained from using any digital media. This passive information avoidance heightened their anxiety, as expressed by #6: 'It's when you feel a significant gap in information. You spend the whole Shabbat really on edge, feeling a lot of stress because you know something's going on and the lack of information about it is just awful'.

On the other hand, #18, a non-religious individual, actively avoids using any digital or print media:

*I find that it helps me create a kind of bubble in my life. I've disconnected from everything and adopted a strict diet. I feel that it helps me handle the situation. We don't even have a TV at home, and we avoid watching the news.*

These three coping strategies highlight the different ways individuals interacted with information during the initial weeks of the war, illustrating the interplay between seeking information and managing information overload and anxiety.

## **Discussion**

The first research question (RQ1) sought to understand the primary information needs that the citizens experienced regarding the disaster and how they fulfilled them.

Research during crises has shown that citizens' information needs are influenced by the severity and nature of the emergency (Yavetz, et al., 2023). People typically seek information to understand how to cope with the situation (Alajmi and Khalil, 2022). During the current conflict, participants reported diverse information needs. Their information-seeking was twofold: they sought disaster-related updates while also looking for ways to provide support to those in need. Previous studies have shown that information needs during crises often encompass both personal and community concerns. For example, on one hand, during the H1N1 virus outbreak, people sought details on prevention, treatment, causes, pandemic spread, and vaccine availability (Majid and Rahmat, 2013). On the other hand, Syrian refugees in Egypt sought information primarily about daily essentials and their children's education (Mansour, 2018). These findings echo our findings which reveal a similar pattern of information-seeking behaviour that encompasses both personal and communal needs during times of crisis.

RQ2 aimed to examine the information sources that individuals sought in relation to the crisis situation and to explore the reasons behind their choice of these resources.

Participants actively sought information from various sources, including those they had not used before. The lack of knowledge and high levels of confusion that accompanied the beginning of the severe event led to increased exposure to different information sources. Unlike earlier research (Majid and Rahmat, 2013; Yavetz, et al., 2021) that highlighted traditional media as primary information sources during crises, this study found that social media platforms, particularly

Telegram, have become primary sources of information, with TikTok and Instagram following closely behind. The Israel Internet Association (2024), supports this trend, reporting a doubling in the use of Telegram, with many individuals joining since the crisis began. We assume that the reason for this shift is that Telegram often presents raw and uncensored material, allowing individuals to access firsthand accounts and unfiltered news. This transparency appeals to users seeking immediate and authentic information, which is especially crucial during crises when traditional media may be slower to report or may censor content (Vosoughi, et al. 2018). However, the downside of this unfiltered access is the increased exposure to false information and biases, which can lead to misinformation (Friggeri, et al., 2014). To combat this, some participants sought information through WhatsApp groups consisting of family and friends, especially within more intimate circles. This reliance on personal networks highlights a preference for trusted and familiar sources of information, emphasising the role of community and close connections in disseminating news and updates during times of uncertainty. This tendency aligns with previous studies (Majid and Rahmat, 2013; Gómez, 2013; Rahmi, et al., 2019), which indicated that family and neighbourhoods were the most popular sources during crises.

RQ3 examined the barriers that the citizens encounter when searching for information and how they coped with them. One barrier was the fact that participants' information sources expanded significantly. However, as they continued their information-seeking, they encountered misinformation and fake news due to the proliferation of information sources and Internet accessibility (Liu and Xu, 2023). In response, participants used information triangulation which involves comparing data from various perspectives, sources, or methods (Greyson, 2018).

The large amount of information, along with the need to verify and triangulate it, led to another barrier; feelings of information overload and information anxiety, as was reported during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fu, et al., 2020; Qiong, et al., 2020) and the Russo-Ukrainian war (Chudzicka-Czupała, et al., 2023). Consequently, participants had to employ different coping strategies that suited them.

Echoing Yavetz et al.'s (2023) findings during the COVID-19 crisis, a similar pattern emerged in the context of the current crisis. Initially, there was an active pursuit of information, but within a few days, the situation evolved. Participants reported that the influx of news became overwhelming and that information began to "find" them without any deliberate effort, mirroring the "news finds me" phenomenon observed during the pandemic. Consequently, the majority of participants employed the first coping strategy, "monitoring information effectively", as individuals felt the need to monitor effectively their news consumption.

Some interviewees excluded specific TV channels due to a perceived lack of objectivity and bias aligning with political agendas, while others reduced the hours dedicated to news consumption to a minimum more suitable to their preferences. This finding aligns with Zeidner and Ben-Zur's (1993) research, which highlights that during a national crisis, individuals often seek to gain control and comprehension of the situation by actively accessing information through available media channels. This proactive information-seeking behaviour can reduce uncertainty and alleviate anxiety.

The second coping strategy, utilised by a minority of participants, involved an active information approach, in which individuals intentionally used multiple channels to stay informed. These individuals actively engaged with a variety of information sources to enhance their overall information-seeking efforts. From their perspective, managing their information-seeking across diverse sources, despite facing an overwhelming volume of information, proved beneficial by increasing their sense of control, even though it also led to heightened information overload. This coping strategy aligns with previous research, which indicated that in rapidly evolving situations, there is an increase in the demand for additional information sources (Chan et al., 2020; Chen et

al., 2020). Although this strategy demanded considerable effort and sometimes resulted in feelings of overwhelm, participants perceived the benefits as outweighing the challenges. By confronting information overload, they transformed a potential obstacle into a resource. This engaged and proactive approach allowed them to feel more informed and in control, thereby helping to lessen some of the anxiety associated with the crisis.

Concerning the third coping strategy of blunting/avoiding information, researchers noted that the heightened information overload resulted in information avoidance, prompting participants to employ the blunting coping strategy minimising their exposure to threatening information (Miller, 1987). However, the application of this strategy varied. On the one hand, participants overwhelmed by the amount of information actively avoided it intentionally. On the other hand, those identifying as ultra-Orthodox, represent a passive form of information avoidance. These findings align with Wurman (1989) who suggests that both an excessive amount of information and a lack of information contributed to feelings of information anxiety. The excessive amount of information led to overload, inducing anxiety, while the absence of information also triggered anxiety. Both scenarios adversely affected individuals' well-being.

This study contributes to research on disaster-related information-seeking behaviour by providing a detailed examination of how individuals sought information during the conflict. Through real-time interviews conducted at the onset of the crisis, we capture fresh experiences and intense, authentic emotions. These insights are valuable to scholars in the field of information behaviour, insights that inform strategies for coping with information-related challenges, such as information overload, anxiety, and subsequent information avoidance.

## Conclusion

This research offers significant findings on how individuals seek and manage information during a conflict, including their preferred sources, experiences with information overload, and strategies for coping with excessive information.

A key finding reveals a dual nature in information seeking during a complicated conflict: individuals simultaneously pursued updates about the conflict but also sought ways to support those affected, reflecting that personal awareness and community support become intertwined priorities. Notably, this finding aligns with observations from the Russo-Ukrainian war (Olcese, et al., 2024; Oviedo, et al., 2022), where volunteer activities and expressions of solidarity were found to enhance resilience among interviewees.

Another main finding suggests that the severity of the conflict drove individuals to explore new information channels, broadening their sources beyond traditional media channels. However, the proliferation of information sources led to a significant need for verification and triangulation, and the necessity to cross-check information between different sources to ensure its accuracy. Moreover, the phenomenon where news "finds me" contributed to information overload and anxiety, compelling participants to develop three main coping strategies.

The study findings can be utilised by policymakers, communication strategists, and decision-makers in the field of information science to develop better frameworks for managing information dissemination during crises, ultimately supporting the public in processing critical information more effectively.

## Research limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a specific, critical period, which, while providing detailed insights, may limit the broader applicability of the findings. Additionally, the sample's socio-economic and cultural diversity is limited, and future research should include participants from a wider range of backgrounds to offer a more comprehensive understanding.

The interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling via social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, which may have resulted in a sample that is not fully representative of the broader population. Although this method included several academics, this was a reflection of participants' social networks, not an intentional criterion. The small and potentially biased sample may affect generalisability. However, the study's value lies in its in-depth exploration of information behaviour during a critical period, offering rich, context-specific insights, in line with qualitative research practices (Patton, 2015).

Future research could expand on this by including a more diverse sample, conducting follow-up studies to track how information behaviours evolve during ongoing conflicts, such as the war in Gaza, and comparing findings from post-conflict contexts to explore potential changes over time. Lastly, the study's focus on Facebook and WhatsApp may have excluded individuals not active on these platforms, and future research could address this limitation by exploring information-seeking behaviours across different media.

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## Appendix I

### Demographic details

Gender:

Age:

Employment:

Education level:

Religious/non-religious

Residence:

**Questions:**

Please tell me about the advantages and disadvantages of digital and written media.

How do you typically search for information, and how has your approach changed during the war?

How much do you utilize the Internet in your daily activities today compared to before?

Do you use social networks? If yes, which social media do you use?

Is your search influenced by the search subject? If so how?

Can you give me an example of a search for information that helped you deal with any problem in the past and today?

Can you provide an example of a search for information that hindered your ability to deal with a problem, both in the past and today?

Do you think there has been a change in your search for information following the war?

Have you faced challenges regarding the reliability of your information?

Do you have any additional experiences and insights about your information-seeking during the war that you would like to share with me?