AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Psychology of Popular Media

ISSN: 2689-6567

2025, Vol. 14, No. 1, 176–186
https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000549

Contagion and Character: How Personality Predicts Interest in Pandemic Media

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The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic saw dramatic increases in engagement with pandemic fiction (e.g., movies about pandemics), information about historical pandemics (e.g., the 1918 flu), and news about the current pandemic. At the same time, many people were actively avoiding all media related to pandemics. What is behind these drastically different responses? This preregistered study investigates the relationship between personality characteristics and engagement with pandemic-related media at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. A large sample ($N = 418$) reported their engagement with these three types of pandemic media and completed several individual difference measures. Intellect and Intolerance of Uncertainty predicted engagement with pandemic news. In contrast, Compulsivity predicted greater engagement with pandemic fiction and information about historical pandemics, with Withdrawal predicting lower engagement with these two genres. This research has wider implications, helping to explain engagement with media related to current or pending catastrophes.

Public Policy Relevance Statement

What determines whether people are interested in watching a fictional movie about a pandemic during an actual pandemic? Or read relevant news or historical reports of past pandemics? By studying people early in the most recent pandemic, we discovered that people with more compulsive tendencies engaged more with fictional, as well as historical, accounts of pandemics. In contrast, people more prone to depression and anxiety were less interested in these kinds of media. Lastly, an attraction to complex thought and a dislike of uncertainty both predicted more engagement with current news about the pandemic.

Keywords: media, COVID-19, personality, characteristics, media engagement

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, it was accompanied by an interest in pandemic-related media (e.g., Battaglio, 2020; Lindahl, 2020; Lovelace, 2020). This includes fiction, in the form of movies and novels about pandemics, but also nonfiction information about the current and past pandemics (e.g., Clark, 2020; Flood, 2020; Rogers, 2020). Although some eagerly consumed this content—seeking out old movies about pandemics for example—others seemed repelled by it and could not imagine voluntarily consuming it (Gallucci, 2020). What individual differences, such as personality traits, explain these very different reactions to the pandemic in terms of media consumption? We report a preregistered study of a large sample, conducted early in the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020), examining associations between individual differences and engagement with pandemic-related media. Specifically, we examined engagement with three types of media: (a) pandemic fiction (e.g., movies), (b) historical nonfiction (e.g., Wikipedia), and (c) current nonfiction (e.g., news). As a secondary goal, we also investigated whether engagement with pandemic-related media predicts concern about the pandemic and psychological well-being.

Interest and Avoidance of Pandemic-Related Media

At the end of 2019, reports emerged of a new virus discovered in Wuhan, China, and by January 2020, cases started emerging in America. By the end of January, the World Health Organization officially announced a public health emergency (Center for Disease

This article was published Online First September 19, 2024.
Karen E. Shackleford served as action editor.
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This research was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada awarded to Raymond A. Mar (435-2017-1030). The authors report that they have no competing interests to declare. This research received ethics approval from the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board (Approval e2020-101).

Chantelle Ivanski served as lead for conceptualization and writing–original draft and served in a supporting role for formal analysis. Joshua A. Quinlan served as lead for formal analysis and served in a supporting role for conceptualization and writing–original draft. Anh T. P. Nguyen served in a supporting role for formal analysis and writing–original draft. Raymond A. Mar served as lead for supervision and served in a supporting role for conceptualization, formal analysis, and writing–original draft. Chantelle Ivanski, Joshua A. Quinlan, and Raymond A. Mar contributed equally to methodology. Chantelle Ivanski, Joshua A. Quinlan, Anh T. P. Nguyen, and Raymond A. Mar contributed equally to writing–review and editing.
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Control and Prevention, 2022). This fast-spreading virus was eerily reminiscent of the movie Contagion, in which a woman returns to the United States from a business trip, unknowingly carrying a virus that quickly spreads throughout the globe, causing mass casualties (Soderbergh, 2011). This parallel was not lost on the public; in the first months of the pandemic, illegal downloading of Contagion increased by more than 5,600%, and it quickly became the seventh most popular movie on iTunes despite being 9 years old (with the first six being recent releases; Clark, 2020). This renewed interest in Contagion was just one example of a sudden interest in pandemic-related media, however. Articles began popping up suggesting other options for those who wanted more, such as "The 79 Best Pandemic Movies to Binge in Quarantine" (Crucchiola & Ebiri, 2020) or "10 Pandemic-Themed Video Games You Need to Play" (Birsner, 2020). Pursuing these forms of entertainment might even be adaptive, with some arguing that watching Contagion could help people feel prepared (Dibdin, 2020). A similar trend emerged for nonfiction media, as articles covering historical pandemics proliferated (e.g., Lovelace, 2020; Rogers, 2020) and engagement with the news increased dramatically. All three major American evening news shows (*ABC*, *CBS*, and *NBC*) reported an increase of viewers greater than they had seen in 15 years (Battaglio, 2020; see also Jeukowitz & Mitchell, 2020).

As some flocked toward pandemic media, others avoided it altogether. In fact, some felt so strongly about not consuming this kind of media that they actively encouraged others to do the same, arguing that watching a "worst-case scenario" could result in further stress (Gallucci, 2020). In addition, many people posted on social media about the negative impact of consuming pandemic fiction (e.g., suggesting that it could increase fear; Gallucci, 2020). In line with this reasoning, some have expressed direct concern that consuming fiction about catastrophes might be deleterious. Because disaster films rely on sensationalized depictions, some have argued that these films could end up misinforming the public, causing unnecessary panic (Eskjær, 2013). This sharp divide in media engagement habits in response to the pandemic begs to be better understood. What characterizes those who become attracted to, or repulsed by, media that addresses a current catastrophe? It also introduces an interesting paradox: why would people want to engage with such media given that it is potentially so upsetting?

Explaining Pandemic-Related Media Preferences

Although COVID-19 is the first global pandemic in the contemporary era, other global catastrophes can shine a light on how and why media preferences are affected by major events. Environmental disasters, for example, are a popular topic for film. This trend began in the 1990s and features disasters that are both natural, such as climate change (Eskjær, 2013), and man-made. For example, the movie *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004) came out in 2004 but is still discussed as part of current conversations around climate change (e.g., Woodward, 2019). More recently, *Don't Look Up* (McKay, 2021), a film about scientists discovering an asteroid headed toward Earth and the government's lack of action to prevent it, was an immediate hit, in part due to the parallels between the film and government responses to the pandemic.

It has been proposed that disaster movies are popular because they allow audiences to engage in "risk calculation" and, thus, safely address their fears and apprehensions about a possible disaster (Eskjær, 2013). This is partly explained by uses and gratification theory, which suggests that people engage with media to learn how to behave (Rubin, 2009), among other reasons. Using media to model behavior was especially relevant in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many were unsure about how to protect themselves and their families. It is therefore possible that those engaging with pandemic fiction were doing so in order to help determine how concerned they should be, gauging the amount of risk they were facing. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the popularity of the true crime genre. Women are more likely to engage with true crime than men, and this may be because women are more likely to be victimized by crime (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). True crime stories are therefore often more relevant to women than men. However, to our knowledge, there is little research on whether and how individual differences play a role in determining the appeal of catastrophic media during an actual catastrophe, which is the focus of the current study.

Individual Difference Characteristics

Although we are unaware of direct research on how personality predicts the consumption of pandemic-related media, there is research into the role of personality in other forms of media consumption. The predominant model of personality traits within psychology is the Big Five, also known as the five-factor model (John & Srivastava, 1999). These broad traits describe general tendencies that help predict how people think, feel, and behave, and are relatively stable across situations and time. The Big Five traits can be easily remembered using the mnemonic OCEAN, with each letter corresponding to one of the traits. Openness to Experience describes a tendency to enjoy complex thought and invite new experiences. Those high in Conscientiousness are typically highly responsible and prefer to follow rules and guidelines. Extraversion entails a reward-focused enthusiasm, which is also oriented toward social engagement. People high in Agreeableness value social harmony and find disruptions of social norms to be troubling. Lastly, Neuroticism refers to a tendency to experience negative affect (DeYoung et al., 2007).

These Big Five traits have been found to predict media consumption of different forms. For example, Extraversion and Openness to Experience both predict engagement with fiction. More specifically, Openness to Experience predicts an interest in the genres of romance, science fiction, and nonfiction, whereas Extraversion predicts an interest in fiction more generally (Fong et al., 2013, 2015). Openness and Conscientiousness also predict engaging with literary novels, suspense, and romance (Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2005). Finally, Neuroticism predicts greater engagement with informational television shows and tragedy movies, and less engagement with comedy television and action movies (Weaver, 1991).

These Big Five traits can also be decomposed into more fine-grained aspects, with each trait being composed of two aspects (DeYoung et al., 2007). For example, the broader trait of Openness to Experience is made up of two aspects, Openness and Intellect. Openness reflects the dimension of the broader trait tied to curiosity and aesthetic appreciation, whereas Intellect reflects one's interest in information and complex problems. Neuroticism is made up of Volatility and Withdrawal, with Volatility tied to anger and irritation, and Withdrawal reflecting a tendency toward depression and anxiety.

In the current context, Openness and Intellect, the two aspects of the Big Five trait Openness to Experience (DeYoung et al., 2007), both seem likely to predict greater consumption of pandemic-related media. For one, the broader trait from which these two aspects are derived has already been associated with reading in various genres. Moreover, Openness is associated with curiosity and the appreciation of art, both of which would orient a person toward consuming pandemic-related media, perhaps fiction in particular. Intellect, similarly, is associated with seeking out and processing complex information, and this seems consistent with being drawn to pandemic media as well, perhaps nonfiction specifically. The Big Five trait of Neuroticism, and in particular the Withdrawal aspect of this trait (DeYoung et al., 2007), might also be associated with greater consumption of pandemic media. Neuroticism reflects a tendency to experience and react to threat, so perhaps individuals higher in this trait are more likely to engage with pandemic media as a way to assuage their worries**.** The aspect of Withdrawal, in particular, should be closely associated with these worries. We did not have any strong predictions about the other Big Five traits and therefore did not include them in the current study. Outside of the Big Five traits, some narrower and more specific individual differences seem relevant to study.

Uncertainty and Information Seeking

Intolerance of Uncertainty is a trait describing the tendency to experience anxiety and stress in situations with no clear outcome (Carleton et al., 2007). Given the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19—its effects and mode of transmission—in the early days of the pandemic, it is possible that those high in Intolerance of Uncertainty felt a need to consume media that could inform their expectations and reduce ambiguity. Closely related to Intolerance of Uncertainty is the Need for Closure. Those high on Need for Closure feel a strong need to know how something will end, regardless of whether the outcome is positive or negative (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). As with Intolerance of Uncertainty, we predicted that those high in Need for Closure would be more likely to consume all forms of pandemic-related media, to help them better understand how and when the pandemic might end.

Like both Need for Closure and the Intellect subscale of the Big Five Aspect Scale (BFAS; DeYoung et al., 2007), those high on Need for Cognition tend to be interested in learning about and understanding the world around them. These individuals enjoy cognitively demanding tasks and the effort involved in critical thinking (Petty et al., 2009). Given the novelty presented by the pandemic, Need for Cognition was hypothesized to predict a greater interest in pandemic media as a way to satisfy an interest in knowledge and deep thinking.

Compulsivity

Similar to the worry associated with Withdrawal, we also hypothesized that Compulsivity would predict more engagement with pandemic media. Compulsivity is an aspect of obsessive-compulsive disorder, in which an individual feels the need to constantly check or complete tasks in order to avoid negative consequences (L. G. Burns et al., 1996). In this context, we expected that those high in Compulsivity would feel like they could not "look away" from content related to the pandemic, resulting in greater engagement.

If individual differences predict how much pandemic media people are likely to consume, a natural question is whether doing so affects psychological well-being: specifically affect, loneliness, and perceived social support.

Well-Being

Given that many of the relevant individual differences deal with motivations, needs, and worries, does actually engaging with media have a salutary effect on psychological well-being? We first wanted to understand if there is a relationship between the consumption of pandemic media and well-being. Next, we examined whether these relations are moderated by individual differences. For example, does someone higher in Intolerance of Uncertainty experience genuine relief after engaging with pandemic media, because it helps to shape expectations and soothe anxieties? It is possible that people who were isolated during the early days of the pandemic used related media to reduce feelings of loneliness and increase well-being. This is akin to research demonstrating that new mothers use social media and blogs about motherhood to form connections with others going through similar experiences (McDaniel et al., 2012). In contrast, research on digital media use among adolescents suggests that consuming digital media can predict worse well-being (Twenge & Campbell, 2019). More germane to the current topic, one study examined the well-being of survivors of a deadly hurricane and found that engaging with hedonic and eudaimonic media was related to avoidant coping, but unrelated to well-being (Raney et al., 2022). In comparison, engagement with self-transcendent media was related to approach coping and resulted in posttraumatic growth (Raney et al., 2022).

On direct study on pandemic-related media found that consuming more of such media is associated with lower well-being (Neill et al., 2023), but another study found that this same behavior increased well-being, as long as consumption was not excessive (Fan & Smith, 2021). Personality may also play a role, as one study found that those high in extraversion who engaged "excessively" with pandemic media did not experience much impact on their well-being, whereas those high on neuroticism did (Yamauchi et al., 2022). Overall, the findings on this topic are mixed and deserve further exploration. Given the uncertain basis for strong predictions, all of our moderation analyses were entirely exploratory.

The Current Research

The interest in pandemic media by some, and avoidance by others, at the beginning of this pandemic has been well documented. But it remains unclear why people demonstrated such disparate media preferences in response to these ongoing catastrophic events. In this study, conducted at the beginning of the pandemic, we examined the relationship between a variety of individual differences and pandemic media consumption, hypothesizing that all of the studied traits would predict greater consumption. We also investigated whether such consumption would predict psychological well-being and whether any such relations would be moderated by individual differences. As a secondary goal, we explored whether consuming pandemic media is associated with greater concern about the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we predicted that engagement with pandemic media would be related to an increase in social distancing behaviors and concern about COVID-19. Importantly, given that no research had been done on this topic at the time it was conducted, this study was largely exploratory. However, our hypotheses, measures, and analysis plan were all preregistered prior to data collection (https://aspredicted.org/TJY_CLX).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from Prolific Academic, a crowdsourcing platform, between April 29 and 30, 2020; participants were compensated with $2.16 (CAD). The initial sample consisted of 455 individuals. Preregistered exclusion criteria led to the removal of eight participants for failing to provide exit consent, 10 participants for reporting that they had not responded honestly, 16 for incorrectly answering at least one of our two inattentive responding items, and three for having greater than 5% missing data for our crucial measures. The final sample consisted of 418 participants (51.9% female) ranging in age from 18 to 76 years ($M = 34.28$, $SD = 13.1$). For full demographic information please, see our Open Science Framework (OSF) repository (https://osf.io/s38ag/).

Measures

Media Engagement

Engagement with three different types of pandemic-related media was assessed, each measured using five items: (a) Pandemic-related fiction (e.g., "Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, I have been engaging with more pandemic-related fiction than before [e.g., TV shows, movies, novels, video games]"); (b) Current news about COVID-19 (e.g., "I am actively trying to avoid news about the COVID-19 outbreak [e.g., TV news, news articles, radio news]"; reverse-scored); and (c) Information about past global pandemics (e.g., "I have been actively searching for information on historical pandemics [e.g., the Spanish Flu, SARS] on the internet [e.g., Wikipedia]"). All 15 items were presented together in a randomized order and were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. All items, for all our measures and all other materials, can be found at https://osf.io/s38ag/.

Concern About COVID-19

Concern about COVID-19 was measured using three items: (a) Self-reported social distancing, (b) self-reported self-isolation, and (c) self-reported concern about the virus. The social distancing and self-isolation items were measured using a 100-point slider from *not at all* to *completely*, whereas the concern item was measured using a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all concerned* to *extremely concerned*. However, both social distancing and self-isolation were extremely left-skewed: both questions had means of about 91, with over 75% of the sample responding with a 90 or above. This lack of variability raises statistical issues in addition to concerns about social desirability. As a result, we deviated from our preregistration and only analyzed the self-reported concern item, which did not have these issues.

Need for Closure

Need for Closure, a measure of discomfort with ambiguity, was measured using six items chosen from the 15-item version of the Need for Closure Scale (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). The decision to present only six items was made in order to reduce the burden on participants. The items chosen were those with the highest loadings on the latent factor based on the original article (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). These items in general represent a need for unambiguous answers. The 15-item Need for Closure Scale demonstrates good construct validity and shares similar internal consistency with the revised 41-item scale (Roets & Van Hiel, 2007), with a Cronbach's α of .87. An example item is, "I don't like to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it." All items were measured using a 6-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Intolerance of Uncertainty

Intolerance of uncertainty was measured using five items from the 12-item version of the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (Carleton et al., 2007), which measures one's tolerance of ambiguous situations. As with the previous measure, we presented only five items from this scale to reduce the time needed to complete our study. Doing so also allowed us to measure this construct in a way more germane to this particular topic. Items were chosen from each of the two subscales based on their factor loadings in the original study (Carleton et al., 2007) and how well they reflected our theoretical predictions. To that end, three items were chosen from the Prospective Anxiety subscale (e.g., "I always want to know what the future has in store for me") and two items from the Inhibitory Anxiety subscale (e.g., "When I am uncertain I can't function very well"). Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all characteristic of me* to *entirely characteristic of me*. The 12-item scale has good internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$) and correlates strongly with the 27-item version, with negligible loss of construct validity (Carleton et al., 2007).

Need for Cognition

Need for Cognition was measured using the six-item version of the Need for Cognition Scale (Lins de Holanda Coelho et al., 2020), which measures preference for activities and tasks that are complex and require a lot of thought. Research shows similar patterns of correlations with various psychological variables for the six-item and 18-item scales, representing good construct validity. The six-item version also demonstrated excellent reliabilities among different samples ($\alpha = .86–.90$). An example item is "I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems." Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all characteristic of me* to *entirely characteristic of me*.

Compulsivity

Compulsivity was measured using four items from the Checking Compulsions subscale of the Padua Inventory (G. L. Burns, 1995). Checking compulsions tend to result from a person's fear that by not carrying out a certain action, negative consequences will occur. We selected these four items in order to narrow our measurement to compulsions possibly related to consuming pandemic-related media (e.g., "I tend to keep on checking things more often than necessary"). All items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *not a lot* to *very much*. A meta-analysis on the Padua Inventory reports an internal consistency of $\alpha = .90$ and a test–retest reliability of $\alpha = .66$ for the Checking Compulsion subscale (Rubio-Aparicio et al., 2020).

Openness, Intellect, and Withdrawal

Five items from each of the Openness, Intellect, and Withdrawal aspects of the BFAS (DeYoung et al., 2007) were included as measures of trait personality. Individuals high in Openness tend to be more comfortable in unfamiliar situations and more likely to seek out new and novel experiences (e.g., "I enjoy the beauty of nature"). Relatedly, those high in Intellect tend to be more naturally curious about the world (e.g., "I formulate ideas clearly"). Finally, the Withdrawal aspect represents individuals who tend to experience high levels of worry and anxiety (e.g., "I become overwhelmed by events"; DeYoung et al., 2007). These three aspects thus appear relevant to consuming pandemic media. We chose five items per aspect in order to reduce the total length of our survey. All items were rated on a 5-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.[1] Analyses by DeYoung et al. (2007) suggest high internal consistency ($\alpha = .80–.86$) for Openness, Intellect, and Withdrawal and high correlations for the Big Five domains with other measures of these broad traits.

Psychological Well-Being

Well-being was evaluated with three different measures. First, participants' current emotional state was assessed using face-valid items measuring four positive emotions (i.e., happy, hopeful, calm, and relaxed) and four negative emotions (i.e., sad, anxious, worried, and tense). Ratings of the negative emotions were then subtracted from the positive ones, creating an index of overall positive mood. This approach follows the well-established Scale of Positive and Negative Experience by Diener et al. (2010), who proposed that a balanced score of subjective emotional well-being can be calculated by subtracting negative from positive emotion scores.

Second, the six-item version of the University of California, Los Angeles Loneliness Scale was used to measure how lonely or isolated participants felt (e.g., "I am unhappy being so withdrawn"). The six-item version has a Cronbach's α of .82 and exhibits the expected negative associations with self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and positive affect (Neto, 2014). These items were rated on a 4-point scale from *often* to *never*.

Finally, the six-item version of the Perceived Social Support questionnaire was used to measure whether participants felt they have support from their social group (e.g., "If I'm very depressed, I know who I can turn to"), with items rated on a 5-point scale from *not at all true* to *very true*. The six-item scale has good internal consistency with a Cronbach's α of .94 (Kliem et al., 2015). There is also evidence of construct validity for this scale, with strong correlations among relevant constructs (e.g., depression symptoms, generalized anxiety; Kliem et al., 2015).

Demographics

Participants were also asked a variety of demographic questions, including age, gender, cultural background, and level of education, in order to help us to characterize this sample.

Procedure

After providing consent, participants completed each measure in a randomized order, with the demographic items always answered last. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed and asked to provide postdebriefing consent. The entire study took approximately 10 min to complete.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and omega for all measures and Table 2 displays the Pearson's correlations. All analyses were preregistered, except where noted. Of the three types of media, people reported engaging with nonfiction the most, followed by historical nonfiction, and then fiction. Positive associations were observed among engagement with the three types of media, which reflects a broad interest in pandemic media across various genres.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Individual Differences and Media Engagement Measures

Variable	*M*	*SD*	ω
Fiction	2.70	0.92	.75 [.70, .79]
Nonfiction	3.75	0.97	.85 [.82, .88]
Historical	3.05	0.94	.86 [.84, .88]
Loneliness	2.44	0.71	.84 [.81, .86]
Social support	3.85	0.87	.85 [.82, .88]
Emotional state	0.43	1.37	
NF Closure	4.25	0.83	.76 [.70, .80]
Intolerance of Uncertainty	3.03	0.81	.79 [.75, .82]
NF Cognition	3.57	0.76	.82 [.78, .85]
Compulsivity	2.05	0.78	.84 [.81, .86]
Withdrawal	3.20	0.91	.86 [.84, .89]
Openness	3.81	0.63	.67 [.61, .72]
Intellect	3.76	0.68	.78 [.74, .81]
COVID concern	3.64	0.99	

Note. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for the hierarchical omega. NF Closure = Need for Closure; NF Cognition = Need for Cognition.

The well-being outcomes exhibited the expected intercorrelations with one another and the expected relationships with COVID-19 concern, with greater concern associated with worse well-being. Openness, Intellect, and Need for Cognition predicted better well-being, whereas Intolerance of Uncertainty, Compulsivity, and Withdrawal predicted worse well-being. However, none of our media engagement measures had a robust association with any of the well-being outcomes.

Engagement with pandemic fiction was associated with higher levels of Compulsivity, Intellect, and COVID-19 concern, and lower levels of Withdrawal. Similarly, engagement with pandemic nonfiction was associated with greater Intellect, Intolerance of Uncertainty, and COVID-19 concern. Lastly, engagement with information regarding historical pandemics was associated with greater Compulsivity, Intellect, and COVID-19 concern compared to the other two categories, and also greater Need for Cognition and Openness. Thus, individuals higher in Intellect and with greater concern regarding the pandemic were more likely to seek out pandemic-related media of all genres. Other individual differences were associated with particular genres, such as Compulsivity, which was positively associated with fiction and historical media, but had a much weaker association with nonfiction. Openness and Need for Cognition both predicted engagement with information on historical pandemics, but these two traits had weaker associations with fiction and current nonfiction.

Pandemic-Related Media Consumption

We hypothesized that individual differences would predict engagement with pandemic media. To assess these hypotheses, we

[1] We also created two items to measure Need for Control. However, these items did not correlate with one another and so we did not use them in any analyses. This is a deviation from our preregistration, as we had planned to use them in Step 2 of our regression models. The construct and items are discussed in more detail in the additional online materials (https://osf.io/s38ag/).

Table 2

Correlations Among All Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Fiction	—												
2. Nonfiction	.35** [.26, .43]	—											
3. Historical	.53** [.45, .59]	.47** [.39, .54]	—										
4. Loneliness	−.02 [−.12, .07]	−.03 [−.13, .07]	−.03 [−.12, .07]	—									
5. Social support	.01 [−.08, .11]	.02 [−.07, .12]	.06 [−.04, .16]	−.58** [−.64, −.52]	—								
6. Emotional state	.06 [−.03, .16]	−.02 [−.11, .08]	.00 [−.09, .10]	−.55** [−.61, −.48]	.37** [.28, .45]	—							
7. NF Closure	−.01 [−.11, .08]	.04 [−.06, .13]	−.03 [−.13, .06]	.23** [.14, .32]	−.14** [−.23, −.05]	−.17** [−.26, −.07]	—						
8. Intolerance of Uncertainty	.01 [−.09, .10]	.10* [.00, .19]	−.00 [−.10, .09]	.39** [.30, .47]	−.26** [−.35, −.17]	−.33** [−.41, −.24]	.61** [.55, .67]	—					
9. NF Cognition	.08 [−.01, .18]	.02 [−.07, .12]	.14** [.05, .24]	−.27** [−.36, −.18]	.15** [.05, .24]	.18** [.08, .27]	−.26** [−.35, −.17]	−.25** [−.34, −.16]	—				
10. Compulsivity	.20** [.10, .29]	.08 [−.02, .18]	.26** [.17, .35]	.26** [.17, .35]	−.23** [−.32, −.14]	−.26** [−.34, −.16]	.28** [.19, .37]	.36** [.27, .44]	−.14** [−.23, −.04]	—			
11. Withdrawal	−.10* [−.20, −.01]	−.00 [−.10, .09]	−.06 [−.16, .03]	.53** [.46, .59]	−.29** [−.38, −.20]	−.59** [−.65, −.52]	.32** [.23, .40]	.51** [.44, .58]	−.28** [−.37, −.19]	.38** [.30, .46]	—		
12. Openness	.01 [−.09, .10]	−.00 [−.10, .09]	.16** [.06, .25]	−.17** [−.27, −.08]	.18** [.08, .27]	.13** [.03, .22]	−.20** [−.29, −.10]	−.15** [−.24, −.06]	.36** [.27, .44]	.00 [−.09, .10]	−.13** [−.23, −.04]	—	
13. Intellect	.14** [.04, .23]	.15** [.05, .24]	.17** [.08, .27]	−.33** [−.41, −.24]	.15** [.06, .24]	.26** [.17, .35]	−.14** [−.23, −.04]	−.15** [−.24, −.06]	.52** [.44, .58]	−.12* [−.21, −.02]	−.40** [−.48, −.32]	.32** [.23, .40]	—
14. COVID concern	.12* [.03, .22]	.29** [.20, .37]	.19** [.09, .28]	.11* [.02, .21]	−.11* [−.20, −.02]	−.31** [−.39, −.22]	.18** [.08, .27]	.25** [.16, .34]	−.06 [−.16, .03]	.25** [.16, .34]	.23** [.14, .32]	.04 [−.06, .13]	−.06 [−.16, .04]

Note. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. NF Closure = Need for Closure; NF Cognition = Need for Cognition.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

used hierarchical regression models, with each model using a single genre as its outcome. The first predictors entered into the model were the broadest aspects of personality: Openness, Intellect, and Withdrawal. Next, the individual differences specifically related to information seeking were added: Need for Cognition, Need for Closure, and Intolerance of Uncertainty. Finally, Compulsivity was added. All models satisfied all regression diagnostic requirements, except where noted. Although some predictors were positively correlated, no models had evidence of issues related to multicollinearity, with the highest variance inflation factor observed being 2.06.

Fiction

For the model predicting pandemic fiction, regression diagnostics recommended the removal of two influential cases for each step of the model. In the first step, Intellect was a unique predictor of fiction exposure ($\beta = .11$, $p = .04$), whereas Openness and Withdrawal were both very weak and statistically nonsignificant, Openness, $\beta = -.03$, $p = .61$; Withdrawal, $\beta = -.07$, $p = .21$ (Table 3). This model accounted for only 2% of the variance in fiction exposure.

Next, Need for Cognition, Need for Closure, and Intolerance of Uncertainty were added. In this step, the effect of Withdrawal was strengthened ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .04$), with Openness remaining a weak predictor ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .75$) and the effect of Intellect attenuated ($\beta = .10$, $p = .11$). The new variables were generally weak predictors, with Intolerance of Uncertainty being the strongest of the three, Intolerance of Uncertainty, $\beta = .13$, $p = .06$; Need for Cognition, $\beta = .003$, $p = .97$; and Need for Closure, $\beta = -.05$, $p = .45$. This step did not improve on the original model, $R^2 = .03$, $F = 1.22$, $p = .30$.

Finally, in the third step, Compulsivity was added. All predictors previously included demonstrated similar effects as they did in Step 2. The unique effect of Compulsivity was the strongest of all predictors ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$), followed by Withdrawal, $\beta = -.20$, $p < .001$. This model also accounted for 9% of the variance in fiction exposure and improved on the previous model, $F = 27.54$, $p < .001$. In summary, being compulsive and less prone to emotional withdrawal predicted consumption of pandemic fiction, after controlling for several other individual differences.

Nonfiction

For pandemic nonfiction, three influential cases were identified and removed for all three steps. In the first step, Intellect uniquely predicted engagement with pandemic nonfiction ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$), whereas Openness and Withdrawal were very weak predictors, similar to what was observed for fiction (Openness, $\beta = -.05$, $p = .36$; Withdrawal, $\beta = .06$, $p = .30$; Table 4). This model did not account for much variance ($R^2 = .03$).

In the second step, the three original predictors performed similarly to what was observed in Step 1, Intellect, $\beta = .22$, $p < .001$; Openness, $\beta = -.02$, $p = .78$; and Withdrawal, $\beta = -.04$, $p = .55$. In terms of the new variables, Intolerance of Uncertainty uniquely predicted engagement with pandemic nonfiction ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$), whereas Need for Cognition ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .10$) and Need for Closure ($\beta = -.08$, $p = .21$) were both weak predictors. This model also accounted for more variance than in the previous step, $R^2 = .06$, $F = 3.70$, $p = .01$.

Finally, Compulsivity was added in the third step. All previous predictors had similar effects as in Step 2. However, unlike for pandemic fiction, Compulsivity was not a major predictor of nonfiction ($\beta = .06$, $p = .30$) and the model did not improve on its previous step ($R^2 = .06$, $F = 1.06$, $p = .30$; Table 5). Overall, these analyses show that individuals higher in Intellect and Intolerance of Uncertainty were more likely to seek out current news regarding the pandemic.

Historical

For engagement with media on historical pandemics, all models had a single influential case removed before being examined. In the first step, Intellect and Openness uniquely predicted media engagement (Openness, $\beta = .12$, $p = .02$; Intellect, $\beta = .14$, $p = .01$), whereas Withdrawal did not ($\beta = -.002$, $p = .97$). This model accounted for about 5% of the variance in exposure to media about historical pandemics.

In the second step, these three original variables had similar associations as in the first. However, all three newly added variables were very weak predictors, Need for Cognition, $\beta = .03$, $p = .67$; Need for Closure, $\beta = -.03$, $p = .64$; and Intolerance of Uncertainty, $\beta = .08$, $p = .26$. This step also did not improve the model, $R^2 = .05$, $F = 0.49$, $p = .69$.

After Compulsivity was added in the final step, the associations for Openness and Intellect were similar as before albeit somewhat attenuated, Openness, $\beta = .09$, $p = .09$; Intellect, $\beta = .11$, $p = .05$. Withdrawal also emerged as a negative predictor, $\beta = -.12$, $p = .04$. The variables added in Step 2 all remained weak predictors. In contrast, Compulsivity was identified as the strongest unique predictor, $\beta = .34$, $p < .001$. This also improved upon the previous model, $R^2 = .14$, $F = 43.49$, $p < .001$. In summary, more compulsive people were more likely to seek out information on historical pandemics. Those who are more emotionally volatile were also more likely to seek out this media, but this effect only emerged after controlling for Compulsivity.

Media Consumption and Well-Being

We preregistered that we would examine whether consuming pandemic media is associated with well-being and whether this relationship is moderated by personality. Zero-order correlations, presented in Table 2, indicated that the bivariate associations between pandemic media consumption and well-being are very weak. All nine correlations are near zero and the 95% confidence intervals all contain zero. However, null bivariate associations do not preclude the possibility of moderation, and so we assessed whether these associations were moderated by our individual difference measures.[2] In general, these models yielded null results, so we do not describe them here but have included full details in the additional online materials at https://osf.io/s38ag/.

[2] Although these moderation models were identified as exploratory, we did preregister that we would assess models when the bivariate association between a given media and a measure of well-being was greater than $r = .10$. However, none of the associations satisfied this condition. Additionally, we realized after the fact that this condition would inappropriately exclude cases where a reversal interaction led to a near-zero bivariate association. Thus, we deviated from our preregistration and estimated and report all possible well-being models.

Table 3
Regression Models Predicting Pandemic-Related Fiction Exposure

	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
Predictor	β [95% CI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*	β [95% CI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*	β [95% CI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Openness	−.03 [−.16, .12]	0.08	−0.51	.61	−.02 [−.17, .32]	0.08	−0.32	.75	−.05 [−.20, .11]	0.08	−0.86	.39
Intellect	.11 [−.04, .26]	0.08	2.04	.04	.10 [−.07, .26]	0.08	1.61	.11	.09 [−.07, .25]	0.08	1.54	.12
Withdrawal	−.07 [−.17, .04]	0.05	−1.27	.21	−.13 [−.25, −.00]	0.06	−2.02	.04	−.20 [−.32, −.08]	0.06	−3.23	<.01
NF Cognition					.003 [−.15, .15]	0.08	0.04	.97	.02 [−.13, .16]	0.07	0.28	.78
NF Closure					−.05 [−.18, .09]	0.07	−0.75	.45	−.07 [−.21, .06]	0.07	−1.21	.23
Intoler. Uncert.					.13 [−.03, .29]	0.08	1.88	.06	.09 [−.07, .24]	0.08	1.24	.22
Compulsivity									.28 [.16, .40]	0.06	5.25	<.001

Note. All regression coefficients and 95% CIs are standardized. CI = confidence interval; NF Cognition = Need for Cognition; NF Closure = Need for Closure; Intoler. Uncert. = Intolerance of Uncertainty. Step 1: $R^2 = .02$, $p = .03$; Step 2: $R^2 = .03$, $p = .05$; Step 3: $R^2 = .09$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

We examined the relationship between personality characteristics and engagement with pandemic media during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The different traits we measured were differentially related to the different types of pandemic media (i.e., fiction, historical nonfiction, and current nonfiction).

Both Intellect and Intolerance of Uncertainty predicted engagement with news about the pandemic, but not with pandemic fiction or historical nonfiction. For those made uncomfortable by uncertainty, fiction and the past likely do not possess enough potential to reduce the uncertainty of what is to come, unlike the news. Along similar lines, a natural curiosity about the world explains why those high in Intellect would be interested in the news, with fiction and the past perhaps being seen as less relevant and therefore less interesting. As a secondary point, the unique predictions made by both Intellect and Openness, the two aspects of the Big Five trait Openness to Experience, with historical nonfiction (in the first model) help to further validate the 10 aspects model of personality upon which the BFAS is based (DeYoung et al., 2007).

Compulsivity also predicted engagement with pandemic fiction and historical pandemics, but not the news. This could be because Compulsivity drove these individuals to seek out relevant content outside of the obvious (i.e., the news). Compulsivity also emerged as the strongest predictors in our models, even after controlling for several other relevant traits. Similar research conducted at the beginning of the pandemic showed that obsessive-compulsive tendencies were heightened in April 2020 and, in contrast to our findings, seeking out news by those with these tendencies was high at this point (Loosen et al., 2021). Our research extends this past work to new domains of media, namely pandemic fiction and historical nonfiction. One possible explanation for this discrepancy in association with news consumption is that the research by Loosen et al. (2021) examined obsessive-compulsive tendencies in general, whereas the current study focused specifically on Compulsivity.

In contrast to our predictions, we found that Withdrawal was negatively associated with consuming pandemic fiction and historical nonfiction. It is possible that those high in Withdrawal recognize that they are already prone to anxiety and choose not to feed these anxieties by engaging with potentially distressing media, particularly content that shows how bad things could turn out. After all, the 1918 influenza pandemic resulted in the death of between 50 and 100 million people (Morens et al., 2010). Individuals high in withdrawal might not have had the same trepidation about consuming current news, as the news can also bring hopeful information (e.g., vaccines being developed, or a drop in cases). Withdrawal might also have predicted less engagement with fiction and historical nonfiction because these genres are not as "necessary" as keeping up with the news and typically reflect voluntary engagement.

Engaging with all three types of pandemic media was associated with greater concern regarding the pandemic. Although these data are correlational and thus cannot determine causal direction, it is possible that these media reinforced the seriousness of the situation producing greater concern. It is also possible that those who were more concerned sought out more media relevant to the pandemic, in an effort to better understand it and make more accurate assessments of risk. However, consuming pandemic media was not related to psychological well-being, nor was this moderated by any of the

Table 4
Regression Models Predicting Pandemic-Related Nonfiction Exposure

	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
Predictor	β [95% CI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*	β [95% CI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*	β [95% CI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Openness	−.05 [−.20, .11]	0.08	−0.92	.36	−.01 [−.17, .14]	0.08	−0.28	.78	−.02 [−.18, .14]	0.08	−0.38	.70
Intellect	.20 [.04, .35]	0.08	3.52	<.001	.22 [.05, .39]	0.09	3.65	<.001	.22 [.05, .39]	0.09	3.62	<.001
Withdrawal	.06 [−.06, .17]	0.06	1.03	.30	−.04 [−.16, .09]	0.06	−0.60	.55	−.05 [−.18, .08]	0.07	−0.82	.41
NF Cognition					−.10 [−.25, .05]	0.08	−1.66	.10	−.10, [−.25, .05]	0.08	−1.61	.11
NF Closure					−.08 [−.22, .06]	0.07	−1.25	.21	−.08 [−.22, .06]	0.07	−1.33	.18
Intoler. Uncert.					.19 [.03, .35]	0.08	2.76	.01	.18 [.02, .34]	0.08	2.6	.01
Compulsivity									.06 [−.07, .18]	0.07	1.03	.30

Note. All regression coefficients and 95% CIs are standardized. CI = confidence interval; NF Cognition = Need for Cognition; NF Closure = Need for Closure; Intoler. Uncert. = Intolerance of Uncertainty. Step 1: $R^2 = .03$, $p < .01$; Step 2: $R^2 = .06$, $p < .001$; Step 3: $R^2 = .06$, $p < .001$.

Table 5
Regression Models Predicting Pandemic-Related Historical Media Exposure

	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
Predictor	β [95% CI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*	β [95% CI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*	β [95% CI]	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Openness	.12 [−.03, .27]	0.08	2.37	.02	.12 [−.04, .28]	0.08	2.24	.03	.09 [−.06, .24]	0.08	1.7	.09
Intellect	.14 [−.01, .29]	0.08	2.55	.01	.12 [−.04, .29]	0.09	2.01	.05	.11 [−.05, .27]	0.08	1.94	.05
Withdrawal	−.002 [−.11, .11]	0.05	−0.03	.97	−.03 [−.16, .09]	0.06	−0.53	.59	−.12 [−.25, .00]	0.06	−2.08	.04
NF Cognition					.03 [−.12, .18]	0.08	0.43	.67	.04 [−.10, .18]	0.07	0.73	.47
NF Closure					−.03 [−.17, .11]	0.07	−0.46	.64	−.06 [−.20, .07]	0.07	−1.06	.29
Intoler. Uncert.					.08 [−.08, .24]	0.08	1.14	.26	.02 [−.13, .17]	0.08	0.34	.73
Compulsivity									.34 [.22, .46]	0.06	6.59	<.001

Note. All regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals are standardized. CI = confidence interval; NF Cognition = Need for Cognition; NF Closure = Need for Closure; Intoler. Uncert. = Intolerance of Uncertainty. Step 1: $R^2 = .05$, $p < .001$; Step 2: $R^2 = .05$, $p < .001$; Step 3: $R^2 = .14$, $p < .001$.

individual differences we measured. It is quite likely that well-being at this time was determined by far stronger factors, such as potential job loss and social isolation. In hindsight, media exposure is almost entirely voluntary and so the possibility of choosing to watch Contagion or read about the 1918 pandemic likely had rather weak influences on well-being (positive or negative), relative to the many other concrete and actual threats to well-being at this time.

Relevance for Other Forms of Media Engagement

Interest in pandemic media heightened at the beginning of the pandemic and a parallel can be drawn to the consumption of mood-congruent music: when the media consumed reflects one's current state. Often, people choose to listen to sad music when they are already feeling down. Although uplifting music may improve their mood, people will often choose to use sad music as a way to delve into their negative emotions. Individuals listen to mood-congruent music to share their feelings and feel closer to others, especially when the sadness is a result of interpersonal distress compared to impersonal distress (Lee et al., 2013). Something similar may be what happened with pandemic media. At the beginning of the pandemic, when people were told to stay home and isolate from others, engaging with such media could have served to make people feel closer to others who were currently having the same experience. Consuming mood-congruent music, disaster films, true crime media, and pandemic media all seem to reflect a similar pattern: consuming potentially upsetting media that is rooted in reality and current concerns. It would be fruitful to examine if the individual differences identified in this study also pertain to these other forms of media engagement.

Limitations and Future Directions

It is important to note that this study relied on cross-sectional data and correlation analyses, so causal inferences are not possible. These data were also collected at the start of the pandemic (April 2020) and people's attitudes and opinions regarding the pandemic have changed as it has progressed. Our data are likely most informative in terms of understanding how a new and catastrophic real-world event shapes media consumption.

The measure of pandemic media consumption we created also has some limitations. It does not, for example, take into account participants' overall media engagement. In addition, some items reflect subjective impressions that likely vary between individuals (e.g., what constitutes "a lot" of media), and the wording of some items might have biased respondents toward certain kinds of responses (e.g., I am more aware of historical pandemics now than I was before COVID-19 [e.g., the Spanish Flu, SARS]). Some of these issues likely introduced measurement error, attenuating estimated associations.

There are also some potential limitations of our sample, as some of those who are highly avoidant of content related to the pandemic might have opted not to participate given the topic of this study. Lastly, although we included a variety of different individual difference measures, it is entirely possible that other constructs not measured might have had stronger associations than what we observed.

Conclusion

We discovered that in the context of an ongoing catastrophic event, individual differences play a role in the degree to which people seek out related media and that genre is also important. In particular, Compulsivity and Withdrawal emerged as important predictors of both pandemic fiction and historical nonfiction. In contrast, traits related to curiosity and information processing predicted the consumption of current news regarding the pandemic. Individual differences clearly play a key role in driving media consumption related to major current events. However, it would be helpful if more research was done to examine the effects of engaging with such media. Although we hope that another global catastrophe like this pandemic is not around the corner, research along these lines is essential for delineating the bidirectional associations between real-world events and mass media consumption.

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Received May 12, 2023
Revision received April 30, 2024
Accepted May 16, 2024 ■