

# Information literacy and information behaviour of disadvantaged people in the COVID-19 pandemic. Case study of beneficiaries of the charitable foundation

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** The purpose of the study was to explore information behaviour and information literacy in the group of the charitable foundation beneficiaries, their attitudes, choices, and behaviour regarding particularly COVID-19 information.

**Methods:** Two series of quantitative CAPI studies were carried out. The first consisted of basic questions about access and preferences related to information sources. The other was explicitly related to COVID-19 pandemic information. Basic statistical descriptive measures and chi-square tests of independence were used in the analysis.

**Results:** Poverty and the concept of small worlds seem to be a specific living context of vulnerable groups. Information flow is based mainly on personal sources. Their searches for pandemic information did not differ significantly from everyday behaviours. The respondents felt fatigued with information about the pandemic dominating the media and informal discussions. In relation to previous studies, we see similar behaviours and competencies levels indicating information poverty, although differences in source preferences are also observed. Volunteers appear to have a limited informative role concerning the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other studies of people in crisis.

**Originality:** Information behaviour patterns of the studied group indicate new tasks for caregivers in terms of provision of information and development of information skills, in particular in health or life-threatening circumstances.

## Keywords

Health information needs. Health literacy. Information literacy. Information seeking behaviour. Information skills. Vulnerable groups.

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## 1. Background

Access to and usage of reliable information on health and fake news are what we generally think about regarding information behaviour and information literacy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a health-threatening situation, it is crucial to know how to find the information required to protect one's own and relatives' health. Additionally, it is important to distinguish between real and false information, the latter confusing information transmission.

It is particularly difficult for vulnerable groups to find their feet in the new conditions for information transmission. People from socially marginalised groups, those in crisis situations (health, economic, homeless, etc.), make up a specific group of information users. Often struggling with limited access to information sources and means to improve their competencies, they experience additional negative consequences of an exclusion cycle. Social crises, including the global coronavirus pandemic, influence all the people everywhere, and for the vulnerable groups, create an additional barrier in their already difficult lives. The needs and competencies of this group facing pandemic threats seem equally important as the other social groups. However, it is often overlooked due to the problem of access to disadvantaged groups, their reluctance to participate in research, or a general lack of interest in their situation.

This research gap was the background of exploring information behaviour, including health and COVID-19-related information seeking and reception of people in crisis; beneficiaries of the charity. The charity is active in Częstochowa, a medium-sized city in Poland, with approximately 230 thousand inhabitants.

A few research perspectives have been referred to. Firstly, considering the scale of permanent infection risk and the permanent availability of information on the pandemic (at least in media), information behaviour in everyday life should be mentioned here. The information space – its scope and diversification of information sources used daily – is the second important aspect. The third is the current knowledge of information literacy of people in crisis. Furthermore, last but not least, there is knowledge about information literacy research in the specific context of COVID-19.

Information literacy is hereinafter interpreted in general as a set of competencies indispensable for effective usage of information (ALA, 1989), but also in the perspective offered by CILIP (Secker, 2018), focusing on citizens' empowerment, which is particularly important for those in need. Information behaviour is defined broadly as people approaching and handling information (Rather & Ganaie, 2018).

Information literacy has been manifested in either passive reception or an active information search. Searching health information belongs to the category of everyday life information-seeking behaviours (ELIS) (Savolainen, 1995, 2005). Information can be searched purposefully to complement information gaps (Dervin,

1998), or acquired incidentally, depending on external or internal user's circumstances (Williamson, 1998).

Analysis of health information literacy, needs, and behaviours in COVID-19 pandemic context with reference to the ELIS concept can be challenging – nothing has been ordinary or routine here. However, on the other hand, after more than two years of living in the pandemic regime, we can think about a kind of habit and implementation of a new, time – and situation-specific routine.

Elfreda Chatman's (1992) theory of small worlds has been an essential reference for vulnerable groups' information literacy and behaviour studies. Small worlds are small communities of the specific, predictable mode of activity, based on accepted norms and beliefs of the group members, the so-called normative behaviours (Chatman, 2000). This predictability and internal normativity also refer to information usage. Chatman proved in her numerous studies (e.g., 1987b, 1991ab, 1992) that marginalised people had quite a narrow, specific, and local view of the world, limited to the well-known environment. Two components specific to the concept of small worlds seem to be important here. The first is the limited and organised horizon of information sources. The individual experience or trusted persons from the family or friends are the key sources, followed by the media (TV, less often newspapers), other people or institutions, or the Internet (Williamson, 1998; Savolainen, 2005).

The theory of information poverty (Chatman, 1992; Thompson, 2007) is another element of the small worlds concept, critical as a reference for this study. It was defined as a situation where people and communities in a specific context, do not have competencies, possibilities, or means to obtain adequate access to information, its understanding, interpretation, and appropriate usage (e.g., Marcella & Chowdhury, 2020). In short they are lacking access to information indispensable for survival, self-reliance, sustainable persistence, or development (Marcella & Chowdhury, 2020, 368).

The concept of small worlds has been quite often applied in the studies on the information practises of different marginalised groups, for instance, homeless mothers (Buchanan, Jardine, & Ruthven, 2017; 2019; Gibson & Martin, 2019) and parents (Hersberger, 2001), people in crisis receiving different forms of social assistance (Hayter, 2006; Nobilet & Ihadjadene, 2019), as well as the seniors (e.g., Eriksson-Backa et al., 2012; Pang, Karanasios, & Anwar, 2020).

The common elements of many of these projects are the scope and types of information needs, and the preferred information sources. Regarding the first one, the primary information needs focused on finances, followed by (depending on a specific group) the care for children, health problems, shelter, job seeking, availability of social support, and health care (Hayter, 2006; Hersberger, 2001). Nobilet and Ihadjadene (2019) found that the social service appeared to be the primary information need; followed by the availability of ICT (mainly the smartphone) which

allowed one to stay in touch with relatives, settle things online; and lastly – legal information. Nobilet and Ihadjadene conclusions differ, however, from those of other studies.

The social network has been constantly the primary information source (Buchanan, Jardine, & Ruthven, 2017; 2019; Gibson & Martin, 2019; Hayter, 2006; Hersberger, 2001; Nobilet & Ihadjadene, 2019). Social service professionals (Hayter, 2006; Nobilet & Ihadjadene, 2019; Pang, Karanasios, & Anwar, 2020), or media (including the Internet) were usually mentioned as secondary (Hersberger, 2001). Trust in a person, institution, or another entity providing the information was the key (Gibson & Martin, 2019; Hayter, 2006). However we can find an opposite perspective – anxiety linked to information searching has been observed as well, primarily due to previous experiences. Social workers or healthcare professionals were the sources of information concerning potential support (Hersberger, 2001; Pang, Karanasios, & Anwar, 2020) and were often mediators between the community and the external world (Hayter, 2006; Buchanan, Jardine & Ruthven 2017; 2019).

Again, the study of relatively poor people in northern France was an interesting exception (Nobilet & Ihadjadene, 2019). They often used not only close social contacts but also external sources, trusting the official ones. It might depend on the group specifics, i.e., the situation of relative rather than extreme poverty (low income, e.g., pension or retirement). A high level of trust in social services workers as information mediators was also found in this study.

Seniors were also the subjects of information literacy studies as a vulnerable group often experiencing, among other problems, poverty and digital exclusion. Easy access and understandability, particularly considering health information, was perceived as very important by the respondents of the Finnish study (Eriksson-Backa et al., 2012). In the study of the elderly in a situation of natural disaster (Pang, Karanasios & Anwar, 2020) the sense of closeness and informal mode of communication with information mediators, even with the representatives of institutions or authorities, were considered to be very important. In such circumstances, local institutions and regional-specific knowledge and habits appeared particularly important (even more important than the media).

Health literacy seemed crucial in the pandemic circumstances (Paakkari & Okan, 2020). Orkan Okan et al. (2020) proved that the pandemic might additionally worsen information literacy which already was not satisfactory in many European countries (Sørensen et al., 2015). The key problems were the inability to use competencies in health – or life-threatening situations, or regarding infodemics.

Archila et al. (2021) introduced a specific concept of COVID-19 literacy, defined as the understanding of COVID-19 and making informed decisions based upon this understanding. They carried out the study of COVID-19 literacy among students from a Columbian university. The Internet appeared to be the most frequently referred information source regarding pandemics and healthcare professionals – the

most reliable one. The more advanced (in age and education) students and the medical students had higher competencies, while general results were on a medium level.

Thus, enhanced care for education in information literacy and health IL in particular is currently needed, including access to verified content. Emotional support is also an important element of enhancing information competencies (Walton & Hepworth, 2011). For example, Rudd & Baur (2020) recommended developing verified, publicly and easily accessible information for users of different knowledge and the information competencies levels. The groups and individuals of lower education or social-economical status required particular informational care in such circumstances (Spring, 2020).

### *1.1. Social background*

Częstochowa is the county city located in the central-south part of Poland, formerly (1975–1998) the capital of a region (voivodeship). According to statistics (Polska w liczbach, 2020), Częstochowa is the 13th among other Polish cities considering its area and number of inhabitants, with high economic potential. 1,738 new economic entities were registered there in 2018 (Polska w liczbach, 2020). The unemployment rate amounted to 4,4% at the end of March 2021 and was 1,1% lower than the average for the country (Polska w liczbach, 2020). The city, located near highway no. 1, connecting the north and south of Poland, is an important communication hub. Despite these factors, the number of inhabitants has been decreasing for almost 30 years, with 259,135 inhabitants in 1995 and 217,530 at the end of 2020 (Polska w liczbach, 2020).

According to regional statistics in Katowice, 3,5% of Częstochowa residents referred to the social service in 2019; for comparison, in the whole of Poland, it was an average of 3% (Polska w liczbach, 2020). The main reasons why Częstochowa residents refer to social services are poverty, unemployment, and disability.

The respondents of the surveys are the beneficiaries of the “Adullam” Christian Foundation, living in poverty and social exclusion. This charity is a non-governmental organisation that supports the poorest living in Częstochowa and the suburbs. Its principal activities include:

- Free canteens – two-course dinners, as well as bread and other food products, are distributed six days a week to 564 people (all figures mentioned here come from the charity’s financial statements for 2021),
- Social rehabilitation in the hostel for 106 men recovering from alcoholism, after serving criminal sentences, or long-time unemployed,
- A club for children and adolescents from dysfunctional families helping 60 children,
- A consultation point for the alcohol addicted persons and their families for 159 people,

- A repository of in-kind support for 472 people,
- Organising local communities in the Old Town district (Fundacja, 2021).

## 2. Objectives

The main objective of this study was twofold: to explore the information behaviour patterns and the level of basic information literacy in the group of the charity's beneficiaries, as well as to find out if (how much) they were explicitly applied to seek and evaluate the COVID-19 pandemic information (e.g., sanitary regime, risk of infection, potential treatment, vaccination).

Due to the specific characteristics of the population (and sample), only a few aspects of the information behaviour were included in the study, those we perceived as strongly related to information literacy. These are: selection of information sources in different circumstances, interest and attitude towards the pandemic situation, and information sources on this topic.

In order to achieve these two objectives, the following research questions were posed:

Q1: What information sources are routinely used by people in crisis? (What do they choose? Are these sources differentiated or not?)

Q2: Do they choose information sources according to their information needs?

Q3: To which information sources do they refer: in daily routine and in a crisis situation?

Q4: What is the interest in information about the crisis situation (namely: the COVID-19 pandemic) among this group?

Q5: What is the attitude of this group towards information about the crisis situation?

Q6: Is there a gender differentiation in the sample in terms of information behaviour (on selected examples) and interests and attitudes towards the crisis situation?

Q7: Is there an age differentiation in the sample in terms of information behaviour (on selected examples) and interests and attitudes towards the crisis situation?

## 3. Methods

Two waves of quantitative CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interview) studies were conducted among the charity's beneficiaries. CAPI technique was used due to aforementioned reluctance to contact other people (strangers) or reveal some private information. Convenient and purposive sampling was applied: both surveys were carried out on the sample available at the charity's locations during interviewers' visits. The decision of sampling method was reasoned by the vulnerability

of this population and the researchers' intention to provide the respondents with adequate comfort, and not to discourage them from participating in the study. Two ways of the survey were conducted, because of the specific condition of the pandemic, which we found out to be important in the context of information behaviour and information literacy of the population.

Some interviewees might have problems with completing the survey on their own, e.g. with reading the standard print size, using a tablet or computer. Therefore, the interviewers recorded participants' answers using standardised Google Forms questionnaires. The interviewers were recruited from the full-time charity's workers. We acknowledge the problematic nature of this solution, i.e., exploiting certain power dynamics between helpers and help-seekers in the interviewer-interviewee relationship. However, this solution allowed for crossing the most significant barrier in this group – the lack of trust in people “from the outside” and the related reluctance to share information about oneself.

The first wave of the survey included basic questions about accessing information and preferred information sources. It took place in March 2021, with 163 respondents (55 women and 108 men). The questionnaire (see: Appendix 1) focused on the availability of information sources and preferred media and information types for specific purposes, to reveal actual choices of the respondents (behavioural aspect).

The second wave was carried out in June and July 2021, with 154 responses (46 women and 108 men). The questionnaire (see: Appendix 2) consisted of 12 closed questions and 5 demographic ones, with the following topics:

- Use of information sources during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- Evaluation of one's knowledge of the pandemic and the risk of infection,
- Information behaviour related to health and pandemics,
- Availability of information on the charity's activities and support, its evaluation during the pandemic, satisfaction from the received support.

## 4. Results

The basics on the information behaviour and competencies of the sample was established first, followed by the data on specific information behaviour patterns and competences related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results will be discussed in relation to the research questions.

Q1: What information sources are routinely used by people in crisis? (What do they choose? Are these sources differentiated or not?)

The question about routine usage starts with accessibility. About three-quarters of the respondents of the first wave of the study could access TV and broadcasting, and half of the respondents had access to the Internet and press in their homes. It is worth noting that almost 30% of them read the press also outside of home – not

so common behaviour concerning other media. More than 34% of the respondents declared that they did not have access to the Internet (see: Table 1). It might indicate that information poverty is present in this group, as in particular, the Internet was available in 90.4% of Polish households in 2020, according to Statistics Poland (2020a).

Tab. 1. Answers to the question “Do you have access to...?”  
(first wave, N=163).

Access to Media	At home	Out of home	No access	N valid answers
Internet	58.3	7.4	34.4	163
TV	81.5	7.4	11.1	162
Broadcasting	71.3	11.3	17.5	160
Press	49.1	28.0	22.4	161

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Respondents (N=163) indicated the news as the most interesting topics of information (75.5%), followed by the curiosities (31.9%) and weather forecasts (30.1%). Other contents were indicated by 27.6% of them. People who indicated additional topics could be perceived as the most engaged information users, having specific preferences. Eighteen of them mentioned sport, eleven films and TV series, four people – social media. Three stated that they were not interested in any information.

However, overall the interviewees were not intensive media users. As presented in Table 2, not more than half of them declared having a favourite radio station (the so-called background medium). A bit less (42.9%) had a favourite TV series. About one third declared having a favourite newspaper or website.

Tab. 2. Percentage of people who declared having a favourite radio station,  
TV programme, newspaper or website (first wave, N=163).

Do you have a favourite...?	% positive answers
Radio station	49.7
TV programme	42.9
Website	35.0
Newspaper	32.5

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Q2: Do they choose information sources according to their information needs?

This research question was divided into two survey questions. According to the literature, people living in information poverty tend to depend on personal



connections and personal information sources. Thus, the first question about perceived usefulness of selected sources of information was asked. It was formed in the hypothetical context of searching for job offers so that the respondent had a specific, real-life point of reference. Respondents answered using a five-point Likert scale.

The respondents highly preferred personal sources, followed by the Internet (Table 3). Institutional sources (job centres) were evaluated relatively low (although close to the mean value).

Tab. 3. Assessment of the usefulness of selected information sources in job seeking (first wave, N=163).

<b>How do you assess the usefulness of the following information sources in job seeking? (1 – not useful, 5 – very useful)</b>			
<b>Source</b>	<b>N of valid answers</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
People I know	162	3.43	1.29
Internet	163	3.17	1.46
Newspaper advertisement	162	2.98	1.39
Information in a jobcentre	162	2.78	1.35
Advertisements on a board	163	2.64	1.24

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Next, respondents were also asked about finding information about transport to a new place, which is a much less complex information task than seeking a job. Traditional sources dominated here, readily available (timetable). Less than 25% of the respondents would ask for help or seek it on the Internet (see: Table 4).

Tab. 4. Finding information about transportation to a new place (first wave, N=163).

<b>How do you plan your transportation to a new place?</b>	<b>% positive answers</b>
I check a schedule at a bus stop	50.9
I search on the Internet	23.9
I ask for help	22.7
Other	2.5

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Q3: To which information sources do they refer: in daily routine and in a crisis situation?

As a preferred source, we understand the most frequently used and perceived as the most convenient. However, we acknowledge that frequency is also strongly linked to access (regarding media access, see: Table 1). Data from the first wave shows to a certain extent that personal sources, such as family, friends, neighbours, and charity volunteers might be a preferred and important source (Table 3). More data concerning family and friends as preferred information sources in the context of the pandemic were gathered from the second wave.

Again, the so-called traditional media were the most frequently used (78% used them at least sometimes), together with personal sources (59%), i.e., family, friends, and neighbours. The Internet was the third choice (56%). Considerably less often, they referred for information to the charity's workers or volunteers (43%), or they obtained information on the occasion (heard somewhere on the street or in a store – 42%) (see: Figure 1).

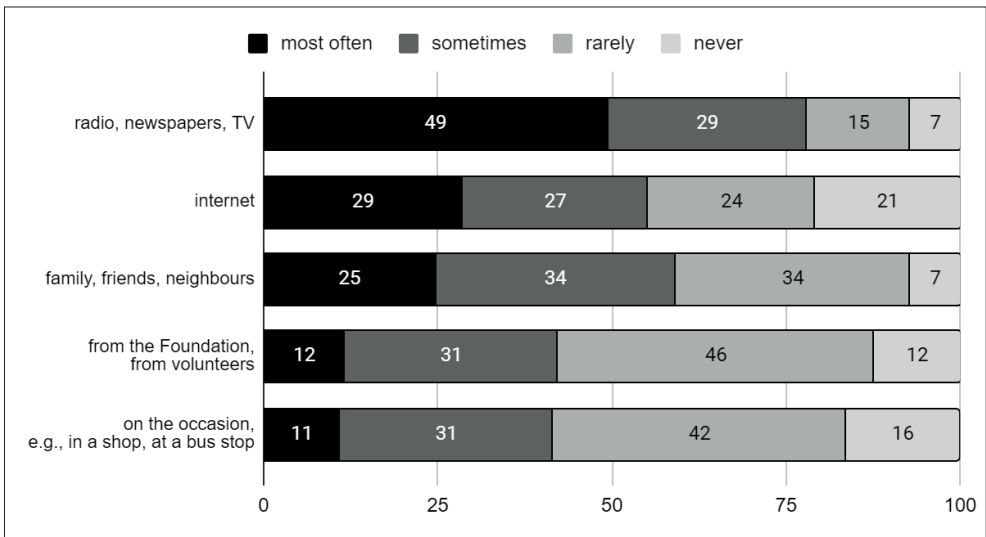


Fig. 1. The frequency of using selected sources of information on the COVID-19 pandemic (second wave, N=154).

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Comparing these data with national statistics, more than 98% of people aged 16–74 followed information on COVID-19 in 2020 (Statistics Poland, 2020b, p. 1; see also: Statistics Poland, 2020a). The most preferred information sources were: TV (86.9%) and the Internet (68.5%). The older the respondents, the more often they chose traditional media (broadcasting, TV, newspapers, journals). Personal sources were not listed in the cited study.

Personal sources also dominated among the most convenient forms of information. 65% said that conversation with another person is definitely or rather a convenient form of COVID-19 information. It was followed by visual materials (photos, posters, diagrams, etc.) available in different media (54% positive answers). The least popular were texts (articles, leaflets) – 38%; and audio materials – 40% assessed them as a convenient form of information (see: Figure 2). Low preference for audiovisual material may confirm its role as a background medium, not listened to carefully, at least not all the time.

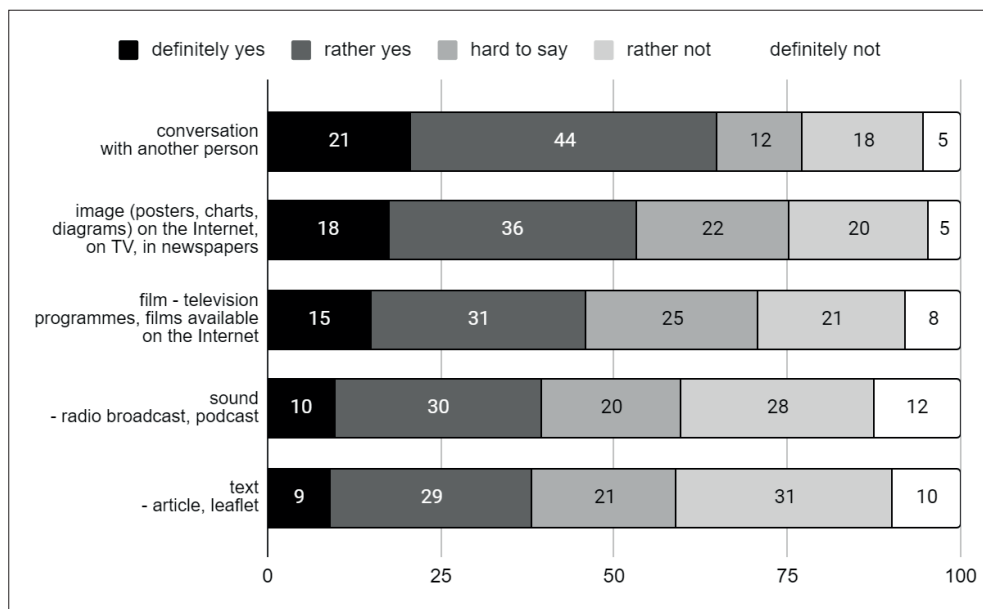


Fig. 2. Preferred forms of information about pandemic (second wave, N=154).

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Based on the data, conversation with others is one of the most used and considered the most convenient source of information. Therefore, let us look at the behaviour related to the exchange of information about the pandemic with the immediate environment. Respondents were asked if and how often they talk to others about the COVID-19 pandemic (see: Table 5).

Q4: What is the interest in information about the crisis situation (namely: the COVID-19 pandemic) among this group?

The COVID-19 pandemic was not a topic discussed very often with others. Only about one third often talked about it with family and friends or people they met by chance. Most of the respondents (41.6%) discussed the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic only sometimes. A quarter of the respondents avoided talking about it at all. The sample included relatively few people whose inability to leave home

limited conversations with others about the pandemic. Relatives, friends, and even people met by chance play a more important role as informants about COVID-19 than the charity's volunteers.

Tab. 5: Talking to others about the pandemic (second wave, N=163).

Respondents' answers	% positive answers
Often with family and friends	33.1
Often with people met by chance	35.1
Sometimes with a family, friends, neighbours, people met by chance	41.6
Seldom, only with a family, I do not go outside	7.1
Seldom, only with the charity's volunteers or workers, I do not go outside	5.2
No, I avoid this topic	24.0

Source: Compiled by the authors.

National public statistics revealed that 98.2% inhabitants of large cities, 98.4% residents of central Poland, and 97.6% of low-income households (average monthly net income from the first quartile) declared monitoring COVID-19 information in 2020 (Statistics Poland, 2020a). These results were on a similar and high level in all studied groups. Against this background, what is the interest in information about the COVID-19 pandemic in the studied sample?

Firstly, the respondents were asked about the topics they were interested in (see: Figure 3). The respondents' interests focused on personally important matters – first on the health status of the people they knew (68% said they were definitely or rather interested in this topic), personal protection (60%) and pandemic-related restrictions (59%). However, the interest in mortality and morbidity rates was not much smaller (56%). It might suggest the existence of information needs related to general knowledge on this specific and challenging situation. 53% of the respondents were interested in the accessibility of health services during the pandemic. The slightest interest concerned the availability of vaccines (40%), presumably due to the calendar of events. Vaccination for the oldest social groups was available in Poland since the end of January 2021, and the group of authorised patients has been successively extended for the following years. The study was carried out in summer 2021 when most of those who wanted to be immunised probably received the first dose.

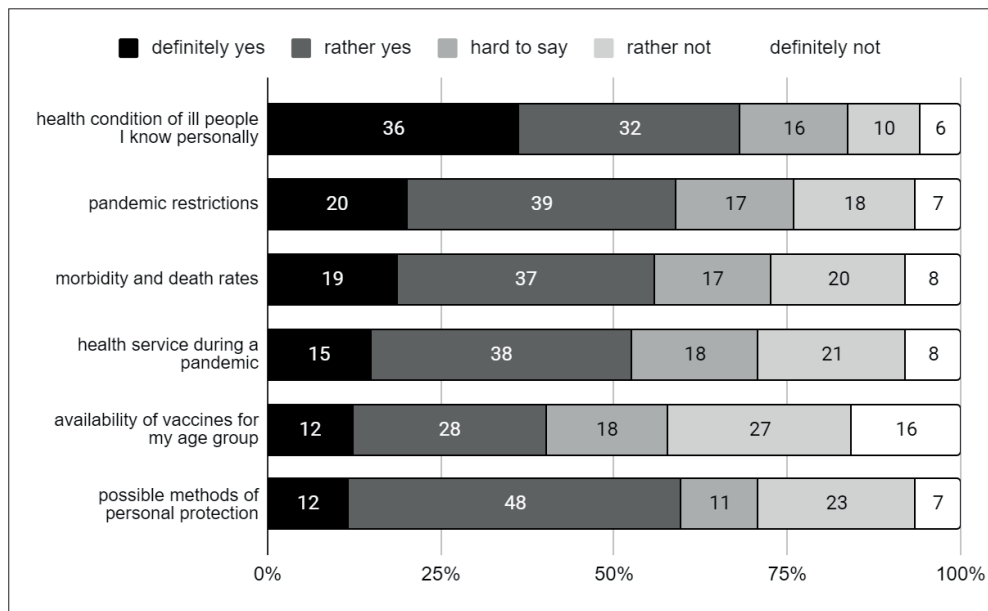


Fig. 3. Interest in pandemic-related topics (second wave, N=154).

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Q5: What is the attitude of this sample towards information about the crisis situation?

As the attitudes are the important components of the information competencies, respondents' attitudes towards pandemic information were also studied. The most frequent attitude toward the COVID-19 pandemic was fatigue. 80% of the respondents definitely or rather agreed with the statement that they are tired of pandemic and related information. The vast majority (65%) also felt that the available information was enough for them. They felt quite well oriented and updated (60%). However, almost half of the respondents reported feeling uninformed or threatened. The pandemic was not often discussed with the others (46%, which relates positively to the frequency of conversations about the COVID-19 pandemic). Furthermore, 32% declared that they were not interested in health topics at all, and 24% said they would like to know more but had some difficulty finding new information (see: Figure 4).

The attitudes may impact the importance of the pandemic topic for the respondents. Even if the pandemic is an important issue for them, prolonged exposure to its risk and information may lead to the sort of information fatigue that negatively influences the respondents' sensitivity and ability to judge its importance.

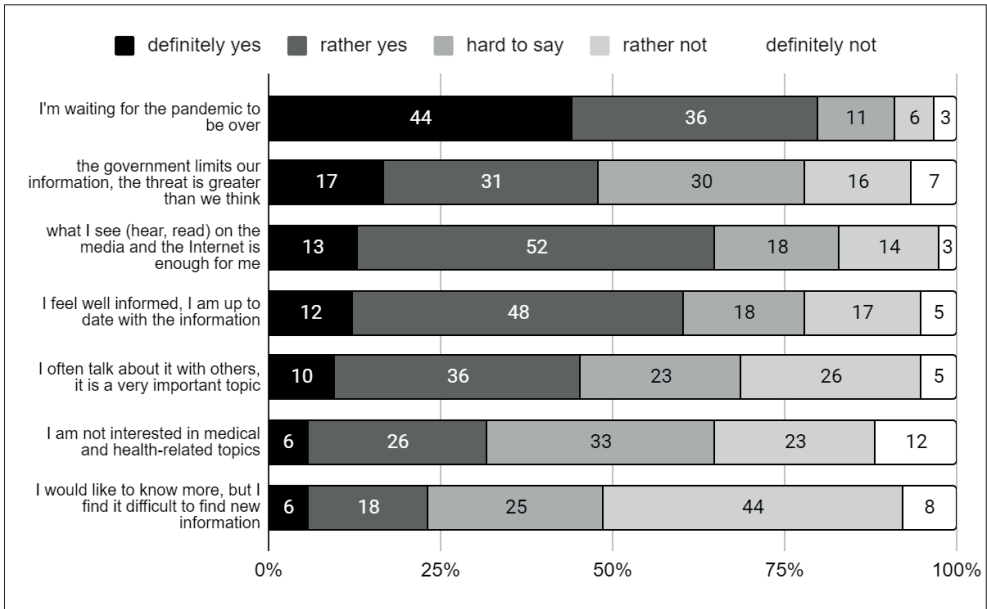


Fig. 4. Attitudes towards the information about the pandemic (second wave, N=154).

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Q6: Is there a gender differentiation in the sample in terms of information behaviour (on selected examples) and interests and attitudes towards the crisis situation?

- Within the sample, differentiation of access to media at home, out of home and no access is evident when it comes to television ( $\chi^2=6.7, p<0.05$ ), radio ( $\chi^2=11.5, p<0.01$ ) and press ( $\chi^2=9.5, p<0.01$ ). Women were more likely to declare access to television and press at home, while men – to radio. Detailed data are presented in Figure 5.
- In terms of established media preferences, differentiation can be seen in terms of having a favourite TV series ( $\chi^2=7.9, p<0.01$ ). More than half of the women (58.2%) had a favourite programme compared to 35.2% of the men.
- Women were generally much more likely to rate positively (as useful) the sources of information presented in the survey in the context of their job search<sup>1</sup>. Table 6 presents means, ANOVA test results and eta square values.

1 The statistical significance of the variation for the variables was at least  $p=0.01$  or less, except for the press adverts. In this case,  $p=0.00502$ . However, the gap between the mean value for men and women (0.64) and the eta squared value leads us to consider that there is variation in this case. This is confirmed by the statistical significance for the correlation between the evaluation of the usefulness of newspaper adverts and gender ( $\rho=0.219, p=0.003$ ).

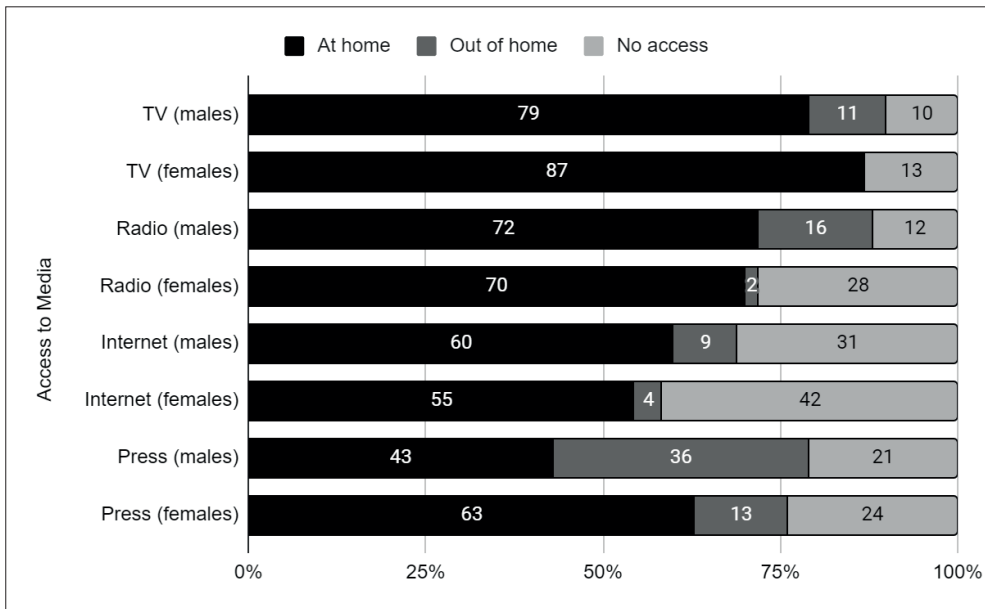


Fig. 5. Differentiation of access to media at home, out of home and no access by gender (second wave, N=163).

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Tab. 6: Gender variation in usefulness assessment of selected information sources in job seeking (first wave, N=163).

Item	M for males	M for females	ANOVA test results	Eta square
People I know	3.18	3.93	F(1; 160)=13.1	0.076
Internet	2.91	3.69	F(1; 161)=11.2	0.065
Newspaper advertisement	2.76	3.40	F(1; 160)=8.1	0.048
Information in a jobcentre	2.48	3.36	F(1; 160)=17.2	0.097
Advertisements on a board	2.36	3.20	F(1; 161)=18.5	0.103

Source: Compiled by the authors.

- We did not observe any gender differentiation in terms of the sources used in the context of seeking directions to a new location.
- We did not observe any gender differentiation in terms of the sources used in crisis situations (on the example of COVID-19 pandemics).

- We did not observe any gender differentiation in terms of talking to others about the pandemic.
- Regarding the topics that interested the respondents in the context of the pandemic, a gender difference is apparent only in the case of the health status of ill people whom the respondents knew personally (family, friends) ( $F(1; 151)=5.7, p<0.05; \eta=0.037$ ). Women were significantly more likely to declare an interest in this topic ( $M=3.17$ ) than men ( $M=2.67$ ).
- We did not observe any gender differentiation in terms of attitudes towards the information about the pandemic.

Q7: Is there an age differentiation in the sample in terms of information behaviour (on selected examples) and interests and attitudes towards the crisis situation?

- In terms of access to media in the home, outside the home or no access, the only differentiation by age is apparent when it comes to the internet ( $\chi^2=17.2, p<0.001$ ). Those under 50 years of age had internet access at home significantly more often than seniors (77.3% versus 45.4%). Almost half of the seniors had no internet access (46.4%, compared to 16.7% for those under 50) and were also more likely to use the internet outside the home than younger respondents (8.2% compared to 6.1% for those under 50).
- Age differentiated the sample in terms of having a favourite website ( $\chi^2=15.9, p<0.001$ ). More than half (53%) of people under 50 – generally more likely to have internet access at home – had a favourite website compared to only 22.7% of older people.
- People over 50 years of age were generally more likely to rate positively (as useful) the sources of information presented in the survey in the context of their job search. The results are statistically significant for personal sources, the internet and advertisements on a board at the  $p<0.05$  level. However, the variation by age is weaker than by gender. Table 7 presents means, ANOVA test results and eta square values.

Tab. 7: Age variation in usefulness assessment of selected information sources in job seeking (first wave,  $N=163$ ).

Item	M for 18–50 years	M for 50+ years	ANOVA test results	Eta square
People I know	3.15	3.62	–	–
Internet	3.52	2.94	–	–
Newspaper advertisement	2.74	3.14	$F(1; 161)=6.5$	0.039
Information in a jobcentre	2.62	2.89	$F(1; 161)=6.4$	0.038
Advertisements on a board	2.35	2.85	$F(1; 160)=5.4$	0.033

Source: Compiled by the authors.



- In terms of the sources used in the context of seeking directions to a new location, differentiation by age is apparent. People under 50 would be more likely than seniors to use the internet for this purpose (37.5% vs. 15.8%), while older people would check the timetable at the bus stop (57.9% vs. 43.8%) or ask for help (26.3% vs. 18.8%).
- With regard to the use of information sources in the context of an emergency (COVID-19 pandemic), differentiation by age is only apparent for the Internet. People under 50 years of age declared more frequent use of the Internet than older people. Among those under 50 years of age, 36.1 % most often learned about the pandemic situation specifically from the Internet, 31.9 % used this medium sometimes, 23.6 % rarely and only 8.3 % never. Among seniors, 22% most often or sometimes learned about the pandemic situation from the Internet, 24.4% rarely and 31.7% never used the Internet for this purpose.
- We did not observe any age differentiation in terms of talking to others about the pandemic.
- Regarding the topics that interested the respondents in the context of the pandemic, age difference is apparent only in the case of the COVID cases and death rates – global, national, local ( $F(1; 152)=6.2, p<0.05; \eta=0.039$ ). People over 50 were significantly more likely to declare an interest in this topic ( $M=2.62$ ) than younger ( $M=2.14$ ).
- Regarding attitudes towards the information about the pandemic, age difference is apparent in the case of three items. People over 50 were more likely to say that they're waiting for the pandemic to be over, that they're satisfied with the information they consumed, and they consider pandemic a very important topic they talk about with others. Table 8 presents means, ANOVA test results and eta square values.

Tab. 8: Age variation in attitudes towards the information about the pandemic (second wave, N=154).

Item	M for 18–50 years	M for 50+ years	ANOVA test results	Eta square
I'm waiting for the pandemic to be over	2.90	3.30	$F(1; 152)=6.0$	0.038
The government limits our information, the threat is greater than we think	2.32	2.40	–	–
What I see (hear, read) on the media and the Internet is enough for me	2.39	2.76	$F(1; 152)=5.6$	0.036

I feel well informed, I am up to date with the information	2.31	2.59	–	–
I often talk about it with others, it is a very important topic	1.96	2.39	F(1; 152)=6.2	0.039
I am not interested in medical and health-related topics	1.82	1.99	–	–
I would like to know more, but I find it difficult to find new information	1.72	1.68	–	–

Source: Compiled by the authors.

## 5. Discussion

The majority of the charity's beneficiaries do not have any problem with access to information sources. They refer primarily to traditional media (TV, broadcasting) but also to the Internet. However, they are not intensive media users, which means they tend not to have favourite sources or programs they refer to regularly and by choice. So when they need information – the simple one related to public transport, and the more complex concerning job seeking – other people become an essential source of information. It is followed by the most accessible sources – the Internet (in job seeking, following newspaper ads) or public information (timetable at a bus stop – the first choice information source in this case).

These choices of information sources answer the first research question. Thus, they confirm the occurrence of information poverty in this particular group of people in a difficult situation. The respondents make routine choices, referring to the known and easily accessible sources – people from an inner cycle, followed by media and the Internet (Chatman, 1992; Savolainen, 2005; Williamson, 1998). Another important feature of this group in the perspective of information poverty is that **it lacks competencies rather than access to the media**. More than half of the respondents declared having the Internet at home and within the horizon of potential information sources. This confirms previous findings on the usage of the most straightforward and well-known solutions (Chatman, 1992; Thompson, 2007), and avoidance of any additional effort (e.g., Marcella & Chowdhury, 2020). The Internet is not a first-choice medium for this group, the habit to refer to traditional media in this case is more powerful.

The negative influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on information literacy (Okan et al., 2020) is also partially confirmed, as it comes to the preferred forms of pandemic information. The problematic situation does not urge them to develop searching skills or even refer to different forms of information. Besides conversation, the simplest are preferred, without effort of interpretation (visual and audiovisual).

Referring to the second and third research questions, concerning information sources' adequacy to information needs, the study revealed that family, friends, or voluntary caregivers are preferred and important pandemic information sources, was partially confirmed. Though traditional media are the first choice source for the respondents, members of the inner cycle – family and friends – were indicated as the second. At the same time, conversation with another person was indicated as the most convenient form of obtaining information. This is a difference in relation to previous studies (see: Buchanan, Jardine, & Ruthven, 2017; 2019; Gibson & Martin, 2019; Hayter, 2006; Hersberger, 2001; Nobilet & Ihadjadene, 2019; Pang, Karanasios, & Anwar, 2020).

Presumably, due to its scale and specificity, the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the choices of information sources (which also refers to the third research question). On the one hand, it can result from the widespread availability of news in traditional media and the Internet (the problem of its quality is beyond the scope of this study). On the other hand, it might be related to the scale, universality of the pandemic, which results in permanent presentation of news in different media.

The finding that the charity's volunteers are not perceived as convenient informants is a bit surprising, but important. Significantly fewer respondents declared that they talked to them about the COVID-19 pandemic than to the other people, including those who they accidentally met. Paradoxically, pandemic can be a kind of a "safe" topic like weather, as it concerns everyone and can be discussed safely, in the sense that everyone would have something to say about it. Presumably, the pandemic is also somewhat rather "popular" than an "important" topic, discussed by all of us.

It seems to suggest that preference and importance of personal information sources can be applied somewhat to the family or friends, not the people in rather formal relations. It may be precisely due to the specific nature of information needs and interests focusing on the health status of family and friends, and personal protection. Official information is available in the media, and private information is discussed with relatives.

Relationships with charity volunteers seem to be more nuanced. Usual topics discussed between beneficiaries and charity representatives touch upon rather private and even sensitive issues, such as social support service. Current needs and issues might be then discussed with the volunteers rather than the general situation of the city or country in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic turned out to be an important social topic for the respondents (answering the fourth research question). This topic is perceived primarily from a private experiences perspective, thus in line with the theory of small worlds (Chatman, 1992). Respondents declared interest mainly in the health status of family and friends, but also, like the whole Polish population, in personal protection equipment and (a bit less) pandemic restrictions, mortality, and morbidity rates. Fatigue appeared to be a prevalent attitude, but also, the majority had a sense of being well-oriented and up-to-date with the topic (answering the fifth research question).

The latter can be related to the limited horizons (Chatman, 1992) and a reluctance to take additional effort or specific information seeking (Archila et al., 2021).

Answering the sixth research question, we see some gender variation in terms of information behaviour (using selected examples) and interests and attitudes towards information in a crisis situation. Women seem to have more diverse and established preferences regarding media and information sources. Women were generally much more likely to rate positively the sources of information presented in the survey in the context of their job search. They are also more interested in the situation of those close to them in terms of COVID.

Lastly, in answering the seventh research question, age differentiation is also apparent. It seems to occur more frequently than gender differentiation, but the strength of the relationship is generally weaker. People under 50 have a stronger preference for online sources and older people for traditional sources. This is true for sources they use and like, searching for directions to a new place and pandemic information – and therefore for everyday and emergency situations. Those older than 50 usually rated more positively the sources of information in the context of their job search, and expressed more interest in information about cases and deaths by COVID. Among older people, selected attitudes towards the COVID pandemic were also more pronounced, especially recognising the pandemic as an important topic and talking about it with others.

## 6. Conclusions

The information behaviour patterns and information literacy level in the sample in terms of selection (quantity, diversification) of information sources is relatively low. In other words, the findings generally confirm information poverty, however defined in terms of poor competencies and undeveloped information needs rather than the accessibility of different information sources. The results also fit into the concept of small worlds, where information flow is based on personal sources, members of a given community. The respondents did not declare the need to obtain more information than gathered in the easiest and typical way or further diversification of sources. According to the least effort principle, the search for pandemic information was carried out according to everyday schemes and habits. The pandemic appeared to be an important topic, particularly considering its influence on personal life. On the other hand, it is perceived as a tiring issue, which is an essential factor demotivating to conduct additional searching and evaluate information reliability, particularly with poor information skills.

The status of information literacy of the studied group indicates new tasks for caregivers in terms of adequate provision of information and development of information skills, particularly in health or life-threatening circumstances.

The study has its limitations. Data is declarative in character, which creates a need to be complemented or confronted with qualitative study (e.g., observation, experiment, e.g., information searching task). The sample was relatively small. Therefore, similar surveys in other social support organisations would be valued. Another limitation refers to the time of the study. Both parts were carried out between April and July 2021, that is, during the specific pandemic period (third high wave in Poland and summertime following). Since, information skills and choices, as well as the respondents' attitudes, could have changed during the whole pandemic, starting from March 2020 until today.

These limitations can also be considered as future research needs. Information literacy studies can explore the dominant attitude of pandemic fatigue. Fatigue can be an essential or even decisive factor in searching for information or updates in a critical situation. Poor motivation and information literacy levels, simultaneously with information overload, can negatively enhance the search and interpretation of information. Fatigue and weakened motivation can also be analysed from an affective perspective, i.e., considering the potential dependence between emotional (or even psychological) status, level of information literacy and behaviour.

In such a crisis as a COVID-19 pandemic, it is also crucial to know that beneficiaries living in small worlds have specific information rituals. Despite different and challenging circumstances, they do not easily change their choices or develop new competencies. The findings of this study might be important for organisations and caregivers – to help develop so-called COVID-19 literacy (Archila et al., 2021) or these information competencies, which can be crucial for safe living in crisis. A strong preference for personal information sources – family and friends – suggests the need to communicate key information to beneficiaries and people in their inner circle. This strategy can potentially increase the effective transmission of information. It would be in line with the relational concept of information literacy (Jasiewicz et al., 2015; Kisilowska, Jasiewicz, & Mierzecka, 2017), according to which information users develop the appropriate skills in their specific situations.

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## Kompetencje informacyjne i zachowania informacyjne osób w trudnej sytuacji w trakcie pandemii COVID-19. Analiza przypadku podopiecznych fundacji charytatywnej

### Abstrakt

**Cele:** Celem projektu było zbadanie kompetencji i zachowań informacyjnych podopiecznych fundacji charytatywnej, ich postaw i zachowań zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do informacji dotyczącej COVID-19.

**Metody:** Przeprowadzono dwie serie badań ilościowych techniką CAPI. Pierwsza dotyczyła podstawowych kwestii dostępu do źródeł informacji oraz preferencji w tym zakresie. W drugiej skupiono się na informacji dotyczącej pandemii COVID-19. Wyniki przeanalizowano z użyciem podstawowych narzędzi statystycznych.



**Wyniki:** Sposób życia osób w trudnej sytuacji warunkuje ubóstwo oraz koncepcja małych światów. Informację czerpią przede wszystkim ze źródeł osobowych. Ich zachowania informacyjne dotyczące pandemii nie różnią się od codziennych zachowań informacyjnych. Respondenci zgłaszali poczucie zmęczenia informacją o pandemii, która zdominowała media i rozmowy nieformalne.

**Wnioski:** Stwierdzono podobny do opisanego w literaturze poziom kompetencji informacyjnych i zachowania wskazujące na ubóstwo informacyjne, choć zaobserwowano różnice w preferowanych źródłach. Wolontariusze fundacje odgrywają niewielką rolę jeśli chodzi o przekaz informacji o pandemii.

**Oryginalność:** Stan kompetencji informacyjnych badanej populacji sugeruje nowe zadania dla opiekunów w zakresie dostarczania informacji i rozwijania kompetencji informacyjnych, zwłaszcza w sytuacjach ryzyka zdrowotnego.

### Słowa kluczowe

Zdrowotne potrzeby informacyjne. Kompetencje zdrowotne. Kompetencje informacyjne. Zachowania informacyjne. Grupy w trudnej sytuacji.

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