

Citizen engagement with information when adapting to health crises: four distinctive profiles

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Marilla Kortessalmi

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland

Harri Jalonen

School of Management, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland, and

Valdemar R. V. Kallunki

Master's Programmes Department, Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Vantaa, Finland

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines citizens' engagement with information during the COVID-19 crisis. While the desire for information intensifies during health crises, such circumstances pose challenges to citizens' ability of to adapt to new situations. Familiar information behaviour, such as seeking and scanning intertwine with collective sensemaking to navigate the situation successfully. While citizen-led adaptation is crucial in public crisis management, limited academic attention has focused on understanding the process of information engagement. The purpose of the study is to investigate how information behaviour and collective sensemaking jointly support adaptation from public management viewpoint.

Design/methodology/approach – The data for this study were provided by 30 semi-structured interviews with members of COVID-19-related Facebook groups. All participants were from Finland, which provided the context for the study. Abductive thematic analysis and narrative practices were applied to analyse the interviews.

Findings – The findings revealed that while citizens' information engagement shared patterns, it manifested in distinctive ways in terms of information behaviours and epistemic ideals. We assign four profiles to encapsulate the narratives elicited: Attendants, Mainstreamers, Outriders and Tribesmen.

Originality/value – This article contributes to the discourse on citizens' information behaviour and sensemaking in informal environments. By focusing on citizens' viewpoints concerning adaptation in times of crisis, the findings contribute to the literature on public crisis management in societal emergencies.

Keywords Public crisis management, Citizen information engagement, Collective sensemaking, Health crisis, COVID-19

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, expose the limits of crisis management and underscore citizens' roles as active interpreters and co-producers of shared understanding. When information changes rapidly and is contradictory, individuals must make sense of uncertain situations to protect their wellbeing. That requires adaptation through learning processes where individuals identify their behavioural tendencies and adjust actions to meet emerging needs (Yeo and Lin, 2025). Uncertainty arises from incomplete or inconsistent information (Reed, 2022) and from scientific complexity (Baram-Tsabari and Schejter, 2019) that challenges comprehension.

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Multiple sources of information are likely to emerge during crises (Siebenhaar *et al.*, 2020). Authorities issue updates that contextualise recommendations, while media outlets compete to provide extensive coverage. Citizens must navigate a path between institutional communication, media content, peer interactions and experiences (Tandoc and Lee, 2022). In addition, contradictory information provided in high-risk contexts like COVID-19 can heighten distress (Siebenhaar *et al.*, 2020). The issue is therefore not how individuals search for information but more fundamentally, how they engage with it and how they interpret, co-produce and negotiate meanings in times of uncertainty. Given that information behaviours influence compliance (e.g. Siebenhaar *et al.*, 2020), understanding these dynamics and the opportunities they afford for dialogue is a crucial part of effective public crisis management.

Research on information behaviour during a crisis shows increased information consumption (Montesi, 2021). However, individuals do not digest all the information they encounter; rather, they evaluate and selectively allocate their engagement with it. Unlike passive exposure, engaging with information is a deliberate endeavour intended to acquire and reflect information (Bråten *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, engaging in information is guided by epistemic orientation, meaning that epistemic ideals that evaluate information value are central components (Hendriks *et al.*, 2020). Information engagement is not merely individual but carries a collective dimension. Although studies have investigated information engagement in formal and on-line contexts (e.g. Wang *et al.*, 2020), there is less emphasis on individuals' engagements in informal environment. Further, while studies of sensemaking have explored citizens' adaptation during crisis, there is a limited academic focus on the process by which individuals' information behaviours to acquire and filter information intertwine to collective sensemaking, that is, the process of information engagement. In this context, health crisis, which necessitates adults learning, provides a pertinent setting for this investigation.

This study addresses the above-referenced gaps by examining what characterises citizens' information engagement as they adapt to a public health crisis. The study analyses interview data from participants in Facebook groups focused on COVID-19. Their viewpoints offer an entry point to investigating how citizens define, reason, and share what they perceive as reliable information under conditions of uncertainty. The analysis draws on information engagement theories (Hendriks *et al.*, 2020) and sensemaking (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995), examining how individuals extract cues, interpret them through dialogue and how epistemic ideals formulate the process. This approach explores information engagement as an epistemic and adaptive process transforming uncertainty into shared understanding.

The article makes three contributions. First, it conceptualises citizens' engagement with information as epistemically orientated behaviour, highlighting its role in crisis adaptation. Second, it extends sensemaking theory by identifying four epistemic ideals of accuracy, credibility, cohesion and plausibility, that shape citizens' adaptation strategies. Third, it broadens understanding of collective sensemaking by illustrating how collective processes of seeking, sharing and interpreting information operate in an informal context beyond organisational boundaries. These contributions advance understanding of how information behaviour underpins social adaptation during crises.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study offers practical implications for public sector management and crisis governance. Citizen engagement with information represents distributed knowledge work complementing formal crisis responses. Collective ideas based on shared experiences provide context-specific insights often overlooked by institutions (Fissi *et al.*, 2022; Yeo and Lin, 2025). Recognising this co-produced knowledge enhances decision-making and supports adaptive governance, enabling authorities to harness the experiential knowledge of citizens to assist crisis management.

Engaging with information during health crises

Health crises, defined as emergencies within the health system affecting the public across geographic areas, extend beyond borders and constitute a public health crisis (Balogun *et al.*,

2023). During a health crisis, the demand for information increases, and citizens become the audience for health authorities and global media. An unstable information environment increases uncertainty and disrupts information activities. In such a context, acquiring knowledge requires intentional engagements, that is, motivated participation in dialogue to achieve understanding (Anderson *et al.*, 2016; Taylor and Kent, 2014). While individual activities like collecting and evaluating information are important, dialogic engagement, such as shared meaning-making and critical examination, is stressed in complex information contexts (Hendriks *et al.*, 2020). Dialogue is particularly important in the context of science-based information, as individual decisions have broader community implications, such as vaccination. While schooling builds scientific literacy, participatory practices in public arenas support adult citizens' information engagement and learning (Baram-Tsabari and Schejter, 2019; Godinho *et al.*, 2021). However, the nuances of individuals' information engagement have garnered limited empirical attention.

Citizen adaptation during a crisis is both individual and collective. At the individual level, we can observe emotional coping that fosters control, while collective adaptation entails behavioural alignment with crisis management. The asymmetry of information between authorities and citizens challenges shared comprehension. Indeed, community-driven engagement, rooted in shared experiences and local knowledge, can complement formal crisis responses, highlighting the importance of co-produced communication strategies (Yeo and Lin, 2025).

The social aspects of confusing events have been studied through sensemaking (Kilskar *et al.*, 2020; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). In the course of sensemaking, individuals extract cues by selecting and interpreting information to understand the situation (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). People combine prior knowledge and beliefs with collective interpretations to create plausible narratives, that is, plausibility functions as an epistemic ideal (Reed, 2022). Socially relatable information and information co-creation support sensemaking (Montesi, 2021). Georgiou and Murillo (2023) illustrate how engaging with sensemaking facilitates forming a social collective rather than being a product of one. Social media provides a key arena for such processes by enabling real-time, distributed sensemaking among dispersed individuals (Stieglitz *et al.*, 2018).

Sensemaking extends individual information-seeking by incorporating interpretations of situations that are constructed collectively. The resulting narratives become intertwined with identity construction (Weick, 1995). Narratives serve as cognitive frameworks through which individuals interpret their experiences. Identity construction influences situational interpretation and information relevance. Sensemaking involves enactments: purposeful actions initiated to support understanding. People revise their understanding as they encounter new information, prompting behavioural changes (Weick *et al.*, 2005). Sensemaking is an iterative, socially embedded process triggered by disruption. It encompasses collective interpretation, identity construction and enacting. Identities are constructed through social interaction, whereas the interpretation of social cues and the enactment of responses are inseparable as individuals attempt to impose order on situations even as they are evolving (Weick *et al.*, 2005).

The loss of normalcy induces a sense of loss of control, necessitating sensemaking on the part of citizens to adapt (Weick, 1993). The literature on sensemaking in crises emphasises shared meanings (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Individual perspectives may be constrained in complex situations, which exemplifies the importance of collective sensemaking (Georgiou and Murillo, 2023; Kilskar *et al.*, 2020). Emotional factors are integral to collective sensemaking. Empathy fosters dialogue, reflection, and the co-construction of interpretations (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) as demonstrated by virtual communities during health-related challenges (Wu *et al.*, 2023).

Further, virtual communities function as a source of information in crisis. Social media provides continuous information flows for interpretation (Soroya *et al.*, 2021) and has become central to crisis communication. They shape how information is produced, shared, and

interpreted. They function as arenas of collective sensemaking and trust networks where citizens exchange, verify and reinterpret information in real time (Pourebrahim *et al.*, 2019). This reflects a shift from hierarchical transmission to dialogic interaction, where meanings emerge through exchanges among citizens, experts, journalists and organisations whose messages intersect, or challenge one another (Jin *et al.*, 2014). Social media enhances situational awareness by aggregating local knowledge while providing emotional support during uncertainty. However, its participatory nature increases exposure to misinformation and blurs the line between reliable information and speculation, while enabling civic engagement (Hendriks *et al.*, 2020).

This transformation reflects a crisis in information ecology, where citizen networks complement formal warning systems (Robinson *et al.*, 2019). Citizens reinterpret official messages to create locally meaningful knowledge that is rapidly spread. Such a decentralised ecology challenges control-oriented crisis management, calling for authorities to operate alongside networked citizens to co-create effective responses. Success depends on trust and cultural orientation (Baram-Tsabari and Schejter, 2019). In high-trust societies, social media sensemaking fosters solidarity, but in low-trust contexts, it can amplify confusion and polarisation. Research shows that citizen-driven arenas of meaning-making are linked to broader civic and political participation, as social media use is associated with increased social capital, civic engagement and political activity (Skoric *et al.*, 2015). This engagement extends to the dialogue between citizens and authorities during crises. Looking beyond rapid information dissemination, perceived openness is important. Studies show that interactivity and multimodal communication enhance trust, whereas one-way communication weakens it (Hendriks *et al.*, 2020). Authorities promoting dialogic communication on social media can harness citizen engagement to strengthen the legitimacy of crisis management.

Data and methods

Research context

This study was conducted in Finland, a country that performs well in global public governance rankings (Pekkola *et al.*, 2023). A distinctive feature of the Finnish political system is that proposed legislation is subject to an *ex ante* review by a parliamentary committee to establish that its provisions are constitutional. While this process can slow decision-making, it enhances the role of legal expertise and bolsters public trust in governance (Pekkola *et al.*, 2023). A recent OECD (2024) report ranks Finland as a high-trust society, with Finns showing strong trust in societal institutions, similar to other Nordic countries. Finns also have high levels of trust in each other and in their leaders.

Government-led COVID-19 efforts relied on individuals and communities cooperating, making trust essential. People had to believe in institutional fairness, and the authorities had to trust in citizens' willingness to comply with mandatory rules. However, citizens' trust weakened when crisis communication relied on nonbinding recommendations. As the pandemic continued, the blurred distinction between legal mandates and informational guidance created confusion and declining satisfaction with the communication (Johanson *et al.*, 2025). The current research examines observed patterns of information engagement occurring at the time.

Research procedure

The study involved 30 Finnish participants (15 females and 15 males) who ranged in age from their twenties to their seventies. Participants were recruited from three Facebook groups that emerged during the COVID-19 outbreak that focused on pandemic-related issues. These groups were chosen due to the prominence of social media as an information source during the COVID-19 pandemic (Montesi, 2021). They represented distinct perspectives on public crisis management: one was critical of the authorities' restrictions on assembly and speech, another

opposed constraints on business activity, and a third supported official crisis-management practices. The groups were selected based on the following criteria: (1) they were established due to the COVID-19 crisis, (2) they were informally organised, did not represent existing collectives like political parties or associations and accepted participants upon request, (3) discussions were active during the period of the study interviews and (4) researchers were granted access by group administrators. These groups were not chosen to represent the general population but to identify individuals who had expressed views on public crisis management during the pandemic. Researchers contacted group administrators and, after joining, posted interview invitations while approaching active group members directly. Interviews were scheduled with volunteers. Achieving an equal number of participants from each Facebook group required extensive recruitment efforts; voluntary participation remained limited.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish via Microsoft Teams or in person between September 2021 and February 2022 as part of the Information Resilience in Wicked Environment (IRWIN) project. Three researchers conducted semi-structured, one-to-one interviews lasting between 43 and 126 min, the average duration being 71 min, and the total being 2,133 min. The interviewees were asked to describe their information behaviour during the COVID-19 crisis. The interviews covered the following themes: perceived purpose of Facebook group (e.g. “how do Facebook group members perceive or react to COVID-19 information”), perceived information agency (e.g. “what information activities have you initiated”), information meaning-making (e.g. “how do you perceive official COVID-19 information”) and trust in information (e.g. “how would you describe trustworthy official information”). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, producing 1,067 pages of text.

Analysis strategy

The transcribed data were studied in their entirety. The dataset was not affected by predetermined questions or the selection of participants. We read the interview material diligently and initially concentrated on identifying the interviewees’ descriptions of their information-related activities. The lead author drew on abductive thematic analysis (Thompson, 2022) to categorise phrases that illustrated information behaviour (Tandoc and Lee, 2022). The outcome was the application of the codes *seeking*, *scanning*, and *sensemaking*. The sensemaking code was then assigned the subcategories *interpretation*, *enactment* and *identity construction* (Weick, 1995). However, the researcher recognised the limitations of the initial coding, as the activities were closely intertwined and the coding failed to capture the underlying purposes of the activities, which were implied within certain phrases.

In the following phase of analysis, the focus of categorisation shifted to the purposes of the interviewees’ information behaviours and was guided by the question *How did the participants reason their information engagements?* Here, we focused on anticipated and/or initiated enactments and articulated epistemic ideas. Two epistemic ideals were established: accuracy (Geers et al., 2024) and plausibility (Weick et al., 2005). Complementary codes, *cohesion* and *credibility*, were then added into the analysis. Credibility refers to epistemic ideals for which information is interpreted to fit the broader frames of the human experience in existential meaning, such as moral rightness. Cohesion refers to information that serves both group discussion contributors and wider societal consensus. Table 1 illustrates the analysis process relating to information activities, exemplifying the purposes of information engagement behaviour in the description, and epistemic ideal. The participants’ statements are anonymised and presented using pseudonyms, along with a participant number (e.g. P18).

In the next phase, coded phrases were synthesised by applying narrative practices. Narrative practices focus on constructing coherent storylines from data. Unlike narrative analysis, which centres on deconstructing and analysing data in narrative form, narrative practices emphasise synthesis and reconstruction: integrating elements into a cohesive developmental account (Joselsson, 2011). In narrative practices, informants’ descriptions of

Table 1. Excerpts that exemplify the analysis of the purposes of interviewees’ information engagement behaviour and epistemic ideals

Information activity description in the data	Purposes of information engagement behaviours	Epistemic ideal
“I worked in the background. I searched for the facts and tried to convey them with as little alteration as possible. In a way like ‘Here, this is what’s being said, and it is based on that and this’. The idea was to make things transparent, so that we all knew what we were talking about” (P27, Julia)	Information seeking and scanning: collect information from various sources and convey it. Increase transparent COVID-19 information	<i>Accuracy</i> Factual information valued; actions oriented to minimise alterations
“The aim [of the FB group] is to open up a channel where people in this field can talk with each other and reflect on how we can influence in a way that our professional expertise as diverse actors is acknowledged and trusted” (P15, Lena)	Sensemaking – co-producing a shared interpretation: establish a channel for discussion and peer support to advance the FB group members’ professional reputations	<i>Plausibility</i> : Information plausibility is obtained as it echoes the reliability of its presenter
“We strive to present the reasoning for why it’s so important to uphold our fundamental rights. We need to increasingly try to influence a broader public in a positive way, to offer factual, constructive and morally grounded information, a kind of Gandhian attitude towards the factual side of information” (P30, Tom)	Sensemaking – taking actions: influence a public audience to enhance their understanding of fundamental human rights	<i>Credibility</i> Information is existentially framed to suit a bigger picture of humanhood
“It creates a sense of belonging during a time of uncertainty, and no one really knows what the future holds. In a way, it [group discussion] brings a sense of safety, togetherness and also sharing information. There is a possibility to have discussions and exchange thoughts with like-minded people” (P6, Kathy)	Sensemaking – identity construction: to obtain emotional peer support among like-minded to increase the sense of manageability.	<i>Cohesion</i> Aligning their own situational interpretation in cohesion with others

events are framed as disruptions to storylines; that is, the events that the informants recount demonstrate their experience of disturbance (Herman, 2009). Consequently, these events establish what is *unfamiliar* or *noteworthy*, and the accounts of those events can then be synthesised into narratives.

Owing to the richness of the dataset, the coded data lacked coherence. However, the identified categories were stable and enabled the researchers to study the information engagement of participants extensively. Each category was investigated to generate a rigorous description. Although epistemic ideals initially served as category markers, the phrases within each category intertwined those ideals with manifested information engagement behaviour, their purposes and rationale for engagement. Consequently, we constructed four profiles that conceptualise the participants’ distinctive narratives around information engagement. The profiles are defined by underlying epistemic ideas, and each is accompanied by a distinctive set of information behaviours. We named these profiles *Attendants* (which had the epistemic ideal (EI) of accuracy), *Outriders* (EI: plausibility), *Tribesmen* (EI: credibility) and *Mainstreamers* (EI: cohesion). The profiles are expanded upon in the following section. Our analysis focused

on characterising narratives portraying each profile; therefore, we did not address participant background information or the specific Facebook group they belonged to. The profiles don't represent a particular group of people but constructed narratives that capture distinct modes of information engagement.

Findings

Four profiles of information engagement

For participants, engaging with information was a process with various purposes and aims. However, each profile shared similarities in terms of how the participants perceived and reasoned their activities. We called the first conceptual profile identified **Attendants**. In this narrative, the epistemic ideal is centred on the accuracy of information. Attendants recognised that accurate information might not always align with the most widely accepted viewpoints; however, achieving or maintaining consensus was not their primary concern. Instead, they positioned themselves as gatekeepers of objectively true information, as the following interview excerpt demonstrates.

Of course, I want everyone to have accurate information, and we have thoroughly investigated the facts in great detail and even consulted legislative experts. So, when I come across false or misleading information, I feel a strong need to correct it. To provide correct information, to prevent readers from acting upon that information. It feels like a responsibility (P18, Mona).

Attendants perceived false information as a broader societal rather than merely an individual matter, and this concern prompted them to engage with collective sensemaking. They believed that the most accurate interpretation of the COVID-19 situation was grounded in the arguments of health professionals supported by scientific references, and they were committed to combating the spread of misinformation. Once perceived to reach an accurate on situational interpretation, their subsequent activities focused on reinforcing their interpretation and responding to conflicting viewpoints as they regarded information accuracy as a fundamental epistemic ideal. Attendants viewed themselves as fact-checkers who supported peers uncertain of the circulating information. They were receptive to all questions and reflections, emphasising that no question was inherently foolish, albeit it might be based on misinformation.

Attendants maintained a personal detachment while engaging in collective sensemaking, valuing diverse professional viewpoints but avoiding personal opinions. For example, familiarity with other countries and languages facilitated the sharing of scientific sources; however, diversity was valued only in terms of professional expertise, and political or personal views were neither encouraged nor supported. Attendants' initiated information activities centred on individual seeking and scanning, alongside cultivating and disseminating the shared situational interpretation. They sporadically supported fellow Attendants by reinforcing their arguments in social media discussions.

For **Outriders**, the epistemic ideal centred on plausibility, which was reflected in their emphasis on efficient information sharing as priority. Their information engagement evolved organically from individual information seeking to collective sensemaking and, eventually, promoting their message in innovative ways: "expansion is essential in order to influence" (P11, Alex). Unlike Mainstreamers, who primarily sought practical solutions to everyday challenges, Outriders sought a rationale behind what they perceived as unequal directives from health authorities. They viewed health-related norms as threatening their livelihoods, causing moral conflict. Sensemaking became a way to clarify the rationale behind regulations, necessitating systematically organised information-seeking. However, they felt that their enquiries with public authorities were frequently dismissed. They recorded instances in which regulatory authorities lacked contextual knowledge to implement equitable rules.

Initially, Outriders valued traditional public relations, such as lobbying authorities. Over time, they adopted more innovative discourses and strategies, for instance, sharing recorded

phone calls showing denied requests. Through this, they sought to highlight perceived unfair treatment. As the pandemic continued, sense of inequality deepened and they felt increasingly ignored in public discourse. Consequently, they expanded their dissemination efforts to reach a broader audience. They organised demonstrations incorporating show business elements, as exemplified in the following interview excerpt.

Right next to the [regional administrative authority] AVI office building was a big square. We got media representatives there [to document our demonstration], [broadcast companies] YLE and Svenska YLE. Because those AVI regulations were so outrageous, and the song we performed directly referenced the regulations (P28, Mark).

Outriders' narrative emphasised their self-perception as active and capable citizens who were unheard and unfairly treated. By redesigning traditional information dissemination methods and adopting diverse communication techniques, they amplified their message but also reshaped their collective identity. The featured descriptions of actions were closely intertwined with an emerging group identity, and they referred to group identity explicitly.

Everyone focused on what interested them most. There was no designated director. Instead, our work was guided by our own intentions. I enjoyed scanning the [Ministry of Social and Health Services] STM webpages, discovering new and interesting information and perspectives that deserved our attention. A fellow group member would then consider how best to manage this information. Our group evolved through collective effort, and the experience felt deeply meaningful (P27, Julia).

The excerpt above illustrates how Outriders perceived their contribution to collective efforts. Information-sharing activities were not merely for dissemination but served civic purposes, which they found meaningful. This sense of purpose motivated them to continue their efforts.

Like Outriders, **Tribesmen** exhibited increased societal participation during the COVID-19 crisis but differed in terms of exclusionary approach. While Outriders sought public attention and inclusive discussions, Tribesmen gravitated towards societal exclusion, perceiving it as their most viable option after concluding they could not influence the public as desired. Tribesmen's information engagement stemmed from their concerns about a moral crisis and their view of COVID-19 communications as a problematic representation of it. Conflicting official statements and personal experiences fuelled their scepticism, reinforced through Facebook group discussions with like-minded freedom enthusiasts as an epistemic ideal centring on credibility. They found health regulations restricting individual freedoms alarming, and mask-wearing recommendations conflicted with their desire for personal autonomy, while information downplaying mask risks was less concerning.

Consequently, their information engagement behaviour increasingly manifested autonomy in decisions about masks and vaccination. Tribesmen's narrative relayed information heavily filtered via alternative perspectives, specifically, those that opposed publicly accepted and official discourse. They regarded both traditional and social media as untrustworthy and initiated efforts to establish their own independent media environment. While actively seeking inconsistencies in public communications, they scrutinised the official line, as exemplified in the following excerpt.

I do recognise and acknowledge that I filter the information we attempt to study and share in regard to faults in the official story. We must emphasise them. But we must also attempt to unite as human beings in the spirit of greater truth and goodness (P30, Tom).

Tom exemplifies how Tribesmen's sustained narrative that portrayed official information as corrupt and positioned alternative interpretations as pathways to truth, framed within an existential, rather than a situational, context. Their rigorous information filtering aimed to protect them from conflicting worldviews. Tribesmen's narratives addressed broader societal flaws beyond crisis adaptation. Their illustrations of the situation are intertwined with prior experiences of systemic issues: inequality, exclusion and government malpractice. They perceived public crisis communication as reflecting those conflicts, with the authorities and

media pursuing concealed, often malicious, agendas. Tribesmen viewed official communications as politically motivated, commercially driven or deliberately manipulative, either exaggerating or minimising COVID-19 impact. For example, they believed newspapers incorporated alarming elements, such as risk calculations, while public communication downplayed statistics to maintain civil order.

For **Mainstreamers**, the primary concern regarding the COVID-19 situation was its impact on their daily lives and engaged in collective sensemaking to find practical solutions to everyday challenges rather than cognitive or value dissonance. Sensemaking was perceived as an integration of factual data with peer experiences; when the experiences of others resonated, these discussions provided emotional support. Their epistemic ideal was anchored in cohesion; they favoured consensual interpretations and viewed the most popular argument as appropriate and adequate. Mainstreamers emphasised seeking and sharing information individually. Although they did not actively engage in co-producing information, they disseminated the most socially endorsed interpretations and widely accepted arguments. They were careful to avoid misinterpretations and misunderstandings, aiming to present information in a manner that mitigated tension. They described themselves as thoughtful observers who refrained from taking outstanding actions, as illustrated in the following excerpt from “Lena”.

I did notice, as an influence of the group, that my opinions softened. I used to be rather harsh, but somehow other group members had the patience to reflect on that with me, and I learnt that my way of communicating was very challenging. I kind of took it for granted that those reviewing [my comments] knew me: knew that I am well-meaning. I learnt that that is not how [discussion] works (P15, Lena).

The quote reflects the observer’s perspective and demonstrates how “Lena” deliberately distanced herself from provocative arguments. Furthermore, as she noted, support from other members suggested that avoiding provocation operated as a favourable social convention. Mainstreamers’ narrative further indicates that they valued the ability to receive and provide peer support.

Information engagement behaviours supporting adaptation during a health crisis

For **Attendants**, the adaptation to the disruptions COVID-19 caused was rooted in their commitment to serve as independent gatekeepers of accurate information and as opponents of misinformation. Their actions didn’t demonstrate an organised collective effort. Further, they perceived the societal endeavour as a primary rationale for their engagement with information, rather than loyalty to peer group members. Unlike Outriders, who actively sought to disseminate their interpretations to a broader public, Attendants adopted a more restrained societal orientation. Their activities didn’t extend to civic engagement but concentrated on cultivating fact-based discussions across various social media platforms. For them, crisis adaptation involved shaping an accurate situational interpretation and defending, not promoting, it. Their objective was to assist individuals by providing accurate information during crises.

For **Outriders**, crisis adaptation necessitated engagement in activities at the societal level, which many found an eye-opening civic experience, as exemplified below with Mark’s statement. Further, civic actions are associated with the emerging role as active citizens. However, these actions were not a primary motivation for information engagements; rather, they were emphasised element of collective sensemaking.

The COVID-19 period made me understand what I can do. Indeed, the experience of being part of society was very important. Like I was not detached from society, but via my limited actions I could participate. The group facilitated diverse means to participate and encouraged me to do so. I learnt that there are more ways to participate, not just voting (P28, Mark).

For Outriders, adaptation during a crisis was intricately linked to the process of collective sensemaking. Outrider’s narrative illustrated how collective sensemaking not only facilitated

their understanding of the complex situation but also supported reimagining and reshaping civic participation. However, they perceived this engagement as contingent upon the COVID-19 crisis and did not anticipate its extension beyond the pandemic.

Tribesmen's adaptation during crisis extended to daily life aspects, detached from information *per se*. That is, activities initially related to information evolved into behaviours that influenced social relationships, leisure activities, communication channels, and even working conditions. They considered public COVID-19 information fraudulent and pursued transformative societal changes, starting by advocating self-sufficient cooperatives and new hobbies such as yoga and shaman drum-playing. For them, crisis adaptation is associated with a more profound process of transformation. Their exclusive discourse enhanced the distinctive worldview, and their interpretation of the health crisis was applied in the bigger frame of humanhood.

For **Mainstreamers**, peer support played a crucial role in crisis adaptation. They made deliberate efforts to help others access and comprehend information. The following excerpt from Samuel's interview illustrates the dynamic.

And then the bad news started to arrive, and there was a lot of it. New challenges to face that influenced everyone's daily life. So, of course, we felt a sense of belonging created by the opportunity to collect and speculate about this news (P10, Samuel).

Mainstreamers viewed themselves as responsible citizens but simultaneously voiced concerns and questioned the complexity and contradictions within the information environment. Information engagement behaviours involved selecting information that aligned with prevailing societal conventions. They demonstrated trust in institutions and public communication and strived to maintain a neutral stance within a polarised information landscape, as exemplified in the following interview excerpt.

I would like to trust, and I do trust YLE news. But, from time to time, I do wonder about the contradictions. A close friend of mine is a doctor and knows a great deal; he is not a conspiracy theorist but explained to me things that have made me think again. I do value being able to interpret the information from different viewpoints (P25, Sandra).

The excerpt illustrates that Mainstreamers perceived both information engaging and adapting to the crisis as individual endeavours, even as they simultaneously recognised the value of peer support.

Discussion

Disruption stemming from a crisis reshapes citizens' information habits. The results include intensified information consumption (Tandoc and Lee, 2022), amplified uncertainty that increases distress (Siebenhaar *et al.*, 2020), and challenges to public authorities that are also operating under uncertainty (Phillips *et al.*, 2023). Heightened uncertainty elevates the role of sensemaking, as shared understanding strengthens the collective capacity to cope (Kilskar *et al.*, 2020; Reed, 2022; Weick, 1993). In that context, the importance of individuals' engagement with information is accentuated.

The current study's findings indicate that citizens' engagements with information during a public health crisis were a form of epistemic sensemaking. Those interviewed acted as epistemic agents who selected, interpreted and shared information in ways that supported adaptation under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty, rather than passively consuming it. The study extends classical sensemaking theory (Christianson and Barton, 2021; Georgiou and Murillo, 2023; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995), which traditionally emphasised cognitive and organisational processes. It does so by identifying and introducing four distinctive epistemic orientations that concern how ideals such as accuracy, coherence and credibility, along with plausibility, shape the sensemaking process and influence interaction and information behaviours.

In accentuating epistemic orientations, this study contributes to understanding how citizens construct a sense of control when confronted with conflicting or incomplete information. In contrast to studies portraying information behaviour as an individual act of searching and filtering (e.g. [Montesi, 2021](#)), our findings highlight the collective and dialogical nature of meaning-making. Online groups are perceived to function as informal epistemic communities that co-produce interpretations through dialogue, contestation and peer validation. Citizens' informational engagement, therefore, becomes both a cognitive and social process, in other words, a distributed form of sensemaking that complements formal crisis communication.

The above interpretation aligns with research viewing crises as processes of collective reality construction ([Christensen and Lægveid, 2020](#)). Public crises expose the limitations of top-down official communication and reveal how adaptive governance depends on the ability of many actors, including citizens, to interpret evolving situations and adjust their responses accordingly. From this perspective, citizens' information engagement is not peripheral but constitutes the epistemic architecture that sustains democratic crisis governance (see [Jalonen, 2025](#)). Our findings indicate that individual information activities, such as scanning and filtering, integrate with collective sensemaking. In this regard, information engagement is a progressive process that not only supports citizens' information needs but also brings joint action alignment and shared identities, with the process being informed by epistemic ideals. Indeed, our findings suggest that epistemic ideals orient sensemaking, whereas emotional attachment and peer support facilitate it (see [Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010](#); [Wu et al., 2023](#)).

The four profiles identified in this study – Attendants, Outriders, Tribesmen and Mainstreamers – represent distinctive orientations towards information and adaptation. These profiles should not be interpreted as fixed categories but as adaptive modes that illustrate the diversity of epistemic ideals guiding information engagement during crises. Mainstreamers embody an orientation towards epistemic conformity and institutional trust. They value coherence with official information and seek stability through alignment with authorities and peers. Attendants display epistemic vigilance ([Sperber et al., 2010](#)) by actively monitoring and evaluating multiple information sources while maintaining critical distance and avoiding overt polarisation. Outriders express epistemic dissent as they question dominant narratives and seek alternative viewpoints, sometimes to counter perceived institutional blind spots. Finally, Tribesmen illustrate epistemic closure by organising their information engagement behaviours within ideologically homogeneous communities that reinforce internal credibility and boundary maintenance. These orientations are dynamic rather than mutually exclusive, and citizens may shift between them as crises evolve and as institutional credibility fluctuates. They show that information engagement behaviours are not uniform but a pluralistic, negotiated process shaped by varying ideals of truth, trust, and coherence.

The typology adds nuance to existing models of information behaviour and sensemaking by demonstrating how epistemic ideals mediate between information engagement behaviour and adaptive outcomes. Sensemaking emerged as an inevitable yet tense aspect of adaptation. Outriders and Tribesmen demonstrated the tension between adaptation and transformation. Outriders focused on communicating perceived frauds, while Tribesmen emphasised collective lifestyles and liberation from societal norms; both diverged from a compliance orientation. Although their actions had limited institutional impact, they generated diverse forms of knowledge to be shared in society. However, from a public crisis management perspective, the gradual formation of group identity could undermine collective adaptations and compliance. Attendants and Outriders both engaged critically with information but differed in how they balanced scepticism and openness to institutional knowledge. Public authorities seeking to interpret citizens' reactions and to design communication that supports constructive sensemaking rather than deepening fragmentation must understand those distinctions.

The current study advances the debate on public crisis management (e.g. [Nolte, 2025](#)) by reframing citizens' informational engagement as a component of distributed governance. Crises such as COVID-19 demonstrate that knowledge relevant to public decision-making no

longer resides exclusively within formal institutions. Instead, it circulates across interconnected arenas where citizens, experts, and organisations co-produce interpretations of risk, responsibility and appropriate action (Fissi *et al.*, 2022; Yeo and Lin, 2025). Recognising this distributed epistemic landscape is crucial for adaptive and participatory crisis governance (see Autioniemi and Jalonon, 2025).

From a managerial perspective, the findings spawn three key implications. First, information engagement expands the knowledge base of crisis management. Citizen collectives can unveil context-specific insights such as local conditions, emerging concerns, or unmet needs that remain invisible to centralised authorities. Integrating such bottom-up information can strengthen situational awareness and responsiveness. Second, dialogue and facilitation are as important as message control. If citizens are treated as merely recipients of crisis communication, opportunities for co-producing understanding will be lost. Authorities can enhance epistemic trust by facilitating two-way communication, acknowledging uncertainty, and engaging with diverse viewpoints rather than suppressing them. Third, adaptive governance requires epistemic humility. Crises involve ambiguity that no single actor can resolve. Recognising citizens as epistemic partners and knowledge co-creators (e.g. Godinho *et al.*, 2021) rather than treating them as a passive audience will enable institutions to learn from societal feedback loops and to calibrate responses in real time. Our analysis illustrated that such co-creation is achievable because citizens are not merely passive recipients of official information but active agents who interpret, question and disseminate information within their own networks. Indeed, engaging with information has co-creational characteristics (Anderson *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, distributed sensemaking entails challenges. While informal digital spaces and social media can enable collective sensemaking among initially dispersed individuals (Stieglitz *et al.*, 2018), they may amplify misinformation, create echo chambers or amplify emotionally charged narratives.

However, these risks do not negate the value of engagement; they underscore the need for public institutions to develop capacities for epistemic steering that support environments where trustworthy dialogue and knowledge co-creation can flourish free from enforced orthodoxy. Such a shift from information control to epistemic facilitation is essential for resilient crisis governance. Our findings indicated that although authorities did respond to citizens' concerns, their observations were not systematically incorporated into the decision-making. That finding underscores the need for structures facilitating the identification, validation and use of citizen-generated knowledge in crisis governance. Beyond an immediate crisis, knowledge co-creation has broader societal implications: It contributes to building public trust, enhances citizen agency and promotes public administration as a learning system.

This study offers novel insights into citizens' informational engagement but is limited by its focus on a single national context and on social media users voluntarily providing interviews. The findings should therefore be interpreted as illustrative rather than representative. Future research could examine cross-country variations in epistemic orientations, comparing how cultural and institutional contexts shape citizens' sensemaking practices. Expanding the scope to sensemaking in informal contexts, including on-line and offline interactions could enhance the understanding of how informational engagement unfolds across media ecologies. Longitudinal research could also capture the temporal dynamics of adaptation, that is, how epistemic orientations influence learning and evolve as crises progress and as trust in institutions fluctuates. Finally, further research into how citizen-generated knowledge feeds into institutional learning is warranted. Exploring the mechanisms through which public authorities recognise, filter and integrate information from the general public could illuminate the co-evolution of informal and formal epistemic systems in public governance.

Conclusion

Health crises compel citizens to actively engage with information and to interpret uncertainty in ways that support adaptation. Rather than being a passive audience of official

communication, citizens act as epistemic agents who search for information, and construct, negotiate, and share meanings, which in turn influence how societies respond to crises. The current study advances the comprehension of that process by conceptualising informational engagement as epistemically oriented behaviours linking individuals' adaptation with collective crisis governance. The four profiles of information engagement identified demonstrate how citizens' epistemic ideals influence both their situational interpretation and the collective conditions of adaptation. From a public management perspective, the findings underscore how compliance and societal resilience depend on citizens' distributed ability to interpret and act under conditions of information uncertainty. Recognising and supporting their engagements would permit authorities to move from information control towards epistemic facilitation, which facilitates dialogue, co-creation and learning across institutional boundaries. Adaptive crisis governance is therefore less concerned with restoring stability than it is with maintaining the collective capability to make sense of, learn from and adapt to uncertainty.

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Corresponding author

Marilla Kortessalmi can be contacted at: marilla.kortessalmi@uef.fi