

## Review

# Attitude strength as a novel predictor of willful ignorance

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Willful ignorance is a pervasive phenomenon with significant consequences for decision-making, belief maintenance, and social polarization. While past research has identified various motivational and contextual factors underlying this behavior, less attention has been paid to attitude characteristics that shape the likelihood of engaging in willful ignorance.

Addressing this gap, this paper introduces attitude strength as a critical and heretofore unexplored psychological factor that should affect when and why individuals engage in willful ignorance. We argue that strong attitudes, such as those held with certainty, are highly accessible, or are perceived as morally relevant, are particularly likely to elicit willful ignorance. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory and motivated reasoning, we synthesize findings across domains, from political partisanship to responses to misinformation and AI-mediated communication.

## Addresses

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Our social world overwhelms us daily with information, from flashing billboards to endless coffee shop choices to the relentless ping of social media updates. Amid the chaos, important information often slips by unnoticed, such as not seeing the coffee shop specials due to children clamoring for cake. Other times, however, we make a deliberate choice to shut information out, like deleting an unsolicited political message without a second thought, not wanting to know the results of an important genetics test, or avoiding a conversation with a friend whose views we fear might challenge our own. This phenomenon, *willful ignorance*, reflects deliberately avoiding or disregarding information [1]. While research

from numerous disciplines has offered valuable insights regarding the motives and consequences associated with willful ignorance [2], an important aspect that has been neglected is how people's *attitudes* (i.e., opinions) can impact their engagement in willfully ignorant behavior. This lacuna is glaring because willful ignorance is a behavior [2,3], and attitudes are a strong predictor of behavior [4]. Addressing this gap, we discuss how a core property of an attitude, namely, its *strength*, can impact the extent to which thinking about the attitude may elicit willfully ignorant behavior.

We start by defining attitudes and attitude strength, and consider how attitude strength can be implicated in willfully ignorant behavior. Second, we present research demonstrating how attitude strength can influence different instantiations of willful ignorance, such as selective exposure [5], motivated cognition and forgetting, and visual attention/inattention [6,7]. We suggest that, in many circumstances, willfully ignorant behavior is more likely to occur when an attitude is strong rather than weak. After discussing strands of evidence, we note that these processes are increasingly important in the context of contemporary social and alternative media landscapes, with individuals often avoiding platforms and outlets that promote views contrary to their own [8]. Finally, we address the interplay between attitude strength and willful ignorance regarding other societal challenges, such as misinformation.

## Attitudes and attitude strength

Attitudes refer to our overall evaluations of people, groups, and other objects in our social world. Attitudes are important because they impact how we perceive the world and how we behave [9,10]. Attitudes can vary on two core dimensions. First, attitudes differ in *valence*; some of our attitudes are positive, some are negative, and others are ambivalent (containing many positive and negative elements). Second, attitudes differ in *strength*. For example, imagine that Bryant and Jordan both oppose animal testing. Bryant finds it unpleasant and avoids products tested on animals when possible. Conversely, Jordan views animal testing as a profound moral violation, has extensively researched the issue, and actively protests against it. Although their attitudes share the same valence, Jordan's attitude is stronger. Strong attitudes are more stable over time, significantly impact information processing and behavior, and are less

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amenable to change after a persuasive appeal [11,12]. Strong attitudes are particularly likely to be perceived as self-defining [13] and morally-based [14,15]. Attitude strength has been conceptualized in many ways, including accessibility, stability, certainty, extremity, and knowledge. While these indicators of attitude strength share many features, they are not redundant and often have unique antecedents and consequences [16].

### Can attitude strength affect willful ignorance?

To explain why attitude strength should increase willful ignorance, we rely on two complementary perspectives. The motivated-cognition framework [17] shows how prior attitudes bias information processing through both external information search and internal sampling from memory, leading people to avoid or discount counter-attitudinal inputs. The moral wiggle room specification [18] highlights situational affordances such as reduced transparency, ambiguity, or uncertainty that provide justifications for such avoidance. We argue that attitude strength determines the extent to which people exploit informational wiggle room. Specifically, if attitudes are strong, then individuals are especially motivated to sidestep or downplay incongruent evidence when a situation affords justification. In this way, motivated cognition provides the process, moral wiggle room provides the situational affordance, and attitude strength supplies the personal driver for willful ignorance.

Moreover, given that attitudes, particularly strong attitudes, guide behavior, one might expect them to influence the onset of willfully ignorant behavior. One mechanism through which this can occur is cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory [19] provides a classic lens to understand why people with strong attitudes might actively engage in willful ignorance, essentially, to evade the mental discomfort that arises from encountering attitude-inconsistent information. Dissonance is the unpleasant state that arises when one becomes aware of inconsistencies between one's attitudes and new evidence or between one's attitudes and behaviors. People are motivated to reduce or avoid this discomfort. The stronger and more central the attitude, the more aversive dissonance can feel when the attitude is challenged, because it strikes at the core of the person's self-concept or worldview.

One powerful dissonance-reduction behavior reflecting willful ignorance is *selective exposure*, which involves steering clear of information likely to contradict one's attitude and preferring to be exposed to congenial, attitude-supportive content [20–22]. By doing so, individuals can maintain cognitive consonance and protect their strong attitudes from threats. A meta-analysis on selective exposure found a tendency for individuals to choose attitude-consistent over attitude-discrepant information. This bias was linked to defense motivation

and was strongest when people's existing attitudes were important, value-relevant, or held with certainty [5]. Thus, the very features that define attitude strength (e.g., importance, certainty, etc.) can heighten dissonance arousal and, in turn, strengthen the motivation to engage in willful ignorance. For example, a person with a strong attitude may experience a clash, such as firmly believing that "climate change is a hoax" whilst encountering undeniable scientific evidence that it is real, threatening their sense of stability or correctness. Because strong attitudes are more resistant to change, the easier way to resolve this conflict is often not adjusting the attitude itself, but to discredit, dismiss, or simply avoid conflicting information altogether. Willful ignorance thus becomes a convenient escape hatch from the discomfort of cognitive dissonance. A partisan individual, for instance, might turn off a news channel broadcasting an opposing political perspective to evade the dissonance of hearing arguments that undermine their favored candidate.

By avoiding counter-attitudinal information, people sidestep the discomfort that the information would have provoked. This aligns with myriad findings across domains. For example, in health behavior, people often revert to habitual actions even after being persuaded to change their attitudes [23] or after being socially influenced to adopt healthier eating habits [24]. In consumer decisions, after making a choice between two products people often avoid or downplay negative reviews of the option they chose [25]. In all such cases, *strong initial commitments* drive the avoidance. Importantly, cognitive dissonance theory can explain willful ignorance as well as its limits. Dissonance-based avoidance tends to occur when the dissonant information is sufficiently threatening and when individuals perceive that ignoring it is feasible. Extremely blatant or unavoidable conflicts might force engagement (or else require other dissonance-reduction tactics like counter-arguing or trivialization). Nevertheless, in today's information-rich environment, it is often remarkably easy for someone to curate their exposure and thus avoid many dissonance-inducing inputs. Strong attitudes motivate us to do so, and technology (like selective news feeds or like-minded social networks) provides the means.

Selective exposure provides one clear example where having a strong attitude can increase engagement in willful ignorance. However, in many instances, deliberately avoiding information might not be possible. Nonetheless, individuals may interpret or encode information in a way that limits self-threat. Based on the premise that people are often motivated reasoners, wanting to see the world through a self-maintaining or self-enhancing lens [26], they often interpret information in a way that aligns with a strong attitude, as well as being motivated to forget certain types of information. As with selective exposure, the strength of an

individual's attitude is likely to be implicated in willfully motivated cognition and forgetting [27]. For example, after reading a news article suggesting that their preferred political candidate had engaged in unethical behavior, James, who holds a strong, favorable attitude toward the candidate, dismisses the report as biased and later struggles to recall its details, while easily remembering favorable coverage encountered at the same time.

Thus far, we have highlighted how attitude strength can motivate individuals to ignore particular types of information. At the same time, the strength of an attitude can impact more fundamental instantiations of willful ignorance, such as the *visual processing* of information presented for a brief period. In one noteworthy study [7], researchers found that an individual's visual attention was drawn toward stimuli for which they possessed strong attitudes. When briefly exposed to images of a set of attitude objects, participants were more likely to report seeing objects for which they had highly accessible attitudes compared to objects for which they had less accessible attitudes. This effect occurred even when participants were not directed to pay attention to the stimuli. These data implicate the importance of attitude strength in guiding visual search strategies, with particular stimuli being more likely to be attended to simply because of their strong object-evaluation link.

Relevant to this work, other research has focused on *visual inattention*, examining people's use of deliberate visual search strategies designed to suppress unwanted information. For example, using eye-tracking alongside a visual search paradigm, researchers found that people can deliberately engage in strategies that lead them to suppress attention to unwanted information [6]. While these studies used neutral stimuli such as geometric shapes that participants were instructed to seek out or ignore, the paradigm could be applied to contexts where individuals are shown images of attitude objects for which they have strong or weak positive or negative attitudes. One might expect individuals' gaze patterns to avoid stimuli for which they have strong negative attitudes while attending to stimuli for which they have strong positive attitudes. Such processes should also generalize to gaze patterns when presented with attitude-relevant information that refutes (or supports) a strongly held opinion.

### Contemporary applications and future questions

Understanding the role of attitude strength in willful ignorance has significant implications for addressing contemporary social challenges, including political polarization, misinformation, and intergroup conflict. For example, attitude-induced motivated avoidance of climate change data, health guidelines, or social justice discourse can perpetuate bias, reduce altruistic behavior,

and hinder collective action. These effects are increasingly relevant given the prevalence of social and alternative media, with individuals often avoiding sources that promote views contrary to their own, contributing to greater ideological polarization [8]. By identifying the cognitive and motivational drivers of this behavior, we can better design interventions to promote openness and mitigate the negative consequences of willful ignorance [28,29]. Promoting openness to perspectives opposing strongly held attitudes is particularly important in light of evidence showing that when attitudes have a strong moral basis, two-sided messages enhance open-mindedness relative to one-sided counter-attitudinal messages [30].

Another important consideration is to further assess how attitude strength impacts people's responses to misinformation. Often, individuals are exposed to misleading or false information and accept such misinformation without questioning or checking its evidence. Regarding the role of attitude strength in these processes, research has found that individuals with more extreme (i.e., stronger) attitudes are less responsive to fact-checking and accuracy nudges than individuals with weaker opinions, deliberately ignoring questions about the truthfulness of attitude-consistent information [31]. In addition to showing these attitude strength-related effects on behavior, these authors reported neuroimaging evidence showing that individuals with highly entrenched views deactivated neural networks associated with deliberation during decisions that were relevant to their core values.

Future research should explore how people respond to emerging communication formats, particularly interactions with artificial intelligence (AI) agents. A recent study examined whether large language models (LLMs) could reduce belief in conspiracy theories, views often held with strong conviction. After dialogue with GPT-4 Turbo, participants' belief strength dropped by ~20 %, with effects persisting for two months and generalizing to related beliefs. Notably, this reduction occurred regardless of whether initial beliefs were strong or weak, suggesting that people may be less inclined to willfully ignore counter-attitudinal information when it comes from an AI source [32]. Consistent with this perspective, research has demonstrated that, when prompted, AI sources can offer high-quality listening that is judged as better than typical human communication [33].

Willful ignorance underpinned by strong attitudes also has implications for intergroup conflict. In polarized societies, people often hold rigid and identity-defining attitudes toward outgroup members, which intensifies the motivation to avoid disconfirming or humanizing information about the outgroup. For example, someone with a strong negative attitude toward an ethnic or

political group may ignore narratives that highlight common values or cooperative success stories. This avoidance perpetuates stereotypes, reduces empathy, and sustains social division. Exposure to counter-attitudinal information about outgroups, especially when framed to evoke perspective-taking, can reduce intergroup hostility [34]. However, the efficacy of such interventions is significantly lower among those with highly entrenched attitudes, as these individuals are more likely to dismiss or ignore such information to preserve their worldview [35]. Thus, attitude strength not only predicts whether people will avoid reconciliatory content but also might moderate their openness to intergroup dialogue [36].

One important question that cuts across these applications concerns the conditions under which attitude strength might be more or less likely to elicit willful ignorance. As mentioned earlier, there are various indicators of attitude strength, many of which can be assessed via both *objective* and *subjective* measures. For example, Petty and colleagues [16] noted that attitude accessibility can be assessed by a response time measure (objective) and by asking someone how quickly their attitude comes to mind (subjective). This distinction might contribute to understanding when attitude strength is most likely to elicit willfully ignorant behavior. It could be the case that directly thinking about the strength of one's attitude enhances willful ignorance, to the extent that these meta-cognitive processes might be especially likely to render salient the motivation to avoid attitude-inconsistent information. Of course, this line of reasoning is speculative and is an interesting avenue for future research.

In sum, integrating attitude strength into the study of willful ignorance offers new insights into how people manage dissonant information. Strong attitudes can amplify avoidance, bias information processing, and reduce receptivity to correction. This framework links individual-level cognition with broader societal trends like polarization and misinformation. Future research should further examine how attitude strength shapes responses to new information sources and help design interventions that reduce willful ignorance without threatening core beliefs. These efforts are essential for promoting more reflective and responsible information engagement.

### Credit author statement

**Prof. Guy Itzchakov:** Conceptualization, Writing, review, revision, and editing.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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\*\* of outstanding interest

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## Further information on references of particular interest

6. A novel eye-tracking and visual search study, advancing understanding of how resource constraints (e.g., cognitive load) bias attention allocation. Though using neutral stimuli, its methodological paradigm opens doors for exploring visual attention in attitude-relevant contexts of willful ignorance.
16. This recent synthesis by leading scholars in the attitude literature revisits and updates the construct of attitude strength, highlighting novel theoretical distinctions and emerging empirical findings. Its comprehensive scope and fresh conceptual clarifications make it foundational for extending attitude strength into applied domains like willful ignorance.
31. This paper integrates behavioral and neuroimaging evidence to show that individuals with extreme attitudes deactivate deliberative neural systems when encountering dissonant information, providing robust neurocognitive support for the attitude strength-willful ignorance link.
32. This landmark study demonstrates the potential of AI-facilitated dialogue (e.g., with GPT-4 Turbo) to reduce entrenched conspiracy beliefs across time and content domains. The sustained effect (over 2 months) and cross-belief generalization underscore its major theoretical and practical implications for combating willful ignorance in digital contexts.