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Review

Blissful ignorance: A motivated cognition perspective on information avoidance

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Extant models of willful ignorance—defined as the intentional choice not to seek or use information—typically invoke varying sets of underlying motives. In contrast, we treat willful ignorance as a case of epistemic behavior explained by a broader model of belief formation: Lay Epistemic Theory (Kruglanski, 2004). Drawing from that model, we argue that information avoidance stems from two overarching epistemic motivations: the need for specific certainty (a directional motive) and the need for non-specific certainty (a non-directional motive). Under particular conditions, these motivations may lead individuals to avoid or suppress information. This approach offers conceptual clarity by embedding information avoidance within belief formation processes and provides a unified framework that generates novel insights and testable hypotheses.

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While much of the research on epistemic behavior focuses on how people seek information and form beliefs, there is growing interest in situations where individuals actively avoid learning new information. Examples of willful information avoidance include choosing not to read a weekly ad flyer delivered by a local grocery store, turning off media aligned with opposing political candidates, or avoiding a review of a movie one has not yet seen. Although these behaviors may seem unrelated at first glance, we propose that just two motivational mechanisms can explain the diversity of behaviors that fall under the umbrella of willful ignorance. In the next section, we describe Lay Epistemic Theory [1–4], a general model of epistemic behavior guiding our analysis, and we discuss the extension of the model for understanding the phenomenon of information avoidance (see Figure 1).

Willful ignorance as a motivated epistemic behavior

Extant theoretical models of willful ignorance typically focus on explaining it with varying numbers of underlying motivational mechanisms [5–10], ranging from two [7] to six types of motives [8]. In contrast to these approaches that take willful ignorance as a starting point, we treat willful ignorance as an epistemic behavior that can be explained by a more general model of belief formation—Lay Epistemic Theory [1–4].

Various models of belief formation, including Lay Epistemic Theory, assume that people form new beliefs by updating their prior beliefs with new evidence [11,12]. The degree of belief updating is a function of the strength of prior beliefs and the credibility of new evidence. In short, people are generally less likely to change strong beliefs, but they are more likely to do so under credible (i.e., diagnostic) evidence. In Lay Epistemic Theory, beliefs are characterized by two key dimensions: value (the desirability of the state represented by the belief) and expectancy (the perceived likelihood that the state is true). Even before receiving new information, people may anticipate how it might affect both the value and certainty of their existing beliefs. For example, they may anticipate that the new information will be either positive or negative, and that it could either strengthen or weaken the certainty of their beliefs. Even in the absence of expectations about a particular piece of information, people hold general expectations shaped by their broader outlook—for instance, by a generally optimistic or pessimistic worldview [13].

The crucial insight of Lay Epistemic Theory is that whether individuals seek out or avoid information is driven by one or both of two distinct epistemic motivations: the need for specific certainty (closure), a directional motive, and the need for non-specific certainty, a non-directional motive. The strength of these motivations determines their relative impact on epistemic behavior [2]. We describe them in the next sections.

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Directional motivation

The first type of motivation—*the need for specific certainty*—refers to the desire to form or maintain a specific belief because of the desirable outcome it refers to (e.g., that one's preferred political candidate is a moral rather than an immoral person). Here, the content of the belief is crucial, as individuals have a clear preference for one conclusion over its opposite. When this motivation is salient, people may avoid new information if they suspect it would weaken their confidence in their preferred conclusion or strengthen an undesirable one [14,15]. For instance, people might avoid engaging with evidence about climate change or the long-term costs of a favored policy to preserve a sense of security or ideological commitment. In short, individuals avoid information because they suspect it might push them toward an undesired belief or action. Under this motivation, they may also avoid attending to information that would not necessarily change their beliefs but simply remind them of the undesirable belief that they already have but prefer not to think about [16].

This form of willful ignorance is among the most frequently studied, encompassing the avoidance of bad financial news [17,18], information about health risks, information about the well-being of others when it conflicts with self-interest [19–21], and evidence of negative environmental consequences of one's (in)action [22–24], as well as numerous examples in other domains [25–28]. In all these cases, avoidance is tied to the anticipated *valence* of the belief should one decide to obtain (rather than avoid) information. This type of information avoidance has been documented among children as young as 5 to 6-years old [29].

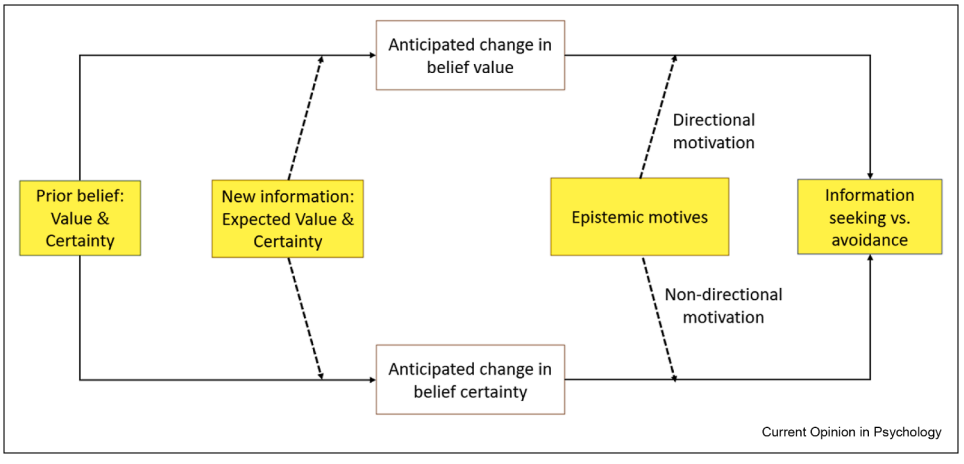
Non-directional motivation

The second type of motivation—*the need for non-specific certainty*—reflects a desire to hold confident opinions. Here, the emphasis is on certainty of beliefs rather than their specific content. It does not matter whether the new evidence is positive or negative, but whether it decreases or increases certainty with which a belief is held. When people value certainty and accuracy of their beliefs, they may avoid new information if it has the potential to introduce doubt or bias. This can manifest in decisions to disengage from unreliable sources [30,31] or to avoid arguments that contradict firmly held opinions.

Importantly, in some situations, information avoidance might be fueled by the opposite need—the desire to avoid certainty and experience surprise. Under this type of motivation, people may avoid information precisely because it would bring them closure. For example, some people avoid spoilers [32], prefer mysterious over non-mysterious products even when they have the same expected value [33], seek unpredictable experiences and prefer ambiguous art over realistic depictions [34]. While there is an ongoing debate about whether such behaviors are driven by the ultimate pleasure of resolving uncertainty, an alternative explanation is that at least sometimes they reflect psychological benefits associated with remaining in a state of uncertainty. For instance, not knowing how a magic trick works preserves the wonder of the performance and not having a single interpretation of a piece of art enables ongoing aesthetic pleasure through reinterpretation [35].

In short, under non-directional motivation people may avoid information when they expect that their preference for certainty would be frustrated by doubt-inducing news, or when their preference for ambiguity would be disrupted by receiving a definitive resolution. Whether it is one or the other end of this dimension may depend on a variety of factors such as mood [36], individual differences in the need for cognitive closure, whether there is a need for decisive action, or time pressure [2,4].

Figure 1



Model of information seeking vs. avoidance from the perspective of Lay Epistemic Theory.

Relative importance of epistemic motives

Importantly, people typically pursue a combination of directional and non-directional motives, which can sometimes be in tension. At times, strong directional goals may override the need for non-directional certainty, leading to willful ignorance to protect a cherished belief. This pattern appears across domains: smokers may avoid cancer statistics, dieters may ignore nutritional labels on tempting foods, and investors may tune out bad financial news—not because they dislike information in general, but because they seek to preserve a belief aligned with their active goal. The more a current belief supports a valued goal, the more likely a person is to avoid information that could undermine it—even at the cost of reduced confidence in one's beliefs. At other times, non-directional motives take precedence, leading people to seek out unsettling truths or to avoid even positive information when they expect it to threaten their sense of certainty. In contrast, individuals who are more comfortable with uncertainty, who have high self-efficacy in processing ambiguous information, or who enjoy mystery for its own sake may be more prone to non-directional avoidance—that is, avoiding information not because of its content, but because it would resolve ambiguity they prefer to maintain.

Importantly, within this motivational framework, information avoidance can also occur for more mundane reasons than are typically considered in this category. For instance, people may avoid information simply because it lacks personal relevance, such as when a person avoids reading an ad flyer for irrelevant products. This form of avoidance has received little attention in the literature on willful ignorance and is often dismissed [5,37] as representing inattention rather than an intentional decision. However, we argue that as long as avoidance reflects a deliberate choice, it should be included under the broader umbrella of motivated ignorance. In such cases, information ignorance may arise from the motivation to focus on other goal-relevant content or from a lack of motivation to expend effort on processing information considered irrelevant.

Model predictions

Lay Epistemic Theory not only offers a simpler alternative to the existing catalogue of motives but also opens new directions for future research grounded in the extensive body of work on epistemic goals [2,4]. In this section, we elaborate on how directional and non-directional motivations may influence the belief updating process, either promoting information seeking or leading to avoidance.

One prediction is related to *the strength of prior beliefs*. Overall, strong prior beliefs reduce the likelihood that new information will lead to belief change. One area where this factor could be studied with regard to information avoidance concerns differences between experts and novices. While this is not limited to experts, the strength of prior beliefs often reflects a well-developed, coherent knowledge system. Experts may thus avoid information not because it threatens the specific, preferred content of their beliefs, but because it is perceived as irrelevant, low in quality, or likely to introduce noise or bias [38]. In such cases, the need for non-specific certainty—the motivation to preserve a coherent and presumably correct understanding of the domain—may dominate. In support of that, some argue that critical ignoring, i.e., choosing what to ignore and learning how to resist low-quality and misleading information, is a key component of digital literacy [39]. Importantly, this form of information avoidance is not defensive but strategic. In contrast, when motivated by desire for non-directional certainty, people with lower confidence in their prior beliefs, such as novices, may be less inclined to avoid new information and be more open to engaging with it. In short, in both cases the motivation to reach non-specific certainty dominates, but the behavioral outcome differs as a function of the strength of prior beliefs.

That said, experts are not necessarily immune to directional motivations. When an expert's belief system is closely tied to their self-concept or professional identity, they may also engage in defensive information avoidance. For example, if updating their beliefs would undermine their sense of competence or other identity-relevant aspects of their expertise, they may resist new evidence—not because it lacks merit, but because accepting it could make them feel less expert in their own eyes. Empirically, manipulating source credibility could help distinguish whether experts avoid new information because they perceive it as irrelevant or because it threatens their expert identity. We expect the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to differ, with stronger resistance to credible evidence in the latter case than in the former.

Another testable prediction is related to the second crucial element of the updating process—new evidence and perception of its credibility. Specifically, expectations about *source credibility* should influence information avoidance differently depending on whether directional or non-directional motivation dominates. When avoidance is driven by the non-directional motivation to hold confident beliefs, information from a highly reliable source is less likely to be avoided. In this case, people should expect that exposure to reliable information will increase their overall sense of certainty, even if it requires adjusting their prior beliefs. In contrast, when avoidance is driven by directional motivation to maintain a preferred belief, a highly reliable source could increase avoidance when it is expected to contradict those beliefs. This is because information from a credible source

may pose a greater threat to the belief one wants to protect, making it harder to dismiss. Indeed, source trustworthiness has been shown to have a complex relation to willful ignorance [40,41]. We believe that distinguishing between directional and non-directional motives offers conceptual clarity that may explain contradictory results.

One social context where this distinction is particularly relevant concerns people's media choices, which can be influenced by perceptions of source reliability and bias. Generally, social media networks are shaped not only by following preferred accounts [42] but also by ignoring, unfollowing, or blocking accounts with opposing views. When directional motivation is strong, individuals may prioritize curated, like-minded content even if this comes at the expense of credibility. Supporting this, evidence suggests that people are much more likely to block counter-partisan than co-partisan accounts [43,44]. Notably, a field experiment on social media showed that this behavior exhibited a partisan asymmetry: Democrats were more likely to block counter-partisans than Republicans [44]. However, given that Republican accounts shared lower-quality, more politically slanted, and more toxic content than Democratic accounts, this pattern may reflect a desire to avoid low-quality information rather than opposing views per se. This suggests that information avoidance in this context may result from an interplay between directional and non-directional motives.

Likewise, recent studies have shown that exposure to information delivered through personalized chatbots can influence even strongly held beliefs—such as conspiracy theories or opinions about climate change [45,46]. Given that conversations with Large Language Models tend to produce larger and more lasting effects than traditional, less interactive interventions, people may come to view engagement with highly persuasive AI systems as risky. As a consequence, they may adopt a different form of protective behavior: avoiding such interactions altogether. In this case, people may anticipate that exposure could be too difficult to resist and might ultimately challenge beliefs they are motivated to preserve. Exploring the role of expectations people have toward the reliability and impact of new information on their beliefs could offer insights into metacognitive sources of information avoidance.

Finally, in our framework people might avoid information either because it lacks personal relevance or because it's highly relevant to a valued belief. While both cases reflect motivated avoidance, we would expect the emotional consequences to differ depending on which motivation is dominant. Avoidance driven by high relevance likely triggers stronger emotional reactions and because of that may be less likely to sustain over a long time. In contrast, avoidance due to low relevance may elicit little or no emotional response and be quickly forgotten.

Concluding remarks

When comparing our Lay Epistemic Theory-based perspective to existing categorizations of motives underlying willful ignorance, some motives clearly align with the distinction between motivations for specific versus non-specific certainty. For example, motives such as maximizing suspense and surprise [6–8] or implementing fairness [6,8] align with the drive for non-specific certainty, while avoiding negative emotions associated with anticipating a negative event [8,10] or maintaining ignorance to avoid regret [6,8] align with the drive for specific certainty. However, many motives identified in the literature could be attributed to either type of motivation, depending on the context. For instance, avoiding unwanted belief change may reflect a directional motivation if the person cares about the belief's content, but it could also indicate a non-directional motivation if it stems from a concern for the potential loss of belief certainty. Likewise, avoiding feedback on one's performance may signal directional motivation when negative feedback is expected, whereas avoiding feedback that would reveal the correct solution may reflect a non-directional motivation to preserve uncertainty for the sake of learning.

In summary, while previous research has identified a wide range of instances and motives underlying information avoidance, we propose that just two key dimensions— grounded within overarching Lay Epistemic Theory [1–4]—can explain a broad spectrum of behaviors related to both information seeking and avoidance. The relative strength of directional and non-directional motivations may influence not only the intensity of avoidance behavior but also how individuals process information, shaping both their epistemic and emotional responses. Adopting a motivational perspective offers several promising directions for future research. One such direction involves examining how effective different epistemic strategies—such as selective exposure, avoidance, prolonged search, or belief updating—are in satisfying epistemic goals. A goal-systems analysis [47,48] that would distinguish between epistemic goals and means could extend the current framework and offer deeper insight into the temporal dynamics of willful ignorance.

Finally, there are instances of limiting access to information at the societal level that share some features with individual information avoidance but also differ in important ways. These include actions such as supporting censorship (e.g., bans on books) or deliberately sowing doubt about accurate information (e.g. scientific consensus) to discourage its use [49]. While such behaviors are predominantly aimed at influencing

others rather than oneself [50], they may still be subject to the motivational analysis proposed in our framework. For instance, the action aimed at imposing collective ignorance could be driven by the motives identified in Lay Epistemic Theory: motivation to protect the group from unwanted beliefs or motivation to protect its members from inaccurate information. Integrating the desire to restrict information on a societal level with individual-level information avoidance could offer an interesting extension of this phenomenon and provide a more comprehensive analysis of why people do not access and use all available information.

Credit author statement

GC and KJ contributed equally to all aspects of the manuscript, including conceptualization, writing original draft and revising it; AK contributed to conceptualization and revising the draft.

Disclosure statement

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of generative AI use

We used ChatGPT to assist in language correction of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Declaration of competing interest

Authors of the manuscript titled "Blissful Ignorance: A Motivated Cognition Perspective on Information Avoidance" declare no conflict of interest.

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** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

5. ** This review examines the growing field of information avoidance, offering a cross-disciplinary framework, outlines its psychological and social antecedents, and calls for research on its consequences, everyday manifestations, and theoretical integration.

9. * Provides a review of willful ignorance research in the context of power and social hierarchy, bringing literature from multiple disciplines to offer a unifying framework for thinking about power of not-knowing, as opposed to the power of knowledge. Describes (sometimes complex) studies in a clear and approachable way.

23. * This study shows that combining social norm nudges with costly behavioral requests can lead to information avoidance and belief distortion. In both experimental and field settings, people avoided environmental information and justified AC use, highlighting the limits of social nudges under demanding conditions.

29. * This study examines directionally motivated information avoidance in children. Spontaneous avoidance, driven by motives such as protecting themselves from negative emotions or acting in self-interest, was observed in 7- to 10-year-olds but not in 5- to 6-year-olds. However, the younger group also avoided information when explicitly encouraged to protect their emotions.

34. ** This study demonstrates that people exhibit preference for mysterious over non-mysterious products when they have equal expected value. Consumers are attracted to these kind of products because it enhances the experience of anticipation and surprise.

40. * Authors argue that ignoring low quality information and sources—*critical ignoring*—is a key competence in digital era. They propose specific techniques aimed at counteract the impact and spread of false and misleading information.

41. ** This study shows that among COVID-19 vaccine skeptics, refusal to take the shot is partly driven by willful ignorance. Interestingly among pro-vaccine participants, information avoidance was driven by high trust in science.

45. ** Americans' politically assorted social media networks are not only shaped by homophily but also by the active avoidance of opposing views through selective blocking. Across field and survey experiments, users—especially Democrats—were significantly more likely to block counter-partisan accounts, suggesting that political assortment is reinforced by efforts to prevent exposure not only to disagreeable but also low-quality content.