

## Review

**Blind spots: The (social) factors of willful ignorance**

Katharina Reher, Martin Götz and Jörg Gross

Willful ignorance – ignoring the negative consequences one's actions may have on others – is often attributed to the desire to preserve a positive self-image while acting self-servingly. While recent research has started to emphasize the importance of social influences and norms in shaping individuals' tendencies to avoid information, a comprehensive understanding of these factors underlying the prevalence of willful ignorance remains elusive. In this review, we propose that willful ignorance is more accurately understood as a socially embedded phenomenon. We accomplish this by synthesizing emerging research on the social aspects of willful ignorance and considering the interplay between social and individual factors. Finally, we compare how this perspective can enhance our understanding of related phenomena where individuals rationalize their self-serving behaviors.

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**Introduction**

Why do individuals deliberately avoid information about the social consequences of their actions? For example, many people continue to buy fast fashion despite its social costs, such as exploitative labor conditions for garment workers and environmental waste. More broadly, many people seem unaware of or choose to overlook the externalities associated with their choices [1]. A growing body of research indicates that individuals often opt to remain uninformed, even when information is readily and freely available and directly relevant to their actions (e.g., Refs. [2–4]), a phenomenon known as 'willful ignorance'.

Ongoing studies and efforts to consolidate and organize empirical findings [5] have significantly advanced our understanding of the psychological and motivational underpinnings of willful ignorance. Notably, while many studies have focused on individuals in isolation, only recently has research begun to explore the influence of the social context on willful ignorance (e.g., Refs. [6–8]). A comprehensive understanding that incorporates and disentangles individual-level factors, such as self-image concerns, and social factors, such as social-image concerns and social norms, is still lacking. Broader research on prosocial and unethical behavior increasingly acknowledges the significance of the social context, emphasizing how interactions between social and individual behavior can create complex dynamics (e.g., Refs. [9,10]). Given that willful ignorance also manifests itself in numerous social contexts, ranging from consumer choice to political engagement, and can undermine prosocial behavior [2], it is essential to understand these dynamics.

In this review, we propose that willful ignorance, whether it pertains to the consequences of one's actions or existing norms, can be most accurately understood as a phenomenon deeply embedded in the social context. We examine the emerging literature on the 'social side' of willful ignorance, with a particular emphasis on the roles of self- and social-image concerns, the impact of social norms, and how individual decision-making and group dynamics interact in influencing willful ignorance (Figure 1). Conceptualizing willful ignorance as a social phenomenon also provides insights into related areas, such as the justification of collective selfish actions, and the persistence of collective belief misalignments, such as pluralistic ignorance (e.g., Refs. [11–13]).

**(Social) factors of willful ignorance****Self-image concerns**

Self-image concerns – the desire of viewing oneself in a positive light – were among the earliest psychological explanations of willful ignorance (e.g., Refs. [14–16]). The core idea is that when individuals choose a self-serving action that might negatively affect others, deliberately ignoring potential social consequences maintains ambiguity, thereby preserving the belief that no harm was caused. The significance of these motivations is supported by individual-level choice-experiments, where the influence of social-image concerns – the desire of being perceived positively by others – is

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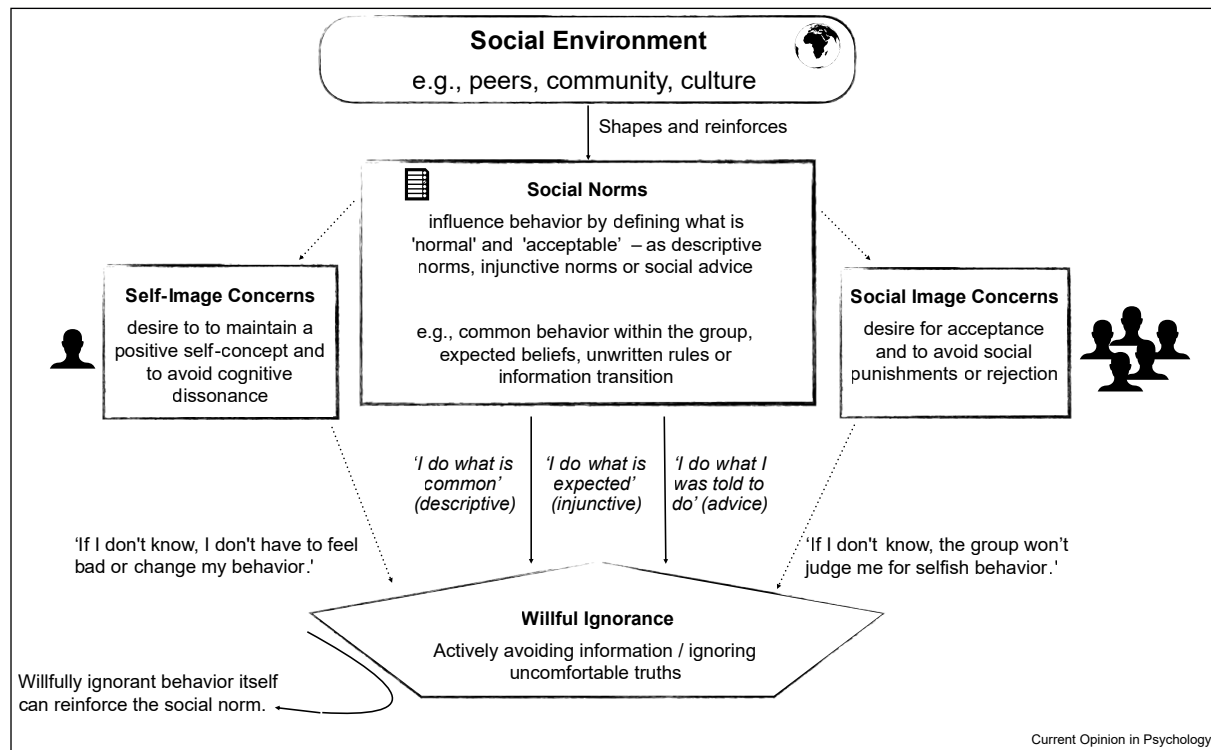
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Figure 1



A conceptual framework for understanding the social embeddedness of willful ignorance and its associated dynamics.

deliberately ruled out [5]. From this perspective, willful ignorance is driven by internal processes, such as avoidance of guilt, or reduction of cognitive dissonance (e.g., Refs. [17,18]). While the concept of self-image concerns has dominated research on information avoidance, recent research suggests that other factors, such as a minimum level of social-image concerns, must also be at play [19].

### Social-image concerns

Social-image concerns become pertinent when behavior is observable and subject to others' evaluation. Such concerns are fueled by the desire for social acceptance and the avoidance of social judgement, punishment, or rejection. Evidence from related fields suggests that people tend to behave more ethically, e.g., lie less, when they know they are being observed by others [20]. However, broader research on reputation, which forms the basis of social-image concerns, indicates that reputational benefits are not simply awarded for abstaining from selfish behavior. Instead, an individual's intentions, including the motives and processes driving their actions, are crucial [21].

On the one hand, willful ignorance, can serve as a mechanism to shield individuals from social punishment

for selfish or unethical behavior [6,22]. When individuals make a decision without knowing its social consequences beforehand, they may anticipate that others will hold them less accountable, thereby reinforcing selfishness and ignorance. On the other hand, there is evidence that willful ignorance is sometimes also socially sanctioned itself [6]. People may adhere to different norms regarding accountability, especially when information would be readily accessible, highlighting the complex dynamics of ignorance in social environments.

### Social norms

Social norms — shared informal rules or expectations about appropriate behavior — serve as a central mechanism of social influence (e.g., Refs. [23–25]). Individuals often align their behavior with their perception of others' behaviors (i.e., descriptive norms, e.g., Ref. [26]) or what is socially approved (i.e., injunctive norms, e.g., Ref. [27]).

Regarding willful ignorance, emerging research indicates that social norms related to information avoidance are both present and malleable [8,28]. When transparency is the norm, meaning that most people seek information, individuals are more inclined to do the same.

Conversely, if avoiding information is the norm, individuals are more likely to remain ignorant. Although actions or norms related to ignorance or information seeking are not always directly observable, they often manifest through everyday behavioral cues, conversational content, and public expressions. For example, when shopping in groups, choosing mainstream fashion retailers over second-hand or ethically labeled stores can reflect norms that disregard the ethical production practices of clothing. Similarly, the lack of discussions about ethical consumption or comments that trivialize production differences (e.g., ‘everything is made in the same factories, anyway’), may reinforce norms of ignorance. In contrast, conversations that highlight sustainable purchases can signal and reinforce a norm of ethical awareness. These examples demonstrate that social norms can function not only to encourage prosocial information seeking but also to legitimize self-serving ignorance.

Importantly, norms are not static; they are shaped and reinforced by observed behavior (Figure 1). Perceived norms around willful ignorance shift in response to its prevalence [8,29]. Consequently, individual actions contribute to a collective understanding of normative behavior, reinforcing or redefining norms over time. It is also important to note that people may not only ignore information about the social consequences of their actions to avoid social punishment, but might also choose to remain ignorant of normative information itself in order to avoid normative pressure in the first place (for example, by not asking others for their opinions or by avoiding certain conversation topics).

#### Active information sharing and strategic withholding

Beyond merely observing, individuals actively share information with others, thereby influencing their awareness, perceptions, and behaviors. Research on advice in moral dilemmas suggests that receiving moral advice encourages fair behavior, whereas selfish advice promotes selfishness [30].

Notably, third-party information sharing can disrupt willful ignorance. When inconvenient truths are shared, individuals can no longer credibly claim ignorance, often leading to more prosocial outcomes [31]. For instance, peers can alert each other to the negative social or environmental consequences of buying unethically produced clothing. While sharing information is generally considered socially appropriate and some individuals — particularly those with prosocial tendencies — actively engage in it [8], not everyone is equally inclined to do so. Several personal preferences, such as the support for the social cause, influence the decision to share information [32].

Importantly, the ability to share information can shift the responsibility to seek it. If I know somebody else can inform me about such consequences, I might shift the responsibility to seek information about, for example, the production conditions of fast fashion onto someone else, creating a second-order responsibility dilemma. When only a minority act as information providers while others reduce their information-seeking efforts, the possibility of information sharing can decrease awareness and prosocial behavior [8]. In competitive or market-like contexts, senders may even cater to what they believe receivers prefer, passing on irrelevant information rather than inconvenient facts [7]. This aligns with findings that senders receive fewer rewards when they deliver negative information [31].

#### Type dependencies

Recent research offers a crucial insight: While the behaviors and expectations of others influence individual behavior, not everyone responds to social norms and information in the same way. For instance, people differ in their willingness to engage with normative information. Studies on dishonesty suggest that some individuals actively seek out descriptive norms, particularly when such information is readily available [33], while others may prefer to avoid normative cues. In dictator-game studies, participants informed about generous prior donations of other participants often opted out of the game rather than following suit [34,35]. Similarly, people frequently select feedback that aligns with their intentions, thereby avoiding information that could harm their self-image [36].

Interestingly, individuals with lower social preferences are more strongly influenced by moral advice, whether fair or selfish, than those with stronger pro-social tendencies [30]. Similar patterns are observed regarding willful ignorance. Selfish individuals are more susceptible to pro-normative pressures, whereas prosocial individuals tend to act consistently with their internal values [8]. Expectations also play a role: Pessimistic individuals, who anticipate widespread ignorance, are more strongly influenced by norms promoting transparency than optimists, who exhibit lower levels of behavioral change [28]. Furthermore, in a study where dictators could seek information on their alignment with recipients on polarizing issues, those anticipating smaller opinion gaps were more likely to avoid information that could make their decision more polarizing [37]. Even when given the option to learn about descriptive norms, people differ: In one study, only about half of the participants chose to see the norm before making a charitable donation [38].

Crucially, information avoidance is not limited to self-serving purposes; it can also be driven by prosocial motivations [39]. Some individuals deliberately avoid information that might tempt them to act selfishly, effectively using ignorance as a commitment device to prosocial behavior [40]. A study examining individuals' political beliefs found that people across the ideological spectrum engage in selective avoidance, either to protect their ego self-servingly or to remain consistent with their pro-social values [41]. This indicates that willful ignorance can originate from both selfish and principled motives.

### Conclusion – towards a (socially) embedded construct

Willful ignorance is influenced by factors at various levels, including concerns about self-image, social image, and normative pressures [6,15,28]. However, none of these aspects alone can fully explain it. While early research emphasized self-image concerns, it is important to consider the broader social contexts in which decisions are made.

Recent research has shown that mechanisms, such as observability, and adherence to social norms, can influence willful ignorance [8,22]. However, empirical findings on this influence are mixed. For instance, it remains unclear to what extent being observed by others affects ignorance [42], how individuals choose information sources, and the specific role social norms play [27]. Additionally, it is still uncertain how image concerns affect the communication of inconvenient information and who chooses to communicate it [43]. An intriguing hypothesis is that in groups with strong norms to act pro-socially, individuals might show increased willful ignorance as a strategy to reduce accountability. This aligns with research indicating that concerns about reputation can also hinder information gathering [44].

Emerging evidence further suggests that individual differences, such as sensitivity to norms, principled value orientation, and social image concerns, influence how willful ignorance manifests within groups [45]. Notably, individuals driven primarily by self-image may show limited responsiveness to normative cues, necessitating the introduction of other factors, such as monetary incentives, to effect behavioral changes [46]. Interventions must account for individual variability and the subtle influence of social norms to prevent unintended consequences or backlash [47,48].

Beyond willful ignorance, adopting a socially embedded perspective can significantly enhance research in related fields. Phenomena, such as motivated reasoning, strategic confusion, and motivated misremembering, demonstrate how individuals maintain a positive self-image while engaging in self-serving behavior [49–51].

Although these behaviors differ from willful ignorance in that they do not involve the outright avoidance of information, they share similar dynamics. Consequently, these areas could also benefit from considering social embeddedness, particularly when observability and social cues influence decision-making, thereby making selfish actions more costly.

Pluralistic ignorance – the systematic misperception of others' beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Refs. [52–54]) – can also be understood through the framework of socially embedded willful ignorance. Existing models struggle to account for its persistence or the ineffectiveness of certain interventions [53]. For instance, individuals might refrain from adopting environmentally friendly behaviors because they (mistakenly) believe others are not doing so [12]. However, these misperceptions may persist because they help individuals maintain a positive self-image, suggesting that pluralistic ignorance endures due to a willful avoidance of information about others' true attitudes.

Further research is necessary to better understand both individual-level and social influence factors. For instance, procedural variables, such as the framing or timing of information, also shape decisions to remain ignorant [55], and the impact of image concerns on driving information avoidance is not always as pronounced as often suggested [56]. Additionally, it is important to investigate how specific social contexts affect willful ignorance. Drawing on insights from related fields, we know that reference group dynamics are important: Individuals tend to conform more closely to the norms of ingroups than those of outgroups (e.g., Ref. [57]), while willful ignorance may, in fact, harm ingroups more than outgroups [58].

Conceptualizing willful ignorance through a socially embedded lens allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay among psychological, social, and normative forces, potentially revealing how they mutually reinforce one another. This aligns with research on organizational ignorance, which highlights the interplay of individual motives, organizational norms, and institutional pressures as interdependent forces [59,60]. Within a group, widespread ignorance can bolster norms that discourage knowledge-seeking, whereas norms that promote transparency might encourage it. By moving beyond isolated psychological explanations, this perspective underscores the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between individuals and their environments in either sustaining or challenging ignorance. Adopting a socially embedded perspective on when and why people avoid learning about the negative social impact of their decisions can help design effective, type-dependent interventions to address societal challenges.

## Credit author statement

**Katharina Reher:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration.

**Martin Götz:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Supervision.

**Jörg Gross:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Supervision, Fund-ing acquisition.

## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT-4 to improve readability of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

## Declaration of competing interest

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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References of particular interest have been highlighted as:

- \* of special interest
- \*\* of outstanding interest

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## Further information on references of particular interest

5. This meta-analysis synthesizes research on the psychological and motivational factors driving wilful ignorance in isolated contexts, thereby enhancing our understanding of this phenomenon from an individual-level perspective.
7. This study highlights the assortative matching between those who send and receive information. While some individuals choose to remain ignorant, senders might strategically offer distractions instead of inconvenient truths. In dyadic markets, individuals can thus partially self-select into either remaining ignorant or seeking informative senders, thereby reinforcing their personal preferences for prosocial behavior or selfish actions.
8. This study illustrates that social norms related to information avoidance are both widespread and malleable. Individuals tend to avoid information more readily when they observe others doing so. Furthermore, actions are evaluated based on their commonality, indicating that behavior is influenced by and, in turn,

reinforces social norms of information avoidance. The study also reveals that third-party informers can encourage prosocial behavior by sharing information, although this might result in individuals shifting the responsibility of seeking information onto these informers.

19. \* This work presents a comprehensive specification of the theory of moral wiggle room, which serves as the underlying mechanism enabling individuals to justify self-serving behavior. By elucidating the theoretical foundations, the authors assist in disentangling previously conflated findings across related studies.
28. \*\* This study reveals that norms encouraging transparency drive individuals, particularly those with a pessimistic outlook, to seek more information. The findings highlight the significant impact of norms on behavior, demonstrating that even simple belief elicitation can lead to increased information acquisition.
30. \* Advice from third parties in moral dilemmas significantly influences behavior: Moral advice promotes fairness, while selfish advice encourages self-interest. Individuals with lower social preferences are particularly susceptible. The study highlights the powerful role of third-party information in shaping ethical decisions.
31. \* When third parties alert individuals to the potential negative consequences of their actions, it often results in behavioral changes, underscoring the prosocial influence of these informers. However, individuals who are unwillingly informed and receive negative information are less inclined to reward the informer.
32. \*\* Third-party informers are more inclined to share information when individuals encounter moral dilemmas with potentially harmful externalities. These informers rely on their own prosocial preferences to determine whether to intervene, suggesting that effective information transmission depends on the presence of prosocial informers.
40. \* This study demonstrates that information avoidance is not merely a tool for justifying self-serving behavior; individuals also steer clear of information that might entice them into selfish actions. These findings highlight the nuanced and potentially beneficial aspects of information avoidance.
56. \* This research indicates that self-image concerns may have a lesser impact on information avoidance than previously thought, highlighting the need to explore other factors that influence this behavior.