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Original Research

Can fictional stories beat the congeniality bias? Selective exposure to fiction and non-fiction

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Abstract

People prefer attitude-consistent information over attitude-inconsistent information (congeniality bias). Connecting theory on the processing of stories to selective exposure theory, we assumed that the congeniality bias is reduced or even nullified when it comes to fictional messages. Across two experiments examining two different, polarizing topics (refugees, $N_1 = 1{,}326$; theistic faith, $N_2 = 1{,}316$) a highly consistent pattern of results could be observed: Participants were more willing to read a narrative message (exposure preference) in which the story events were in line with their attitudes rather than a message contrasting attitudes. This congeniality bias was unaffected by the fictionality of the information (i.e., whether the events were introduced as a fictional short story or a non-fictional journalistic reportage). Interestingly, the congeniality bias emerged for positive characterizations of refugees or theistic faith but not for negative characterizations. Implications regarding the role of fictionality and congeniality in selective exposure are discussed.

Keywords: congeniality bias, narratives, confirmation bias, fiction, selective exposure

Public significance statement

People are more likely to prefer stories that align with their existing attitudes, particularly when the stories convey a positive message. This preference emerged for both non-fictional journalistic reportages and fictional short stories, indicating that attitude-consistent processing shapes exposure to media—even when the story world is fictional.

Social and political polarization and a lack of social understanding are troubling aspects of our times. One of the causes underlying a lack of social understanding is the selective exposure to belief-consistent information (Festinger, 1957; *congeniality bias*, Hart et al., 2009) which may foster misconceptions and stereotypes about outgroup members. Much of the information we encounter about other people and daily issues is presented in the form of stories or narratives. As stories often describe the social world in great detail and give insights into others' motivations, they could be an effective tool to enhance social understanding (e.g., Mar, 2018a, 2018b; Oatley, 2016). Our focus is on selective exposure to stories with an emphasis on the role of fictionality. Given that people are aware of the difference in epistemic status for fictional vs. non-fictional messages (Appel & Maleckar, 2012) and that fictionality may contribute to aesthetic distancing processes (Menninghaus et al., 2017), we posit that motivated avoidance should be reduced for stories introduced as fictional. In other words, we assume that knowing that information is fictional might reduce defensive processes that would otherwise prevent recipients from seeking out a story that contrasts with their beliefs. In this project, we examined if participants were more willing to read counter-attitudinal stories when these were described as fictional (rather than non-fictional). Doing so, we conducted two experiments with different topics building on the three-way interaction between story message (pro vs anti-attitude object), participants' attitude, and fictionality. Whereas Experiment 1 included stories about refugees, Experiment 2 followed the same theoretical framework but examined stories about theistic faith instead.

Selective exposure to attitude-congruent information

According to Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Frey, 1986) individuals' media choices depend on the interplay of previously held attitudes and beliefs on the one hand and the stance of the message regarding the attitude object on the other: Individuals prefer messages that are consistent with their attitudes over messages that are inconsistent with their attitudes (*congeniality bias*, Hart et al., 2009). Such preferences reduce the aversive state of dissonance that occurs when incoming information is inconsistent with the attitudes and beliefs a person holds.

The congeniality bias (i.e., the preference for attitude-congruent messages over attitude-incongruent messages) connects the concepts of selective exposure and confirmation bias. Theory and research on selective exposure are focused on the phenomenon that individuals prefer some media stimuli over others and choose media stimuli accordingly (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). The assessment of preference

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and choice ranges from observations of actual behavior to behavioral intentions and self-reported preferences. Our empirical focus is on self-reported exposure preferences (i.e., the extent to which participants would like to read a given story; see also Metzger et al., 2020; Wölker & Powell, 2021).

The concept of the congeniality bias is narrower than that of selective exposure, because preference and choice may be motivated by a range of factors, not only by reducing the likelihood of aversive dissonance. Individuals may, for example, prefer media products for the sake of mood management, a classic field of theory and research on selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Mood management regularly occurs in situations in which cognitive dissonance does not play a major role in motivating behavioral tendencies. In a classic study, Bryant and Zillmann (1984), for example, made participants perform monotonous tasks (inducing boredom) or work on a GRE/Sat type exam (inducing stress). As expected, participants sought to alleviate their mood by choosing TV programs that increased (when bored) or decreased (when stressed) their arousal to reach a moderate and pleasant arousal level: Participants in the boredom condition preferred exciting TV programs over relaxing TV programs, whereas participants in a stressful state did not show such a preference (for an integrating model, see Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015).

The concept of the congeniality bias is further a subcomponent of the confirmation bias in human information processing (e.g., Oeberst & Imhoff, 2023). The concept of confirmation bias is larger than that of the congeniality bias, as the former goes beyond preference and choice and captures the processing of stimuli as well (e.g., motivated skepticism as a particularly critical processing of belief-inconsistent information, Taber & Lodge, 2006; belief perseverance despite contrary evidence, Jelalian & Miller, 1984; text-belief consistency effects as a result of regular comprehension processes, Richter & Maier, 2017; Richter & Tiffin-Richards, 2024). The congeniality bias and the confirmation bias more generally have attracted large attention by scholars and the general public in recent years (e.g., Hoffman, 2023; Klajman, 2023; Oeberst & Imhoff, 2023). This interest is fueled by the observation of increasing societal polarization in some countries (see Boxell et al., 2024; Jost et al., 2022) against the background of internet news and social media that have increased the quantity and variance of information on a given topic (e.g., Cappella et al., 2015; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

Empirical research is largely in line with the assumptions derived from cognitive dissonance theory. Whereas some studies on selective exposure effects yielded inconsistent or mixed results in earlier decades (leading Freedman and Sears, 1965, to summarize that "experimental evidence does not demonstrate that there is a general psychological tendency to avoid nonsupportive [...] information," p. 69), studies in more recent years have led to a consensus that recipients prefer attitude-consistent messages over attitude-inconsistent messages (Hart et al., 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). Little information on the attitude-relevant content itself is required to elicit expectations that lead to this congeniality bias. In a seminal study by Iyengar and Hahn (2009), Republicans and Democrats selected news items simply based on whether the ascribed TV channel source (e.g., Fox News vs. NPR or CNN) was in line with their own political leaning (a tendency that was observed for political and non-political topics).

The congeniality bias appears to be a reliable phenomenon (Hart et al., 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009), and existing research further identified factors that increase or reduce this effect. For the present research, it is particularly relevant that the expected quality of a message was found to influence the congeniality bias. Early research showed that people are more likely to select attitude-inconsistent information when the information was viewed as easy to refute (novice sources as compared to expert sources, Lowin, 1969). Whereas choosing high-quality information that contradicts one's beliefs can pose a threat, selecting low-quality contradictory information does not. Therefore, the stronger the expected quality of opposing information the stronger the tendency to favor congenial (over uncongenial) content. In line with these assumptions, a meta-analytic synthesis (Hart et al., 2009) showed that the congeniality bias was more pronounced when participants expected high-quality information as compared to situations in which participants expected low-quality information. In the latter case, the congeniality bias was small (when the expected information was attitude-inconsistent) or even absent (when the expected information was attitude-consistent).

The aim of the present project is to further examine the boundary conditions of the congeniality bias and related theory (Levine & Markowitz, 2024). Against the background of prior theory and research, we posit that fictional stories—a gentle giant of our mediated environments—could reduce the congeniality bias and contribute to the exposure of attitude-inconsistent messages.

Stories and social understanding

A large part of the information encountered in daily life is presented in the form of stories or narratives (we use both terms interchangeably). Stories are defined as a sequence of events that unfold over time and are causally related to one another (Abbott, 2002; Onega & Landa, 2014). Stories may be fictional, like short stories, novels, soap operas, and feature films, or non-fictional, such as journalistic reportages, online news articles, and television documentaries. There is evidence to suggest that stories have a unique power to change individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behavior (e.g., Green & Appel, 2024; Walsh et al., 2022). They grab audiences' attention, elicit strong emotions, evoke story-consistent remindings, and the events unfolding in a story have a rather low likelihood to stimulate counterarguing (Green & Appel, 2024; Green & Brock, 2000; Slater & Rouner, 2002).

Theory and research suggest that stories can play a significant role in enhancing social understanding by (a) engaging recipients in social-cognitive processes and by (b) presenting content about the social world (Mar, 2018a). This is because stories provide a detailed description of the social world, including the plans and motivations of the protagonists, which can help recipients practice social interactions in simulated story worlds and ultimately improve their social understanding (e.g., Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015; Mar, 2018a, 2018b; Mumper & Gerrig, 2017; Oatley, 2016; Wimmer et al., 2024). Closely related to theory and research on developing social cognitive skills over time through stories are the findings that reading literary stories can result in short-term increases in mentalizing abilities (e.g., Kidd & Castano, 2013; Kidd et al., 2016; but see De Mulder et al., 2017; Lenhart & Richter, 2025; Panero et al., 2016; Samur et al.,

2018; Schwerin et al., 2025). A recent *p*-curve-analysis of the empirical studies indicated that these short-term effects have evidential value (low likelihood of selective reporting) but that this positive assessment is fragile and may change with few new studies (Quinlan et al., 2023).

From novels of the 19th century (e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) to sitcoms (e.g., *Will and Grace*), theory and research have linked fictional stories to a reduction of prejudice (e.g., Harwood et al., 2013; Murrar & Brauer, 2019; Paluck et al., 2021). This relates to work on meaningful and inspiring media (Oliver et al., 2021, 2018). In this line of research, the focus is on media content that can touch, move, and inspire audiences, leading to feelings of connectedness to others and to lower prejudice (e.g., Krämer et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2015).

Setting the stage: narrativity and literariness

What are the characteristics of mediated stories like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that lead to their power to reduce prejudice and to change attitudes and behavior more generally? Recent theory on story processing and effects has emphasized the distinction between narrativity, literariness, and fictionality of stories (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Denham, 2024; Green & Appel, 2024; Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). We will briefly describe the concepts of narrativity and literariness before explicating fictionality in greater detail, as narrativity and literariness are sometimes confounded, theoretically and empirically, with fictionality. This background sets the stage for our assumptions on the potential role of fictionality in the selective exposure to congenial and uncongenial messages.

Narrativity is an umbrella term that comprises features that distinguish narratives from other types of texts, such as informational or expository texts. None of these features is necessarily found in every story, but together they contribute to the extent to which a story is considered as story-like. Beyond the basic definition of stories (Onega & Landa, 2014), stories are populated by agents who follow goals, interact with one another, and respond emotionally to the events that happen in the story world. In many stories, a conflict arises, and protagonists are hindered in attaining their goals. This conflict can either be resolved (as in stories with a happy ending) or give the sequence of events a negative turn. Thus, narratives usually contain at least one turning point (peripety or climax) that goes along with an emotional shift (Nabi & Green, 2015). A simplified notion of narrativity derived from these considerations is that the more of these content elements appear in the story and the better they are implemented on the discourse level, using the appropriate literary and linguistic devices, the higher the narrativity of a story (Fludernik, 2002).

The concept of *literariness* has a background in efforts to differentiate literature from other forms of text and reading (Jakobson, 1921; Hanauer, 2018). Theorists and empirical researchers suggested two ways to do so (Appel et al., 2021): First, stories may be linked to a renowned publishing house, or prizes won by the author, signifying a certain sophistication or quality. Second, linguistic aspects of stories are characteristic of literary texts. Work defining the forms of language that are indicative of literary texts has emphasized the use of linguistic elements that draw attention to the text, increasing salience by not conforming to everyday language, to other elements of the text, to linguistic conventions, or to world knowledge. This textual aspect of literariness (and related reader responses) is often described as foregrounding (Miall & Kuiken, 1994).

Empirical research has been criticized to conflate narrativity, literariness, and fictionality (e.g., Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Thus, to examine the role of fictionality (see below), narrativity and literariness were held constant in our empirical studies.

Fiction vs. non-fiction

Regarding the presence or absence of selective exposure to attitude-congruent information in the field of narrative communication, we hypothesize that the distinction between fictional and non-fictional stories, that is, the fictionality of the story, is of key importance. More specifically, we assume that fictionality moderates the congeniality bias. Our line of argumentation is outlined in this section.

Theory as well as empirical research suggest that it is often difficult to distinguish fiction and non-fiction based on story content or style (e.g., Eco, 1994; Lamarque & Olsen, 1994). Rather, information that accompanies the story specifies the epistemic category. Such extratextual cues are provided in the paratext of a work (Genette, 1987), that is, context information that is provided by the authors or producers of a story that is not an integral part of the story itself. Regarding the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, paratexts provide clear-cut categorizations in the form of genre labels such as *novel*, *news report*, *reportage*, or *biography*, or in the form of fiction disclaimers, stating that the story characters and events are fictitious (Schreier, 2004).

This distinction between fiction and non-fiction can be traced back to different norms that apply for authors with respect to the correspondence between the information and events depicted on the one hand and real-life events and factual information on the other. The production of non-fiction is based on a set of norms that include a truthful portrayal of events, or, as expressed in the first statement of the *Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists*, "Respect for the facts and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist" (International Federation of Journalists, 2024). In contrast, authors of fiction may invent people, incidents, or societal realities, or they may choose to portray real-life characters and events in an accurate and unbiased way, just as journalists would (Eco, 1994). As a consequence, the relationship between fictional works and real-world facts and incidents is less certain than for non-fictional works (e.g., Prentice & Gerrig, 1999).

Despite the different norms underlying the production of non-fiction and fiction and the aesthetic distancing accounts outlined above, research on the processing and effects of stories often failed to demonstrate an effect of fact vs. fiction labeling of stories. Whereas some studies found differences in the processing and effects of stories introduced to be fiction vs. non-fiction (e.g., Altmann et al., 2014; Riggs & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2024; Zwaan, 1991), other results suggest that participants got equally transported into and influenced by story worlds that are fictional or non-fictional (e.g., Chlebuch et al., 2020; Green & Brock, 2000; Strange &

Leung, 1999). A meta-analysis revealed no evidence to suggest that average belief change differs as a function of a narrative's fictionality (Braddock & Dillard, 2016).

Importantly, these results conducted in the narrative processing and effects tradition may not readily translate to story preference and choice. Prior research on narrative processing and effects has typically used experimental paradigms in which stories were allocated to participants (forced exposure), and in studies on fictionality, these stories were either introduced as fictional or as non-fictional by providing paratextual information (Green & Appel, 2024). The measurement of the dependent variables typically occurred after participants completed the story. This paradigm may obfuscate differences between fiction and non-fiction in user perceptions at the early stages of text processing, or fictionality effects on expectations that are elicited by the paratexts. Related research showed that the distinction between non-fiction and fiction is noticed by recipients at the early stages of text processing. Appel and Maleckar (2012) asked participants what they expected from a fictional story as compared to a non-fictional story (they also asked about fake/lie stories, which is irrelevant here). Non-fiction was considered to be much more useful regarding real-life issues than fiction ("The story contains information which is useful for my everyday life", repeated measures effect size $d_{AV} = 1.50$) and to be much more trustworthy ("The source is trustworthy", repeated measures effect size $d_{AV} = 1.54$).

These results indicate that fiction labels signal rather low-quality information (in terms of correspondence to real-world facts) that should be easy to refute. As a consequence, given prior research on the congeniality bias (Hart et al., 2009; Lowin, 1969) whether or not a story is in line with one's attitudes should matter less when the story is fictional (rather than non-fictional) in terms of message evaluation and media preference, that is, the congeniality bias should be reduced.

Another line of research supports the assumption that the congeniality bias could be reduced for fictional (as compared to non-fictional) stories. Fictionality could play a significant role in promoting aesthetic distancing mechanisms (Bullough, 1912; Cupchik, 2002; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Menninghaus et al., 2017; Oatley, 1999). Aesthetic distancing entails the audience's acknowledgment of a work of art as a product of culture, requiring an acceptance that the depicted reality diverges from everyday life (Cupchik, 2002). This stance allows recipients to take on a detached observer position and fiction is proposed as a means for individuals to explore emotionally intense situations and negative feelings without facing direct real-life repercussions (e.g., Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Menninghaus et al., 2017; Oatley, 1999). Menninghaus and colleagues (2017) argue that distancing mechanisms are vital elements in the reception of art (including entertainment media), facilitating the enjoyment of experiencing negative emotions. Aesthetic distancing doesn't necessarily diminish the intensity of negative emotions (Goldstein, 2009), but rather facilitates the positive reinterpretation of such emotions, thereby fostering positive affect (see Gerger et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2014, 2016, for empirical support in visual and performative art contexts). Given that attitude-inconsistent content is aversive, fictionality may facilitate coping with this negatively-valenced content and—possibly—reduce the tendency to prefer attitude-consistent content in the first place.

Study overview and predictions

As outlined above, theory and research suggest that individuals preferentially choose information that confirms their existing worldviews (selective exposure, Festinger, 1957; *congeniality bias*, Hart et al., 2009). Individuals tend to prefer messages that will reaffirm rather than challenge attitudes and beliefs. In our experiments, participants were exposed to one out of two story summaries. One summary described a story in which the unfolding events provided a positive impression of an attitude object (Experiment 1: refugees, Experiment 2: theistic faith). The other summary described a story in which the unfolding events provided a negative impression of that attitude object. Participants' prior attitudes (towards refugees or towards theistic faith) were measured and treated as a continuous variable. Exposure preference (i.e., participants' willingness to read a story) served as our dependent variable. Transferring extant theory and research on the congeniality bias to the preference for stories, we had the following expectation:

> Hypothesis 1: Participants will have a higher preference to read stories with events that are consistent with prior attitudes than stories with events that are inconsistent with prior attitudes.

Statistically, we expected an interaction between prior attitude and story content with exposure preference serving as the dependent variable (the criterion). Specifically, the association between attitudes (higher scores indicated a more favorable attitude) and exposure preference was expected to be more positive when the summarized story gave a favorable impression of the attitude object than when the summarized story gave an unfavorable impression of the attitude object.

Against the background of this general tendency, we were particularly interested in the role of fictionality. Fictional stories (as compared to non-fictional journalistic reportages) elicit expectations of low trustworthiness (Appel & Maleckar, 2012) and are associated with an aesthetic distance in which content can be processed from a more detached perspective (Menninghaus et al., 2017). Prior research outside the realm of research on stories showed that the congeniality bias was reduced or even nullified for messages expected to be of low quality (Hart et al., 2009). Connecting both research threads, we expected a smaller congeniality bias for fictional content than for non-fictional content. Thus, we had the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 2: Participants will be more inclined to prefer counter-attitudinal fiction as compared to counter-attitudinal non-fiction.

Statistically speaking, we expected that the interaction effect outlined in Hypothesis 1 should be weaker when the story was introduced as fictional as compared to non-fictional, leading to a three-way interaction between participants' attitude, story content (supportive vs. critical towards the attitude object), and fictionality (non-fictional vs.

fictional). Two pre-registered experiments were conducted to test our predictions.

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we focused on the topic of refugees, a topic that is at the center of societal and political debates in many world regions, accompanied by a polarization of attitudes towards refugees and migrants in high-income countries worldwide (e.g., Albada et al., 2021; Czymara, 2021; Willnat et al., 2023).

Method

Transparency and openness

For both experiments, we report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The data and analytical codes underlying this article are available at https://osf.io/37f2a. Experiment 1 was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/FN4_MT5).

Ethics statement

In our country, it is not required to obtain institutional ethics approval for psychological research as long as it does not concern issues regulated by law. All reported research was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were adults and provided written informed consent.

Participants

We determined the required sample size a priori following recommendations on power issues when testing statistical interactions (e.g., Giner-Sorolla, 2018). Based on our assumptions, correlations between attitude extremity and congenial exposure preference were expected to be in the range of $\rho = .10$ for fiction and $\rho = .25$ for non-fiction. To identify a difference between associations of these magnitudes, a required sample size of 1,312 participants was determined (G*Power, $q = -.155$, $\alpha = .05$, two-tailed, power = .80). We increased this number to 1,450 participants, keeping in mind possible exclusions. We aimed for an English-speaking sample using the platform Prolific.

For Experiment 1, we recruited 1,455 participants located in the United States or the United Kingdom with English as their first language. Participants were compensated with £0.80. Of our initial sample, 129 had to be excluded, resulting in 1,326 valid responses. Sensitivity analysis shows that the final sample size provided 80% power to detect an effect size of $q = -.154$ ($\alpha = .05$, two-tailed). The exclusions were due to a failed source manipulation check ($n = 89$), a failed attention check (instructional response item, $n = 15$), and a low response time (less than 120 seconds, $n = 25$). We did not have to exclude any participants based on the pre-registered criteria of bot-indicative responses in an open answer feedback box or incomplete data sets. The participants (53.5% female, 41.8% male, 4.8% other[1]) were between 18 and 86 years old ($M = 42.41$, $SD = 13.87$) with the majority of them identifying their ethnic background as white (89.4%, South Asian: 2.9%, Black: 3.5%, Chinese: 1.3%, mixed or others: 2.9%).

Stimuli

Story summaries

We presented one of two story summaries. Both stories had the same title and author (*Unseen Journeys of Migration* by Suzanne Linder), and both stories were about a female photographer who encountered a refugee. In the pro-refugees condition, the photographer is intrigued by the refugee's trajectory and through her photography connects the familiar and the foreign (53 words). In the anti-refugees condition, the photographer is intimidated as she learns that the refugee is a criminal (58 words). Our approach at securing the validity of the manipulation was three-fold. First, we created the matched pairs (e.g., pro-refugee vs. contra-refugee) with careful attention to tone, length, emotional intensity, and argumentative structure. Each pair was designed to represent opposing viewpoints. The versions were tested with 10 student participants who were asked to evaluate each text in terms of clarity and perceived valence. All participants identified the intended attitudinal direction (e.g., pro vs. contra), supporting the validity of the stimuli for use in the main study.

Second, we included a binary item in the main study that asked participants to classify the story into either pro or contra refugees (see *Measures* section).

Third, we conducted an additional study in which the story summaries of Experiments 1 and 2 were presented to participants from the same subject pool as the participants from the main experiments (i.e., Prolific, first language English with a residence in the United Kingdom or the United States). As expected, participants who were randomly assigned to one of the two summaries used in Experiment 1 ($N = 113$) evaluated the pro-refugee story to convey a message that was more favorable towards refugees ($M = 4.21$; $SD = 0.81$) than the anti-refugee story ($M = 1.99$; $SD = 1.01$), $t(111) = 12.92$; $p < .001$; $d = 2.43$. Study details are reported in Supplement S1 (see online supplementary material). This additional study was conducted after the main experiments were completed.

Paratext

Prior to the story summary, one of two introductory texts about the short story was presented. In the fiction condition participants read "The short story described below is a piece of fiction. It was invented by the author. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental." In the non-fiction condition they read "The short story described below is a journalistic reportage about events that occurred recently in the United States. It is based on a thorough investigation by the author." Directly following the introduction, an item was included to guarantee that the introduction was processed as intended. More specifically, participants indicated whether, given this introduction, the following story was fiction or a non-fictional reportage. Next, the story summary and dependent measures were presented. The introductions and story summaries for both experiments are shown in Supplement S2 (see online supplementary material).

Measures

In the first part of the experiment, participants' attitude towards refugees (our focal continuous predictor) was measured with the Attitude Towards Refugees Scale (Kotzur et al., 2022). The six items went with a five-point scale (1 = *threaten/not at all/strongly disagree* to 5 = *enrich/very strongly/strongly agree*, e.g., "How strongly do you sympathize with refugees?", Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$, $M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.02$). Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude towards refugees.

After the story summary was presented, the participants' exposure preference (our focal dependent variable) was measured with one item on a seven-point scale, asking "As compared to some other text of the same length—Would you like to read this story?" (–3 = *strongly dislike* to +3 = *strongly like*). The scores were transformed to a seven-point scale ranging from 1 to 7 ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.60$). This measurement approach was based on prior research (e.g., Metzger et al., 2020; Wölker & Powell, 2021) and was meant to increase the internal validity of our design.

Near the end of the survey, participants were asked to classify the story into either pro or contra refugees ("Based on the description of the story, what was the message of the story like?", with two response options: *against refugees/open borders* and *in favor of refugees/open borders*). Most participants (92.3%) responded correctly to this item whereas 102 participants (7.7%) gave the incorrect answer. The percentage of incorrect responses did not vary significantly between both fictionality conditions. Moreover, all results remained virtually unchanged if we excluded the participants who gave an incorrect answer (see online supplementary material Supplement S3 for detailed results). We retained these participants in the final dataset.

Procedure and design

On the first page of the questionnaire, participants were informed that the survey contained questions about their attitude towards different topics and that they would read and evaluate a text. After giving informed consent, questions on demographics (age, gender, ethnic group) were presented, before participants were asked about their attitude towards refugees. In addition to this focal continuous predictor variable, two filler scales were included. Participants were asked about their attitudes towards theistic faith (Attitude towards Theistic Faith Scale, Astley et al., 2012, seven items) and their attitudes towards artificial intelligence (ATTARI-12, Stein et al., 2024, twelve items). Moreover, for each of those three attitude topics, participants further answered three questions on attitude strength. Including the scale was exploratory and the results on attitude strength are not reported in detail.[2] In the second part of the experiment, participants read one of the two introductions (and answered the related control item), followed by one of the story summaries. After reading the summary, participants were asked about their exposure preference. Finally, participants were asked to classify the story, based on the provided summary, into either pro or contra refugees. The experiment followed a between-subjects design, involving one focal dependent variable (exposure preference), one continuous predictor (attitude towards refugees) and two randomly assigned experimental variables, paratext (two conditions: non-fiction or fiction) and story content/story events (two conditions: pro-refugees or anti-refugees).

Results and discussion

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with attitude towards refugees (*z*-standardized), fictionality (0 = non-fiction; 1 = fiction), and story content (0 = against refugees; 1 = pro-refugees) as the predictors and exposure preference as the criterion. After entering the predictors in a first step, the second-order interactions were included in the equation, and the third-order interaction was entered in the third step. The results are depicted in Table 1 and visualized in Figure 1. We repeated the analyses with PROCESS (Hayes, 2022; Version 4.2, Model 3). The results of the regression model itself are identical to the regression analyses reported in the manuscript. Conditional effects based on this analysis are reported for both experiments in Supplement S7, see online supplementary material).

Our basic assumption was that participants were more willing to read a story that was in line with their attitudes than content that contrasted with their attitudes (Hypothesis 1). This congeniality bias was represented statistically by an interaction between participants' attitude and story content (i.e., the association between the predictor attitude and the criterion preference was expected to be more positive for pro-refugee than for the counter-refugee story). This effect was expected to be larger in the non-fiction condition than in the fiction condition (Hypothesis 2).

Based on the unmoderated coefficients, the regression revealed that a more positive attitude towards refugees predicted a higher exposure preference, $B = 0.36$, $SE_B = 0.04$, $\beta = .23$, $p < .001$. Or put differently, people with negative attitudes towards refugees were less inclined to expose themselves to information that featured refugees. We also found that the non-fictional story was preferred over the fictional story, $B = -0.39$, $SE_B = 0.09$, $\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$ (raw means: $M_{non\text{-}fiction} = 4.68$, $SD_{non\text{-}fiction} = 1.56$; $M_{fiction} =$

Table 1. Exposure preference regressed on attitudes towards refugees, content, and fictionality (Experiment 1).

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	$R^2 = .07$, $F(3, 1322) = 33.78$, $p < .001$				$\Delta R^2 = .05$, $F(3, 1319) = 25.63$, $p < .001$				$\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 1318) = 0.23$, $p = .629$			
	B	SE_B	β	*p*	*B*	SE_B	β	*p*	*B*	SE_B	*B*	*p*
Intercept (B_0)	4.57	.07			4.66	.08			4.66	.08		
Attitude Towards Refugees[a]	.36	.04	.23	<.001	–.03	.07	–.02	.640	–.01	.08	–.01	.876
Content[b]	.18	.09	.06	.036	.01	.12	.00	.932	.01	.12	.00	.917
Fictionality[c]	–.39	.09	–.12	<.001	–.55	.12	–.17	<.001	–.55	.12	–.17	< .001
Attitude × Content					.71	.08	.32	<.001	.67	.12	.30	< .001
Attitude × Fictionality					.08	.08	.04	.348	.04	.12	.02	.749
Content × Fictionality					.34	.17	.09	.042	.34	.17	.09	.042
Attitude × Content × Fictionality									.08	.17	.03	.629

[a] z-standardized
[b] Dummy-coded (0 = contra refugees; 1 = pro refugees);
[c] Dummy-coded (0 = non-fiction; 1 = fiction)

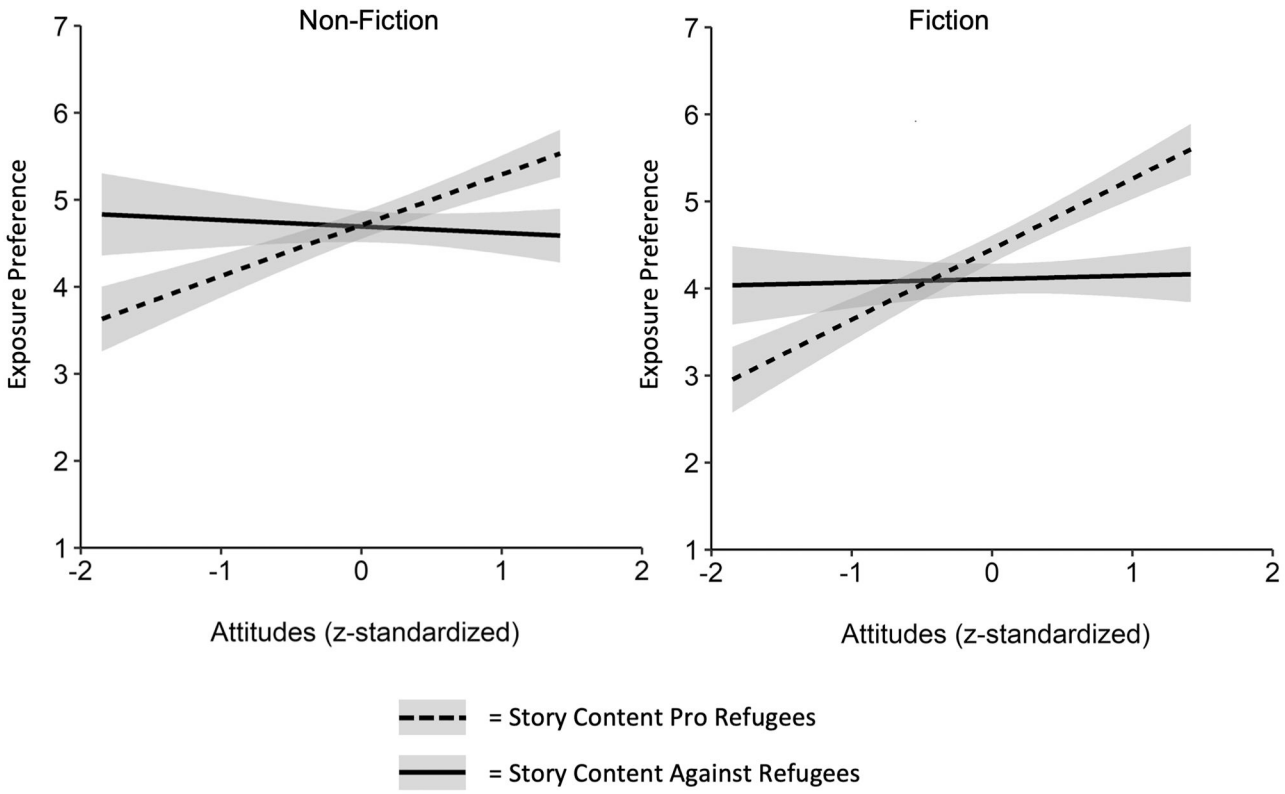

Figure 1. Exposure preference as a function of attitudes towards refugees, message of the story, and fictionality (Experiment 1).

4.25, $SD_{fiction} = 1.62$) and we observed a small but significant tendency that the story with a positive refugee protagonist was preferred over the story with a negative refugee protagonist, $B = 0.18$, $SE_B = 0.09$, $\beta = .06$, $p = .036$ (raw means: $M_{positive} = 4.54$, $SD_{positive} = 1.59$; $M_{negative} = 4.38$, $SD_{negative} = 1.61$). Importantly, a congeniality bias was observed, as indicated by the interaction between attitudes and story content, $B = 0.71$, $SE_B = 0.08$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .049$. The pattern of results in terms of the underlying associations was in line with Hypothesis 1: Positive attitudes towards refugees were strongly associated with exposure preference when the story content was pro refugees, $r\,(661) = .455$, $p < .001$. As expected, the association was smaller (i.e., less positive) when the story content shed a negative light on refugees, $r\,(661) = .012$, $p = .760$. Interestingly, positive attitudes towards refugees were unrelated to exposure preference in the latter condition.

In a final step, we tested whether the congeniality bias was moderated by the fictionality of the information. The sign of the coefficient for the three-way interaction was positive, which matches our hypothesis, but it was not significant, $B = 0.08$, $SE_B = 0.17$, $p = .629$, $\Delta R^2 = .0002$, suggesting that the congeniality bias did not vary with the fictional status of the presented information. Thus, no support for Hypothesis 2 was found. To follow-up on this issue, we performed an equivalence test to examine whether the three-way interaction was smaller than the minimal effect that could still be considered relevant (smallest effect size of interest, SEOI; Lakens et al., 2018). We considered an effect associated with an effect size of $\Delta R^2 = .01$ as the smallest effect of interest, which corresponds to $t_{SEOI} = 3.90$ and $B_{SEOI} = 0.65$ (Bring, 1994, Formula 5.6). The empirical coefficient of the three-way interaction was significantly smaller than the coefficient associated with the smallest effect of interest, $p < .001$. Therefore, we can conclude that if the interaction of fictionality status and congeniality bias exists at all in the population, this effect would be trivially small. In sum, the pattern of results reported above held for a fictional short story as well as for a journalistic reportage. We found no support for our assumption that fiction could ameliorate the human tendency to avoid media content that is in contrast with one's worldview.

Overall, we obtained mixed evidence for our assumptions. Interestingly, the congeniality bias was driven by a positive portrayal of a member of the refugee target group, whereas individuals intended to read a negative portrayal of a member of the refugee target group irrespective of their attitudes towards refugees. This result could be a manifestation of a particular novelty or information utility that negative plots may have for individuals with a positive attitude towards members of the focal group. Prior research showed that people prefer content with high information utility (e.g., Canon, 1964; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). In Experiment 2, we replicated and extended our results by testing our predictions in a different, but equally polarizing field: theistic faith.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2, we focused on the topic of theistic faith, a different topic with similarly polarized attitudes. We deliberately chose this second topic to put the generalizability of our results to a nontrivial test. Whereas positive attitudes towards refugees (our topic in Experiment 1) are associated with a more liberal political stance (Cowling et al., 2019), positive

attitudes towards theistic faith are regularly associated with a more conservative stance (Perry, 2022). There has been a rich scholarly debate about whether and to what extent liberals and conservatives differ with respect to biased information processing (e.g., Baron & Jost, 2019; Ditto et al., 2019, 2025). Thus, it cannot be taken for granted that the observed effects generalize to a topic across the political aisle.

Method

Participants

Experiment 2 was based on the same hypotheses and followed the same experimental design as Experiment 1. The same sample size considerations as in Experiment 1 applied. Participants of Experiment 1 were not allowed to participate in Experiment 2.

We recruited 1,455 English-language participants, located in the United States or the United Kingdom, on Prolific (compensation of £0.80) of which 139 had to be excluded, resulting in 1,316 valid participants. Sensitivity analysis shows that the final sample size provided 80% power to detect an effect size of $q = -.155$ ($\alpha = .05$, two-tailed), as planned. The exclusions were a consequence of a failed source manipulation check ($n = 105$), a wrong answer on an instructional response item ($n = 12$), or a low response time (less than 120 seconds, $n = 22$). Similar to Experiment 1, we did not have to exclude any participants based on the pre-registered criteria of responses in the feedback box or incomplete data sets. The participants (53.7% female, 39.7% male, 6.5% other) were between 18 and 82 years old ($M = 42.83$, $SD = 13.82$). A majority identified as white (89.7%, south Asian: 2.9%, Black: 2.8%, Chinese: 1.1%, mixed or others: 3.5%). Experiment 2 was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/VBX_RJQ).

Stimuli

Story summaries

We again presented one of two story summaries but covered a different topic. Both stories had the same title and author (*Unseen Journeys of Believers* by Suzanne Linder), and both stories were about a female photographer who encountered a member of the local Christian community. In the pro-theistic faith condition, the healing path of a believer and his enriching life was described (69 words). In the anti-theistic faith condition, the believer's story was connected to the hypocrisy and the dark secrets of the Christian church (58 words).

Like for Experiment 1, the matched pairs of summaries (pro theistic faith vs. contra theistic faith) were created with careful attention to tone, length, emotional intensity, and argumentative structure and each pair was designed to represent opposing viewpoints. The ten student participants in a pilot testing study identified the intended attitudinal direction (pro vs. contra theistic faith) successfully.

We again included a binary item in the main study that asked participants to classify the story into either pro or contra theistic faith (see *Measures* section).

The additional study in which the story summaries of Experiment 1 and 2 were presented to different participants further support the manipulation validity. A subsample of 112 participants evaluated the Experiment 2 summaries (between subjects, random assignment). The participants indicated that the pro-theistic faith summary conveyed a message that was more favorable towards theistic faith ($M = 4.35$; $SD = 0.82$) than the contra-theistic faith summary ($M = 1.72$; $SD = 0.88$), $t(110) = 16.38$; $p < .001$; $d = 2.54$. The additional study indicates that our manipulation of attitude object portrayal was successful (see online supplementary material Supplement S1 for study details).

Paratext

Prior to the story summary, two introductory texts about the short story classified the story as either fiction or a non-fictional reportage, followed by an item as a manipulation check, as described in the sections on Experiment 1. Following the introduction, the story summary itself and the main dependent measure were presented. The introductions and story summaries are shown in the Supplement S2 (Table S2.2, see online supplementary material).

Measures

Participants' attitude towards the theistic faith as the focal continuous predictor was measured with the Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude towards Theistic Faith (Astley et al., 2012). The seven items were answered on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$, $M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.21$, e.g., "I think going to a place of worship is a waste of my time" [reverse coded]). The participants' exposure preference as our focal dependent variable was presented after the story summary, $M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.72$ (see Experiment 1).

Again, near the end of the survey, participants were asked to classify the story—based on the story summary—into either pro or contra theistic faith. The large majority of participants (93.3%) responded correctly to this item, whereas 88 participants (6.7%) gave the incorrect answer. The percentage of incorrect responses did not vary significantly between both fictionality conditions. All results remained virtually unchanged if we excluded the participants who gave an incorrect answer (see online supplementary material Supplement S4 for detailed results). Like in Experiment 1, we retained these participants in the final dataset.

Procedure and design

Starting with the questionnaire, participants were informed that the survey included questions about their attitude towards different topics and required them to read and evaluate a text. After giving informed consent, participants answered questions regarding demographics (age, gender, ethnic group) and their attitude towards theistic faith. In addition to this focal continuous predictor variable, two filler scales were included. Participants were asked about their attitudes towards refugees (attitude towards refugees scale, Kotzur et al., 2022, 6 items) and their attitudes towards artificial intelligence (ATTARI-12, Stein et al., 2024, 12 items). Attitude strength items followed (see Footnote 2). In the second part of the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two introductions (fiction or non-fiction), answered the related control item, and read one of the story summaries (pro- or anti- theistic faith). After reading the summary, participants were asked to answer to what extent they would like to read the full story. Finally, participants were asked to classify the story into either pro or contra theistic faith and to indicate their religion (based on the Great Britain census, see Aspinall, 2000). The latter variable was not analyzed further. The experimental design was the same as in Experiment 1.

Table 2. Exposure preference regressed on attitudes towards theistic faith, content, and fictionality (Experiment 2).

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	$R^2 = .11$, $F(3, 1312) = 53.51$, $p < .001$				$\Delta R^2 = .05$, $F(3, 1309) = 23.33$, $p < .001$				$\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 1308) = 2.31$, $p = .129$			
	B	SE_B	β	*p*	*B*	SE_B	β	*p*	*B*	SE_B	β	*p*
Intercept (B_0)	4.15	.08			4.23	.08			4.23	.09		
Attitude Towards Theistic Faith[a]	.35	.05	.20	<.001	.00	.08	.00	.969	.07	.09	.04	.441
Content[b]	−.84	.09	−.25	<.001	−.93	.13	−.27	.932	−.94	.13	−.27	< .001
Fictionality[c]	−.24	.09	−.07	.009	−.36	.13	−.11	.003	−.35	.12	−.10	.004
Attitude × Content					.72	.09	.29	< .001	.58	.13	.23	< .001
Attitude × Fictionality					.01	.09	.01	.893	−.11	.12	−.05	.350
Content × Fictionality					.17	.18	.04	.328	.18	.18	.05	.319
Attitude × Content × Fictionality									.27	.18	.08	.129

[a] *z*-standardized.
[b] Dummy-coded (0 = contra theistic faith; 1 = pro theistic faith).
[c] Dummy-coded (0 = non-fiction; 1 = fiction).

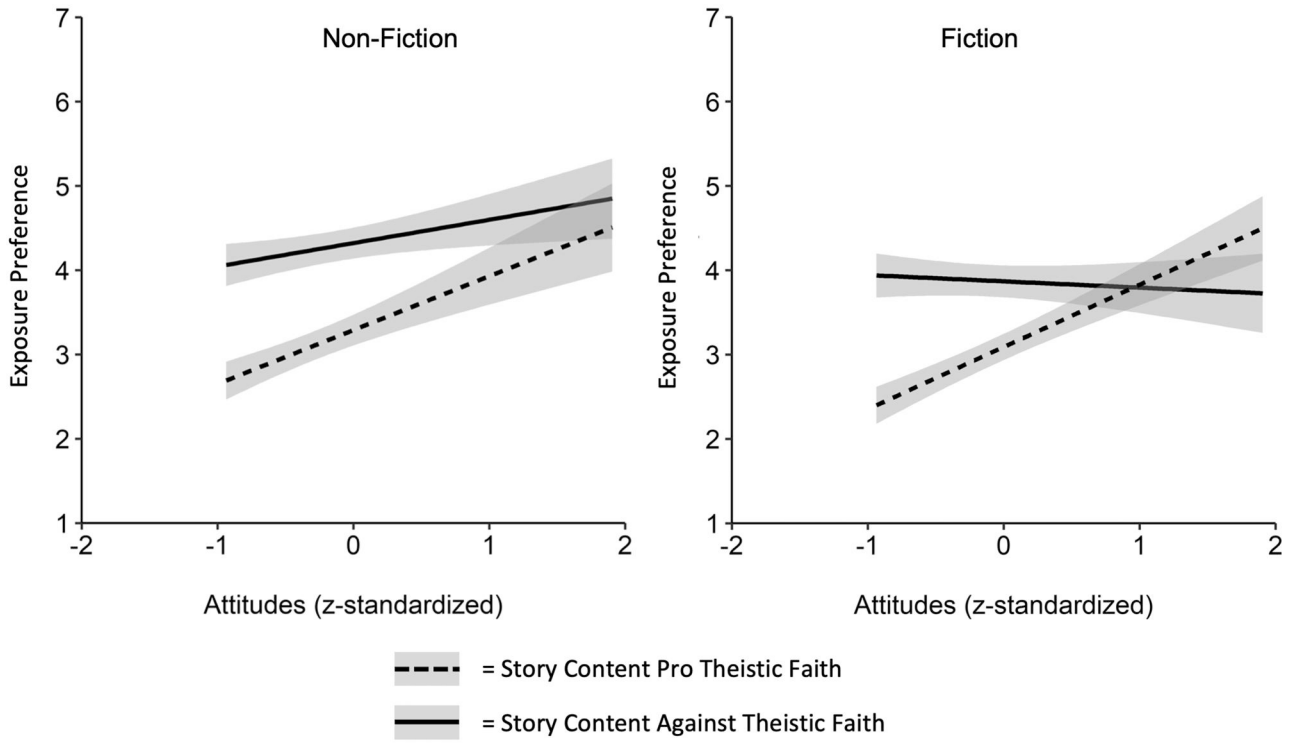

Figure 2. Exposure preference as a function of attitude towards theistic faith, message of the story, and fictionality (Experiment 2).

Results and discussion

We again conducted a hierarchical regression analysis, with the predictors attitude towards theistic faith (*z*-standardized), fictionality (0 = non-fiction; 1 = fiction), and story content (0 = critical of theistic faith; 1 = pro theistic faith) and exposure preference as the criterion. After entering the predictors in a first step, the second-order interactions were included in the equation, and the third-order interaction was entered in the third step. The results are depicted in Table 2 and visualized in Figure 2.

The variables entered in the first step showed that a more positive attitude towards theistic faith predicted exposure preference, $B = 0.35$, $SE_B = 0.05$, $\beta = .20$, $p < .001$, which is consistent with the results of Experiment 1. Moreover, we found again that the non-fictional story was preferred over the fictional story, $B = -0.24$, $SE_B = 0.09$, $\beta = -.07$, $p = .009$ (raw means: $M_{non\text{-}fiction} = 3.72$, $SD_{non\text{-}fiction} = 1.70$; $M_{fiction} = 3.52$, $SD_{fiction} = 1.72$). Participants were more inclined to read the story with a negative stance towards theistic faith than the story with a pro-theistic faith message, $B = -0.84$, $SE_B = 0.09$, $\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$ (raw means: $M_{positive} = 3.18$, $SD_{positive} = 1.63$; $M_{negative} = 4.05$, $SD_{negative} = 1.69$). Please note that in Experiment 1, participants had preferred the story with a *positive* stance towards the attitude object (i.e., refugees) over the story with a negative stance towards the attitude object (unmoderated main effects).

The tendency to prefer content that is line with one's attitudes and to avoid attitude-inconsistent content (congeniality bias, Hypothesis 1) was again represented statistically by an interaction between participants' attitude and story content.

As expected, we observed a congeniality bias, as indicated by a significant interaction between attitudes and story content, $B = 0.72$, $SE_B = 0.09$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .044$. Consistent with the results from Experiment 1 and in line with Hypothesis 1, positive attitudes towards theistic faith were positively associated with exposure preference when the story content was pro theistic faith, $r\ (651) = .430$, $p < .001$. The association was less positive (and non-significant) when the story content was critical towards theistic faith, $r\ (661) = .005$, $p = .896$. Like in Experiment 1, attitudes towards theistic faith were unrelated to the preference rating in the condition in which the summarized content was critical of the attitude object.

We were particularly interested whether the congeniality bias was moderated by fictionality (Hypothesis 2). However, the expected three-way interaction was not significant, $B = 0.27$, $SE_B = 0.18$, $p = .129$, $\Delta R^2 = .0015$, although the sign of the interaction matched the predicted direction of the interaction. Like in Experiment 1, we conducted an equivalence test to clarify whether the interaction would fall below the smallest effect size of interest ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, corresponding to $t_{SEOI} = 4.68$ and $B_{SEOI} = 0.82$). Again, the empirical coefficient of the three-way interaction was significantly smaller than the coefficient associated with the smallest effect of interest, $p < .001$, implying that the effect in the population is trivially small if it exists at all. In that sense, we can conclude that the congeniality bias did not vary with the fictional status of the presented information. To the contrary, the congeniality bias—driven by the story version portraying a positive view of theistic faith—held for a fictional short story as well as for a journalistic reportage. Consistent with Experiment 1, we found no support for our assumption that fiction could reduce the congeniality bias.

Overall, the results obtained in Experiment 2 were highly consistent with the results of Experiment 1. A congeniality bias was found, which was driven by a positive portrayal of religious belief and worship, whereas individuals liked to read a negative portrayal of religious belief and worship irrespective of their attitudes towards theistic faith. Fictionality did not influence the results.

General discussion

The preference of attitude-consistent over attitude-inconsistent information (congeniality bias) is a phenomenon that runs counter to basic principles of sound reasoning (e.g., Dutilh Novaes, 2018) and may impede the appreciation of others' perspectives and the construction of a viable representation of the world around us. Based on theory and research on the processing of stories, we hypothesized that the congeniality bias could be reduced or even absent for fictional (as compared to non-fictional) narrative information with the same content.

Across two sufficiently powered experiments, a highly consistent pattern of results emerged: First, participants were more willing to read a story in which the story events were in line with their attitudes than a story in which the events contrasted with their attitudes. Second, this congeniality bias was unaffected by the fictionality of the information, that is, whether the events were introduced as a fictional short story or a journalistic reportage. Third, the congeniality bias was observed for positive characterizations (i.e., a refugee whose story can bridge the familiar and the foreign; a Christian who had transitioned to live a peaceful and enriching life as a believer). The congeniality bias was not observed for negative characterizations (i.e., a refugee who turned out to be a criminal; a Christian community and their leader that were portrayed as greedy and full of self-betrayal).

Our results connect two fields of research. They speak to theory and research on narratives (e.g., Green & Appel, 2024; Walsh et al., 2022), an interdisciplinary field at the crossroads of psychology, communication science, and literary/film studies, as well as to work on biased information processing (e.g., Cappella et al., 2015, Kaiser et al., 2022; Oeberst & Imhoff, 2023), a vibrant topic across many social scientific disciplines.

Fictionality is a highly important aspect of story production and evaluation on a macro-level. Authors of non-fiction are obliged to adhere to standards of truth. Jonah Lehrer's best-selling non-fictional book *Imagine: How Creativity Works* is a case in point. It included an explanation of Bob Dylan's genius that was backed by supposed quotes of Dylan—that the songwriter never said, they were inventions by Lehrer (who later admitted having invented the quotes). As a consequence of messing with the standards for non-fiction, the sale of the electronic book as well as the shipment of the paper version were stopped. Similar incidents regarding the invented reportages by Claas Relotius (Lünenborg & Medeiros, 2021) or the untruthful biographies by James Frey or Herman Rosenblat come to mind (Kachgal, 2014). Of course, authors of fiction could invent Dylan quotes and present prose in first-person singular without repercussions.

Given the strong normative relevance of fictionality in message production, the missing influence of fictionality that we identified is striking. It is in line with many studies that found no effect of non-fiction vs. fiction labelling on recipient engagement or persuasive outcomes (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000; Green et al., 2006; Strange & Leung, 1999). In our set of studies, we made sure that the participants actively processed the paratext, so we are highly confident in the fidelity of the fictionality manipulation. Our theoretical approach was closely aligned with evidence regarding the congeniality bias in non-narrative material. We hypothesized that the exposure preference for fictional (vs. non-fictional) stories would be guided by the low expected trustworthiness and relevance for real-world issues (Appel & Maleckar, 2012) and higher distancing potential (Menninghaus et al., 2017; Oatley, 1999) of fiction. However, these are not the only expectations evoked by fiction. As shown in prior research, participants expect to be more deeply immersed by a fictional story than by a non-fictional story (Appel & Maleckar, 2012). This expectation could translate into actual immersion when following the story (Tiede & Appel, 2020) including strong emotions elicited by the story events. As a consequence, recipients may have a tendency to avoid attitude-inconsistent fiction *more*, as they expect and avoid immersive and emotional, yet attitude-inconsistent experiences. This selective avoidance of attitude-inconsistent fiction likely runs parallel to the lower expected trustworthiness and higher distancing potential of fiction.

In addition, we further expect substantial individual differences in the epistemic beliefs held about fiction (on epistemic beliefs more generally, see, for example, Kuhn et al., 2000). Whereas some may outrightly dismiss fiction as invented and fictitious, others may perceive fiction as a source of particularly valuable deeper truth, and even others may perceive fiction as a relevant instigator for reflections. Based on recent

theoretical progress (Bartsch et al., 2024), future research is encouraged to examine the epistemic beliefs regarding fiction and to connect these to the congeniality bias.

Our second consistent and intriguing result is that positive characterizations (of a refugee, a person associated with theistic faith) yielded the expected congeniality bias effect whereas negative characterizations did not. This highlights that the congeniality of a message is a relevant, but not the only message factor that affects selective exposure (e.g., Cappella et al., 2015). Preferences for the stories with the message that shed a positive light on the attitude object were not consistently higher than for the messages that shed a negative light on the attitude object. Rather, preference ratings for the negatively framed stories were independent of participants' attitudes. The negative message seems to override the congeniality bias specifically. Possibly, negative plots provide a particular novelty and/or information utility for individuals whose attitudes do not align with the negative plot message. Novelty and information utility are well-established factors that increased exposure in prior research (e.g., Canon, 1964; Frey & Rosch, 1984; see Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). Based on the assumption that individuals are not only motivated to defend their belief systems, but also to derive an accurate and rich picture of the world (Chaiken et al., 1989; Hart et al., 2009; Kunda, 1990), individuals with more extreme attitudes towards refugees or theistic faith might find the negative characterizations in stories to be particularly useful in deriving comprehensive and nuanced beliefs. Thus, the limited congeniality bias for negative stories could be due to a combination of defensive and accuracy goals at play. Information utility could further account for the lower exposure preference in response to a fictional rather than a non-fictional story, a main effect that was observed in both experiments. These results are reminiscent of recent research that highlights conditions under which individuals do not seek out congenial over uncongenial information (e.g., Buder & Said, 2025; Garrett & Stroud, 2014). Results by Buder and colleagues (2023) even suggest that attending to and engaging in online discussions is regularly driven by an uncongeniality bias, that is, users turn to content that contrasts with their worldviews.

Relatedly, decades of research on the negativity bias (Rozin & Royzman, 2001) have demonstrated the human tendency to preferentially attend to negative information. Regarding exposure to news media, negative stories consistently predicted attention to and sharing of news articles. For example, Robertson and colleagues (2023) analyzed data of randomized trials conducted by former news aggregator Upworthy.com and showed that negatively valenced words in online news headlines predicted higher click-through rate. The preference for negative information is reflected in heuristics ascribed to journalism practice ("if it bleeds it leads") and negativity as a prominent news value (e.g., Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). As yet, research on the congeniality bias and the negativity bias have largely been unconnected. We therefore encourage future research to follow up and examine the interplay of the congeniality bias and the particular attraction of negative information in greater detail. Regarding story processing, this may include disentangling the influence of the valence of the words used from the valence of the events taking place in a story under conditions of high vs. low message congeniality.

Our work is not without limitations. First, researchers examining selective exposure to mediated messages have used a large array of methods (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). In line with prior research (e.g., Mares & Cantor, 1992; Zillmann et al., 1994) summaries of media products and related paratexts were presented and carefully manipulated in our studies, in order to guarantee high internal validity. We deliberately decided to present only one stimulus at a time (a combination of paratext and story summary) to reduce the likelihood that the variables of interest could become apparent to the participants (which would have added error variance). Participants would have likely guessed that the study was about attitude consistent vs. inconsistent stories, or about fictional vs. non-fictional stories. We acknowledge that with our design and measure we assessed exposure preference to messages rather than actual exposure. Future research is encouraged to use different operationalizations of selective exposure.

Moreover, although we suggested that exposure to attitude-inconsistent information—in the shielded realm of fictional worlds—could ultimately increase social understanding (e.g., Mar, 2018a; 2018b), our empirical focus was on exposure preference exclusively. Media effects or the intriguing interplay of attitudes and media exposure over time (e.g., Slater, 2015) were beyond the scope of our work. We encourage future longitudinal research to examine the role of fictionality in both message selection and effects over time. We further note that our stimulus material specified the US as the location of the events taking place in the non-fictional condition, no such specification was provided in the fictional condition. This difference is in line with genre conventions, but we cannot rule out that this specification elicited surplus avoidance or approach tendencies.

In addition, our findings are based on two topics, refugees and theistic faith. Both are highly polarizing and can be placed on different ends of the political spectrum. The fact that the results for both topics are highly overlapping speaks to the generalizability of the insights gained. Moreover, the consistent results corroborate (albeit somewhat indirectly) theory and research emphasizing the commonalities between liberals and conservatives in biased information processing (Ditto et al., 2025). Still, we need to note that only two topics were addressed in our studies. Based on available evidence (e.g., Hart et al., 2009), we expect that observed effect sizes for the congeniality bias would be lower for less relevant issues (such as a consumer brand or a lesser-known issue in a foreign country). We further assume that the role of fictionality would be similarly small for low-relevance issues.

As an additional limitation, we need to acknowledge that our experiments did not include mediating variables, such as perceived correspondence of the information provided to real-world issues, perceived trustworthiness (Appel & Maleckar, 2012), expectations of cognitive dissonance, or expectations of negative affect. Such additions appear to be worthwhile, particularly when only two independent variables are focused on and when the complexity of the resulting research design does not undermine the intelligibility of the results. Finally, our focus had been on fictionality—we examined whether the congeniality bias would be reduced for fictional content, and we manipulated the message, which was positive or negative towards refugees and theistic faith, respectively. Other message factors, such as the narrativity or the literariness of the message (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015), were beyond the scope of this work. We encourage

future research to investigate these message factors that have received no or very little attention in theory and research on the congeniality bias, selective exposure or the confirmation bias more generally.

Conclusion

Narrative fiction is an omnipresent part of human culture and of today's mediated environments, ranging from novels and short stories to movies and Netflix series. Despite the substantial amount of research on selective exposure effects in terms of the congeniality bias, this is the first set of studies that examined the effect of fictionality on the preference for attitude-consistent (and attitude-inconsistent) messages. We observed a preference for information that is in line with attitudes for messages that portrayed the attitude object positively but not for messages that portrayed the attitude object negatively. This pattern of results was consistently shown for fictional and non-fictional narrative messages. People prefer attitude-consistent mediated environments no less when these environments are pieces of fiction.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Human Communication Research* online.

Data availability

The data and codes underlying this article are available at https://osf.io/37f2a.

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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Open science framework badges

Open Materials
The components of the research methodology needed to reproduce the reported procedure and analysis are publicly available for this article.

Open Data
Digitally shareable data necessary to reproduce the reported results are publicly available for this article.

Preregistered
Research design was preregistered.

Notes

1. In a minority of cases, the software Qualtrics presented the gender question in both experiments in a somewhat confusing way. This could have slightly increased the number of participants who answered "other". All other questions were unaffected.
2. Additional analyses were conducted which were based on an attitude index, built by multiplying attitude extremity scores with the mean of the three attitude strength items. When using this index in an alternative set of regressions, the results did not differ substantially (see online supplementary material Supplements S5 and S6 for details).

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