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Curiosity, Not Fear: How a UAP-Attentive Public Appraised the 2026 PURSUE Releases

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Abstract

How people would respond to releasing information related to unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP) has long been debated, yet that reaction has never been measured while a government is in the active process of disclosing such information to the public. On 8 May 2026 the U.S. Department of War opened the Presidential Unsealing and Reporting System for UAP Encounters (PURSUE), releasing previously classified records at WAR.GOV/UFO. A self-selected sample of 1,793 UAP-attentive adults in 73 countries responded to a survey circulated through UAP-focused media channels during the first months of the programme. Reception was dominated by curiosity (71.72%) while 19.97% reported considerable anger or frustration and 1.90% considerable fear. Perceived threat was low: only 6.25% judged the releases very or extremely threatening to national security. Among the 1,298 participants holding religious or spiritual beliefs, 78.74% said confirmation of non-human intelligence (NHI) would not disturb those beliefs at all. Participants judged themselves far readier than the general public to encounter more challenging evidence ($dz = 1.12$), with 96.93% rating themselves as mostly or completely ready against 61.91% for the public. However, believing the public was less ready did not meaningfully predict a preference for slower disclosure, and 92.25% wanted much more information released. Most participants (84.05%) believed stigma discourages scientists from studying UAP, and this perception was a stronger predictor of support for further disclosure and public funding of UAP research than either institutional trust or belief in NHI. In free-text responses, the most frequently detected concern was government concealment (21.62%), ahead of NHI intentions (14.26%). The findings provide no evidence that this UAP-attentive audience wanted information withheld because it considered the wider public unprepared, but they do not establish how less attentive or vulnerable publics might respond.

Introduction

In 2026 the United States began releasing its records on unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP) rather than issuing assessments about them. On 8 May the Department of War launched the Presidential Unsealing and Reporting System for UAP Encounters (PURSUE), a government-wide effort to "expeditiously find, review, identify, declassify and publicly release unresolved UAP-related records and historical documents", coordinated with the support of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (US Department of War, 2026). Four tranches were published within nine weeks, on 8 May, 22 May, 12 June and 10 July 2026, comprising documents, photographs, audio and video spanning the 1940s to the present. The four tranches published before the survey closed comprised 334 files, of which 189 were documents, 103 video, 27 images and 15 audio.

The first modern public assessment, published in June 2021, concluded that most reported incidents remained unresolved and constituted a flight-safety and counterintelligence concern (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021). Consolidated annual reports to Congress followed (Department of Defense and Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024; All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, 2026), and in February 2024 the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO) published a historical review finding no evidence of concealed extraterrestrial technology (All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, 2024). Each was an assessment about records. None released the records themselves.

The PURSUE releases therefore create a research opportunity that has not previously existed. Prior work on public responses to UAP disclosure has been retrospective, inferring reactions from polling conducted afterwards or from social-media traces (Bastos and Duarte, 2026; Lomas, 2025). PURSUE unfolds on a published schedule through a single official channel, making it possible to survey a public while a disclosure programme is running, and to ask not only what people believe about UAP but how they evaluate the act of disclosure.

Speculated Public Reactions

How the public would respond to the disclosure of UAP-related information and how the public should be managed have been debated for decades. The 1953 Robertson Panel found no direct physical threat to national security in UFO reports but identified an indirect one in public susceptibility to mass hysteria and its exploitation by hostile psychological warfare, and recommended reducing public interest in the subject accordingly (Central Intelligence Agency, 1953). The same expectation shaped scientific discussion: reports of panic following the 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast produced dire predictions about the consequences of an extraterrestrial intelligence detection, predictions later undercut by evidence that few listeners were fooled (Harrison, 2011).

Other more recent reports and survey data do not appear to support this concern. Most Americans believe in the existence of life beyond earth (Pew 2021), and about half believe that aliens have visited earth (Ballard, 2025), yet these widespread beliefs have not resulted in related societal disturbance. The Peters Extraterrestrial Intelligence Religious Crisis Survey found that between 83% and 94% of respondents, depending on tradition, disagreed that confirmation of extraterrestrial intelligence would precipitate a crisis in their own beliefs (Peters, 2011), cross-cultural and observational studies of anticipated reactions reach compatible conclusions (Kwon et al., 2018; Vakoch and Lee, 2000). Reviews of psychological and public health literature on the potential psychological reaction to UAP disclosure,

found that mass panic was unlikely without personal relevance or direct threat and it is more likely that a small subset of vulnerable people may have reactions that could result in a surge of need for public health services (Priestland, 2026; Vilhauer et al., 2026). Post-detection scholarship has moved from asking whether society could cope to asking how institutions should prepare (Genevieve et al., 2025; Vilhauer et al., 2026).

Two features of this literature matter here. First, almost all of it concerns a hypothetical detection rather than an actual government disclosure, so it establishes what people say they would do, not what they did. Second, and more consequentially, Peters' respondents judged others less resilient than themselves: asked whether contact would undercut traditional beliefs so that the world's religions would face a crisis, 69% of non-religious respondents agreed, against 34% of religious respondents, even though the religious respondents had just reported no crisis in their own beliefs (Peters, 2011). The response pattern is similar to a third-person effect: confidence in one's own resilience paired with doubt about everyone else's (Davison, 1983). Where that perception has been studied, it has predicted support for restricting information on the paternalistic logic that others need protecting (Gunther, 1995; Rojas et al., 1996), though that assumption has never been measured during a real disclosure event.

What Surveys of Extraterrestrial Intelligence and UAP Attitudes Have Established

Survey evidence on this subject has developed along three tracks that have not previously been joined. The first measures experts. Vickers et al. provided the first systematic baseline, finding that 86.60% of astrobiologists judged basic extraterrestrial life likely, 67.40% complex life and 58.20% intelligent life (Vickers et al., 2025).

The second measures general and student publics. The Pew Research Center found that 65% of Americans believed intelligent life exists elsewhere and that 87% did not regard UAP as a major national security threat (Kennedy and Lau, 2021). Gallup recorded a rise from 33% to 41% between 2019 and 2021 in the proportion believing some UAP are alien spacecraft (Saad, 2021). Student samples run considerably higher: 90% among Swedish high school and university students (Persson et al., 2019) and 92% among 1,237 Peruvian university students (Chon-Torres et al., 2020). Neither student questionnaire distinguishes microbial from intelligent life, so those figures are not strictly comparable to the expert baseline.

The third measures scientists as a social group rather than as a source of estimates. Two analyses of a national faculty survey, published in Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, establish the pattern. Among 1,460 tenured and tenure-track faculty at 144 U.S. research universities, curiosity outweighed scepticism and roughly two-thirds rated academic involvement in evaluating UAP information as very important or absolutely essential, yet only 3.84% had conducted UAP-related research (Yingling et al., 2023). The second analysis located the gap: 52.67% reported some degree of concern that UAP research would jeopardise tenure or promotion and 69.04% some degree of concern about ridicule, while 7.4% would vote against such a candidate and 27.95% said they might (Yingling and Yingling, 2024). The anticipated sanction exceeds the reported one. The same misreading of peers appears at the level of private belief. A companion study surveyed 6,114 scientifically engaged respondents and found that 95.01% personally believed extraterrestrial intelligence exists, but they estimated only 48.94% of their social circles shared that view, a 46.07 percentage-point discrepancy (Eldadi et al., 2025). Revealing the actual expert consensus produced negligible belief change ($d = -0.11$).

Together these data reflect widespread belief in non-human intelligence life forms, and a trending belief that others are less likely to believe similarly and are more likely to be impacted in a negative way. This appears to characterize pluralistic ignorance, which occurs when individuals privately hold a belief but mistakenly assume that other people disagree (Miller, 2023).

Disclosure, Trust and Stigma

Transparency initiatives generally rest on the expectation that releasing information corrects misperception and restores confidence, a long-standing assumption in public administration that the empirical literature has not borne out (Cucciniello et al., 2017). A cross-national experiment on student samples in the Netherlands and South Korea, which varied how much government websites disclosed about the process, content and outcomes of specific policies, found the added transparency failed to increase perceived trustworthiness and in some conditions reduced it, the effect falling almost entirely on perceptions of competence (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013), and a twenty-five-year review of 187 studies concluded its effects on trust are mixed and context-dependent, with 38.90% of empirical tests positive, 22.20% mixed and 16.60% negative (Cucciniello et al., 2017).

Work on UAP communities points the other way. An analysis of UFO and UAP forums on Reddit found that government disclosures and hearings were followed by fewer conspiracy-theory posts and more analytic, sceptical and evidence-oriented discussion, though the

authors describe this as a temporary reorganisation of discourse rather than a durable shift (Bastos and Duarte, 2026). Whether it persists is untested, and there is reason for caution. Where an audience already believes information has been withheld, which is what 68% of Americans believe about UAP data (Saad, 2019), a partial release supplies evidence that withholding occurred, and the salience of what remains classified may exceed the reassurance of what has been published. Conspiracy beliefs stem largely from epistemic, existential and social motives, and there is little evidence that holding them satisfies those motives (Douglas et al., 2017). Barkun's concept of stigmatised knowledge is particularly relevant to UFO claims. When scientific or government institutions reject these claims, believers may see that rejection as evidence that the truth is being suppressed, which which can strengthen their belief that the claims are true (Barkun, 2015).

Stigma also operates inside science. NASA's independent study team documented negative correspondence, ridicule, colleagues warned away from the subject, and the judgement that stigma "almost certainly leads to attrition in reporting" (National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2023; p.26). The historical mechanism is well documented: the 1993 termination of NASA's High Resolution Microwave Survey turned on the "giggle factor" rather than scientific merit (Wright and Oman-Reagan, 2018; Garber, 1999; Pellegrini, 2024), producing roughly 25 years of de facto federal exclusion.

Three things follow from this literature. The self-other asymmetry has never been quantified during an actual government disclosure. The paternalistic corollary of the third-person effect has been established only for messages already received (Gunther, 1995; Rojas et al., 1996), never for evidence a government has yet to release. And perceived scientific stigma has been documented inside the academy but not among the public, so whether the public shares that perception, and whether it shapes what people want their government to do, is unknown. Underlying all three is a more basic omission: no existing survey measures appraisal of a disclosure process itself, as distinct from belief about the phenomenon it concerns.

The Present Study

We surveyed a UAP-attentive international public during the PURSUE programme, after launch and tested the following three hypotheses: H1. Participants will judge themselves better able to absorb escalated UAP evidence than they judge the general public, and will anticipate a more positive personal reaction to confirmation of non-human intelligence than they attribute to their close circle; H2. If that asymmetry functions paternalistically, as the third-person literature reports for message effects, participants perceiving the widest self-public gap will be the most willing to see disclosure slowed; H3. Perceived scientific stigma will predict support for further disclosure and for public funding of UAP research, over and above institutional trust and belief that non-human intelligence exists. We further asked, without a directional prediction, whether this public appraises the disclosed material as threatening, and what it says in its own words about the releases and about the prospect of confirmation.

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

Following the established distinction between a general public and an attentive public, the segment with high interest in an issue whose members consider themselves reasonably well informed about it (Almond, 1950), the sample is described throughout as UAP-attentive rather than as a general population. Participants were recruited through Medium, Twitter/X posts, YouTube accounts and news outlet articles reporting the survey, with posting accounts deliberately spanning both proponent and sceptic audiences. Recruitment was open and self-selecting, and eligibility required a minimum age of 18. No compensation was offered. The survey was administered in English through Qualtrics and distributed as an anonymous link embedded in the recruitment posts. Collection opened on 19 June 2026, six weeks after the PURSUE programme launch, and closed on 30 July 2026. Qualtrics recorded 2,301 responses during this window; 508 incomplete responses were excluded, leaving a final sample of 1,793 completed responses (77.92% of those recorded). No sampling frame exists for this population, so no response rate can be computed.

Measures

The survey comprised 41 closed items and two optional free-text items; the closed items were presented as 34 numbered questions, because the eight reaction items formed a single grid. Thirty-four of the 41 closed items used five-point ordered scales scored 1 to 5; the remaining seven were country of residence, age, year of first UAP engagement, and the categorical demographic items (gender, religion, education and profession).

Demographics and dispositions. Country, age, gender, religion (14 categories), education and profession. Engagement with science-related topics, comfort with uncertainty, scepticism toward phenomena not accepted within mainstream science, trust in institutions to tell the

truth about significant discoveries, science-fiction consumption, daily social media use, time spent seeking UAP content, and belief that non-human intelligence exists.

Engagement with the PURSUE programme. Engagement with official U.S. government UAP disclosure efforts generally, with the WAR.GOV/UFO portal specifically, and the extent to which participants' closest family and friends had seen or heard about the releases.

Reactions. Eight parallel items rated the extent of each reaction to the releases (awe, happiness or excitement, curiosity, surprise, indifference, fear or threat, anger or frustration, scepticism or doubt) from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (5), plus one bipolar item recording the close circle's overall reaction valence.

Threat and readiness. Perceived threat of the releases to national security, and the same judgement attributed to the close circle. Readiness to encounter more complex or challenging UAP evidence, exemplified as classified sensor data, technical analyses and biological findings, rated for oneself and for the general public on identical scales from "not ready at all" (1) to "completely ready" (5).

Hypothetical NHI confirmation. Anticipated personal and close-circle reaction (bipolar, very negative to very positive); perceived threat; anticipated effect on the participant's life; and whether confirmation would cause the participant to question their religious beliefs, with an explicit "not applicable, I do not hold religious beliefs" option scored as a separate category.

Policy and field perception. Preference for the government releasing more or less UAP information (much less to much more, with "the current amount is right" as midpoint); support for or opposition to government funding of scientific UAP research; and the extent to which social stigma is believed to discourage scientists from researching UAP.

Self-reported experience. Whether the participant had personally witnessed what they believed to be a genuine UAP, and whether they had interacted with a form of non-human intelligence, each on a five-point certainty scale. The full survey appears in Supplementary Methods.

Procedure

The study was designed, administered and analysed at Reichman University, Israel, under that institution's ethics oversight, and was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of its School of Psychology on 12 June 2026, ethical clearance number P_2026164. All research was performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and with the relevant institutional guidelines and regulations for research involving human participants. Data collection was entirely remote through the Qualtrics platform, with participants taking part from their own devices in 73 countries; no in-person research activity took place at any site. Participants followed an embedded survey link, read an information and consent page, and proceeded by affirmative action, an unsigned consent process. Responses were anonymous and no identifying information was collected. Items appeared in a fixed order for all participants, and all closed items required a response. Co-authors based at institutions in the United States, United Kingdom, Spain and France contributed to instrument design and to recruitment through public channels.

Data Analysis and Reporting

All analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics 29. Procedures without a native SPSS implementation, namely the false discovery rate correction, the equivalence test and the dictionary coding of the free-text responses, were run in Python. Ordinal labels were coded 1 to 5 in the direction of the underlying construct. The "not applicable" option on the religious-belief item and the "other" category on education were retained as categories and excluded from scale scoring rather than imputed; the latter is the source of the reduced n in the regressions, and a sensitivity analysis omitting education as a predictor retains 1,785 of the 1,793 cases and leaves results intact. All tests were two-tailed with alpha set at .05. A sensitivity analysis at the achieved sample size indicated 80% power to detect paired differences as small as d_z = 0.07 and bivariate correlations as small as r = .07. Because the seven regression models yield 105 coefficient tests, a Benjamini-Hochberg false discovery rate correction was applied across the full set at q = .05, and coefficients that do not survive it are identified in Table 2. Where a null result is interpreted, an equivalence test assessed whether effects larger than f = .10 could be ruled out. The three hypotheses stated in the Introduction follow from the design. The readiness, anticipated-reaction and threat items were written as matched self-other pairs, a structure interpretable only as a test of H1 and H2, and the stigma item was included to test H3. The remaining analyses, including the seven regression models and the open-response coding, were not specified in advance and are exploratory. The hypotheses and analysis plan were registered on the Open Science Framework after data collection closed but before the data were accessed (see Data availability).

Table 2

Standardized regression coefficients for four outcomes (n = 1,700)

Predictor	Disclosure preference	Funding support	Own readiness	Public readiness
Perceived scientific stigma	.153***	.271***	.025	.017
Belief that NHI exists	.099***	.117***	.088***	−.005
Disclosure engagement	.060	.084**	.129***	.222***
UAP content seeking	.058	.035	.068*[a]	−.041
Institutional trust	−.072**	.062**	−.072**	−.048
Social media use	−.076**	−.064**	−.038	−.044
Scepticism	−.049	−.073**	−.004	−.008
Comfort with uncertainty	−.033	−.033	.079**	.036
Science-fiction consumption	.028	.061*	−.013	−.006
Science engagement	.005	−.031	.063*	.033
Years engaged with UAP	−.063*[a]	−.002	−.002	.001
Age	.049	.042	.007	−.165***
Male	−.030	.017	.047*[a]	.027
Education	−.028	.005	−.014	−.035
PURSUE portal engagement	.025	.016	.018	.032
R^2	.110	.154	.091	.110
$F(15, 1684)$	13.84	20.51	11.20	13.87

Note. All fifteen predictors entered simultaneously. All four models $p < .001$. Maximum variance inflation factor 1.94. [a] marks coefficients that do not survive Benjamini-Hochberg correction across all 105 coefficient tests. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Self-other comparisons used paired-samples t tests. Because responses are bounded five-point ratings rather than continuous scores, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test accompanied every paired comparison; the two tests agreed in every case. Effect sizes are expressed as Cohen's *dz*, computed on the standard deviation of the difference. Group comparisons used Welch's t test with Cohen's *d* computed on the degrees-of-freedom-weighted pooled standard deviation.

Predictor models were estimated as standardised ordinary least squares regressions entering all fifteen predictors simultaneously, so each coefficient is adjusted for the remaining fourteen; the maximum variance inflation factor was 1.94. Free-text responses were coded with a pre-specified dictionary of word stems. The dictionary was fixed before analysis of the coded themes, themes were non-exclusive, and the proportion of responses referencing no coded theme is reported. Dictionary detections are treated as exploratory indicators rather than exhaustive qualitative coding.

Results

Participants

Participants (N = 1,793) had a mean age of 51.50 years (*SD* = 14.23) and comprised 1,386 males (77.30%), 387 females (21.58%), nine non-binary or third-gender individuals (0.50%) and 11 who preferred not to say (0.61%). Residence spanned 73 countries, led by the United States (52.76%), Brazil (8.48%), the United Kingdom (6.53%) and Canada (4.07%). Educational attainment was high, with 71.39% holding a bachelor's degree or above. Scientific engagement was high (75.18% very or extremely engaged), and participants reported a mean of 29.14 years (*SD* = 19.67) engaged with UAP information. Belief that NHI exists was near ceiling (92.86% probably or definitely), and 38.04% reported having witnessed what they believed to be a UAP (a rating of 4 or 5 on a five-point certainty item; Table 1). Engagement with the PURSUE portal itself was moderate and dispersed (24.42% very or extremely engaged, 21.03% not at all). Distributions of the key measures appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of key measures (N = 1,793)

Measure	1 – lowest	2	3	4	5 - highest	*M*	*SD*
Belief that NHI exists	0.28	1.06	5.80	25.60	67.26	4.59	0.68
Own readiness for further evidence	0.17	0.45	2.45	9.15	87.79	4.84	0.48
Perceived public readiness	5.41	9.70	22.98	36.87	25.04	3.66	1.12
Own reaction to NHI confirmation	0.56	0.89	6.47	13.39	78.69	4.69	0.68
Close-circle reaction to NHI confirmation	0.95	7.14	25.21	34.41	32.29	3.90	0.97
PURSUE releases: threat to national security	57.89	22.87	12.99	4.13	2.12	1.70	0.99
Close circle: threat to national security	65.87	20.86	10.76	1.78	0.73	1.51	0.81
NHI confirmation: perceived threat	52.48	29.28	14.39	2.29	1.56	1.71	0.90
NHI confirmation: effect on own life	20.64	20.86	24.87	22.09	11.54	2.83	1.30
Government should release more	0.56	0.17	1.67	5.35	92.25	4.89	0.46
Support for public funding of UAP research	1.84	2.18	6.30	13.44	76.24	4.60	0.85
Stigma discourages scientists	3.46	3.40	9.09	29.22	54.82	4.29	1.00
Institutional trust	37.03	34.80	19.85	6.75	1.56	2.01	0.99
Witnessed a genuine UAP	25.93	18.63	17.40	14.00	24.04	2.92	1.52
Interacted with NHI	55.33	20.08	11.94	4.57	8.09	1.90	1.25
PURSUE portal engagement	21.03	15.73	38.82	18.40	6.02	2.73	1.16

Note. Cell entries are percentages of the sample at each scale point. Anchors differ by item and are given in Supplementary Methods; in every case 1 denotes the lowest and 5 the highest level of the named construct. Religious-belief disruption is omitted because it is defined only for the 1,298 participants holding such beliefs.

Reception Was Curious, Not Fearful

Among respondents surveyed during the releases, curiosity was the most frequently endorsed reaction (Fig. 1). Curiosity was rated “very much” or “considerably” by 71.72% of participants (*M* = 4.04, *SD* = 1.09), followed by “happiness” or “excitement” (38.26%); no other reaction was endorsed by more than 22%. The most common negative reaction was anger or frustration (19.97%), not fear: fear or threat was the least endorsed of the eight reactions by a wide margin, reported “very much” or “considerably” by 1.90% (*M* = 1.29, *SD* = 0.67).

Threat Appraisal Was Minimal

Perceived threat was low for both referents (Fig. 2). The PURSUE releases were judged not at all threatening to national security by 57.89% and slightly threatening by a further 22.87%, with 6.25% at the top two points (*M* = 1.70, *SD* = 0.99). Hypothetical official confirmation of NHI was appraised almost identically (52.48% not at all threatening, 3.85% at the top two points) (*M* = 1.71, *SD* = 0.90). The two appraisals correlated r(1791) = .431, $p < .001$, consistent with related but non-identical judgements; they are never aggregated.

Participants Judged Themselves Far Readier Than the Public (H1)

H1 predicted a self-public asymmetry in anticipated coping capacity. Asked how ready they felt to encounter more complex or challenging UAP evidence, given classified sensor data, technical analyses and biological findings as examples, 87.79% selected "completely ready" and a further 9.15% "mostly ready" (96.93%; *M* = 4.84, *SD* = 0.48). Asked how ready they thought the general public was, on the identical scale, the same participants credited 61.91% with equivalent readiness (M = 3.66, SD = 1.12). The paired difference was 1.18 scale points, 95% CI [1.13, 1.22], t(1792) = 47.54, $p < .001$, $d_z = 1.12$, 95% CI [1.06, 1.18], corroborated by a Wilcoxon signed-rank test (W = 4,781, Z = −31.53, $p < .001$). It is not driven by a subgroup: 71.33% rated themselves above the public, 28.00% equally, and 0.67% rated the public higher (Fig. 3). Nor is it an artefact of the sample's gender composition: tested separately it is essentially identical among the 1,386 men (d_z = 1.11) and the 387 women (d_z = 1.16).

Self-rated readiness is severely ceilinged, with 87.79% at the maximum, which makes the categorical comparison partly mechanical. Restricting the test to the 219 participants below the ceiling reproduces it at near-full strength: self M = 3.68 (SD = 0.61) versus public M = 2.64 (SD = 1.09), t(218) = 14.37, $p < .001$, d_z = 0.97.

A parallel asymmetry appeared for anticipated reaction to NHI confirmation, where 92.08% expected a positive personal reaction against 66.70% attributed to their close circle, $t(1792) = 36.80$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.87$, 95% CI [0.82, 0.92] (Supplementary Table S1), and it too holds in both genders (0.88 and 0.84). Because this item uses a closer referent its effect size is not directly comparable to the readiness gap, since self-other gaps widen with social distance.

Preference For Further Release Was Near-Unanimous

Asked whether the U.S. government should release more or less UAP-related information, 92.25% selected "much more" and 5.35% "somewhat more" (97.60%; M = 4.89, SD = 0.46; Table 1). Fewer than 1% favoured any reduction. Support for government funding of scientific UAP research was also high but more differentiated: 76.24% strongly supported and 13.44% somewhat supported it (89.68%), with 4.02% opposed (M = 4.60, SD = 0.85).

Perceived Public Unreadiness Did Not Predict Support for Slower Release (H2)

H2 predicted that a larger perceived gap would translate into greater willingness to see release slowed; it did not. The readiness gap was only weakly related to disclosure preference, in the predicted direction, r(1791) = − .080, $p < .001$, accounting for 0.64% of variance on a scale where higher scores mean releasing more, and was unrelated to support for public funding, r(1791) = − .011, $p = .639$ (Fig. 4). Entering the gap alongside the same fifteen covariates used in Table 2 leaves the same picture, β = −.057, 95% CI [− .104, − .010], $p = .017$. The component correlations run in the same direction. Both self-rated readiness (r(1791) = .313, $p < .001$) and perceived public readiness (r(1791) = .210, $p < .001$) were positively associated with wanting more released.

Perceived Scientific Stigma Was Associated With Policy Attitudes (H3)

Perceived stigma was widely endorsed: 84.05% believed considerably or extremely that stigma discourages scientists from researching UAP (M = 4.29, SD = 1.00). Institutional trust was correspondingly low: 8.31% trusted institutions considerably or extremely to tell the truth about significant discoveries, against 71.83% reporting slight or no trust (M = 2.01, SD = 0.99). Standardised regressions entering fifteen predictors simultaneously were fitted for seven outcomes (n = 1,700; Fig. 5 and Table 2). Consistent with H3, perceived stigma was the strongest predictor of disclosure preference (β = .153, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .110$, $F(15, 1684) = 13.84$, $p < .001$) and by a wide margin the strongest predictor of support for public funding (β = .271, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .154$, $F(15, 1684) = 20.51$, $p < .001$). Belief that NHI exists followed in both models (β = .099, $p < .001$; and β = .117, $p < .001$). Institutional trust carried opposite signs across the two outcomes, negative for disclosure preference and positive for funding; the zero-order correlation with funding was − .032, so the positive adjusted coefficient is a suppression effect and should not be over-read.

Own readiness was predicted at $R^2 = .091$, $F(15, 1684) = 11.20$, $p < .001$, by disclosure engagement (β = .129, $p < .001$) ahead of four weaker terms (Table 2). Perceived public readiness was predicted at $R^2 = .110$, $F(15, 1684) = 13.87$, $p < .001$, by a markedly sparser model: disclosure engagement (β = .222, $p < .001$) and age (β = −.165, $p < .001$) accounted for almost all explained variance, with older participants crediting the public with less readiness.

Perceived threat was predicted far less well than the policy outcomes. For threat of NHI confirmation, $R^2 = .051$, $F(15, 1684) = 5.98$, $p < .001$, with scepticism the leading term (β = .120); for threat of the releases themselves, $R^2 = .031$, $F(15, 1684) = 3.56$, $p < .001$, with perceived stigma (β = .116) and institutional trust (β = .093) the only terms surviving correction. Both leave most variance unexplained, unsurprising given that both distributions sit at the floor.

Because the seven models comprise 105 coefficient tests, a Benjamini-Hochberg correction was applied across the full set; 27 of the 34 coefficients significant at $p < .05$ survived at $q < .05$, and those that did not are identified in Table 2 and Supplementary Table S2.

Religious Belief Was Not Anticipated to Be Disturbed

Of the sample, 1,298 participants (72.39%) held religious or spiritual beliefs, the remainder selected an explicit "not applicable" option and excluded from this analysis rather than coded as zero. Among believers, official confirmation of NHI was overwhelmingly judged non-disruptive: 78.74% said it would not at all cause them to question those beliefs, 11.09% slightly and 5.86% moderately, leaving 4.31% at the top two points (M = 1.37, SD = 0.84).

Of these, 1,029 named a specific affiliation. Restricting analysis to the six affiliations with at least 25 respondents (n = 991), one-way analysis of variance found no difference, $F(5, 985) = 1.55$, $p = .172$, $\eta^2 = .008$, with means ranging from 1.31 (spiritual but not religious) to 1.65 (Orthodox Christian). Two constraints apply: an equivalence test against a smallest effect size of interest of $f = .10$ did not support equivalence, so no difference was detected rather than shown absent, and Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh cells were too small to enter, leaving the traditions for which the theological question is arguably most contested untested.

The Dominant Spontaneous Concern Was Institutional

Two optional free-text items were completed at high rates: 1,466 participants (81.76%) described their greatest concern about hypothetical NHI confirmation and 1,283 (71.56%) gave opinions on the releases. Responses were coded with a pre-specified multilingual dictionary applied non-exclusively. These are detection rates, not prevalences: 36.77% and 41.62% of responses respectively referenced no coded theme, so only substantial differences between themes are interpretable.

The dominant concern was not non-human intelligence but the conduct of the disclosing institution. Government concealment or partial truth was referenced by 317 responses (21.62%), ahead of NHI intentions or hostility (209; 14.26%). No other theme exceeded 8.5%. On the releases themselves, demands for more or faster disclosure (17.85%) and appraisal of the programme as progress (15.82%) led, and they coexist: the modal stance is approval coupled with insistence on more. Full theme lists appear in Supplementary Table S3.

The coding showed convergent validity. Participants whose concern response referenced concealment reported lower institutional trust ($M = 1.80$ versus 2.02, $d = -0.22$, $p < .001$) and stronger disclosure preference ($M = 4.95$ versus 4.87, $d = 0.18$, $p < .001$). Those referencing NHI intentions rated both the releases ($d = 0.25$) and hypothetical confirmation ($d = 0.26$) as more threatening but did not differ in readiness ($p = .752$). This supports the precision of the codes, not their recall.

Discussion

Weeks into an official US programme releasing previously classified UAP records rather than assessments about them, the UAP-attentive audience following it most closely responded with curiosity rather than alarm, judged the material almost entirely unthreatening, reported that confirmation of non-human intelligence would not disturb their religious commitments, and asked, near-unanimously, for more. The institutional worry that has historically justified measured release is not visible in this population, though this is the audience least likely to exhibit it, and it is not the general public to whom that worry has always referred.

The Perceptual Gap and Its Policy Corollary

Participants nonetheless drew a sharp line between themselves and everyone else. Nearly all judged themselves ready for escalated evidence; barely six in ten extended that judgement to the public. The effect is large by conventional benchmarks even among the 219 participants below the response ceiling ($dz = 0.97$), and is widely distributed across the sample rather than concentrated in a subgroup. The asymmetry need not be pure bias: participants report a median of three decades of engagement and may simply be right that they are better prepared than a general population, and the paternalistic predictions of the third-person literature concern a bias, which cannot be separated from broadly accurate appraisal in these data. This is the first direct quantification, to our knowledge, in an actual disclosure event of the asymmetry Harrison inferred from Peters' religious-crisis data, where non-religious respondents predicted collapse for communities whose own members did not (Peters, 2011; Harrison, 2011).

Third-person research has repeatedly linked perceptual asymmetry to support for restriction, on the paternalistic logic that others need protecting (Gunther, 1995; Rojas et al., 1996). Here that link is effectively absent: the association runs in the predicted direction but accounts for 0.64% of the variance, and the decomposition reported in Fig. 4 shows it is carried by the perceived-public component of the difference score rather than by the asymmetry itself. The perception of others' unreadiness in this population does not generate demand for slower disclosure. The gap may be a genuine third-person perception whose behavioural corollary is suppressed by the sample's overwhelming commitment to transparency.

Threat Appraisal and Anticipated Consequence

Perceived threat was low: 6.25% judged the PURSUE releases very or extremely threatening to national security ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.99$), and 3.85% said the same of hypothetical official confirmation of non-human intelligence ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 0.90$). The threat findings are therefore and consistent across a real event and a hypothetical one. They align with the broader literature on anticipated reactions to contact scenarios (Kwon et al., 2018; Vakoch and Lee, 2000) and with Peters' religious findings, which this study extends from a hypothetical detection to an actual disclosure programme (Peters, 2011). The equivalence test means the religious null is a failure to detect rather than

a demonstration of sameness, and the untested traditions are a real limit on its scope. A selection constraint also applies: people whose religious commitments would be most disturbed by confirmation are unlikely to have spent decades following UAP material, so the low disruption reported here is partly a property of the sampling frame.

Absence of threat should not be read as absence of consequence. A third of participants expected NHI confirmation to alter their lives substantially, and this was the only measure on which the sample genuinely divided. One in five reported considerable anger or frustration and 1.90% substantive fear: minority reactions in a maximally habituated audience. Open responses suggest, that much of this negative reaction appears directed at concealment rather than at the records themselves: concealment was the most frequent spontaneous concern (21.62%), and participants who raised it reported lower institutional trust (M = 1.80) while wanting more released, not less (M = 4.95). It is taken up under institutional trust below. Engagement ran a median of 30 years, and within the sample anger declined with years of exposure ($r = -.096$, $p < .001$), a gradient consistent with habituation, therefore, these findings are unlikely to exaggerate the level of anger that might be reported by populations with less prior exposure to UAP. Population rates cannot be estimated from a self-selected sample, but small percentages are large absolute numbers: at the scale of any national population, even the 1.90% floor implies millions of individuals. Post-detection preparation is therefore warranted, not against mass panic, which did not appear even here, but for the predictable minority demands on communication, mental health and institutional response that such shares imply (Genevieve et al., 2025; Vilhauer et al., 2026).

Perceived Stigma as a Tractable Lever

The strongest coefficient in the study connects perceived scientific stigma to support for funding UAP research. This is the finding with the clearest institutional implication, because stigma is more tractable than trust. The historical record shows how the current position arose: the "giggle factor" ended NASA's High Resolution Microwave Survey on grounds that were reputational rather than evidential (Garber, 1999; Wright and Oman-Reagan, 2018), and roughly 25 years of federal avoidance followed. The contemporary residue is documented and, importantly, well ahead of the sanction colleagues say they would impose: faculty concern about professional sanction is roughly sevenfold greater than colleagues' reported willingness to impose it (52.67% versus 7.4%) (Yingling and Yingling, 2024).

Our data show that the public shares the perception, and that those who hold it most strongly are most willing to see the research funded. Institutional signals that normalise UAP science therefore act on a constituency already primed to support it. NASA's own panel identified the same dynamic and its consequences for reporting (National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2023). The mechanism need not stop at the academy: officials who anticipate ridicule for engaging the subject may under-report or stay silent, a stigma-driven form of secrecy that operates alongside classification and that no release schedule, by itself, can reach.

Implications for Disclosure Practice and Preparedness

Four implications follow that are actionable rather than interpretive. First, the pacing rationale is not supported in this audience. Nothing here speaks to how a general population would respond, but the group that monitors these records and shapes their online interpretation shows neither alarm nor a wish to see others shielded.

Second, preparedness planning is warranted despite the absence of alarm, not because of it. The pacing test asked whether people who see the public as unready want release slowed, and they do not. It did not ask what happens to the minority who do react strongly. That minority is small but not empty: 1.90% reported considerable or very much fear of the released records, and 33.63% expected confirmation of non-human intelligence to affect their lives very much or extremely. These figures come from the audience with the longest exposure to the subject, a median of 30 years, and fear of this kind is likely to be more common where the material is unfamiliar, since unfamiliarity, unpredictability and uncertainty reliably heighten perceived threat and anticipatory anxiety (Carleton, 2016; Grupe and Nitschke, 2013; Slovic, 1987). Preparedness planning for minority reaction is therefore a warranted part of the disclosure process.

Third, what this audience wants is procedural rather than substantive. The most frequent spontaneous concern was not what the records might contain but whether the release is complete and candid. That is a question about process, and process questions can be answered: publishing the criteria by which records are selected, the volume withheld and the reason, and the schedule for subsequent tranches addresses the stated concern directly, whereas releasing more material without that scaffolding does not.

Fourth, the constituency for funding UAP science already exists and is organised around a perception of stigma rather than around belief. Support for public funding tracked perceived stigma more strongly than any other variable measured, including belief that non-human intelligence exists. Institutional signals that normalise the subject inside science therefore act on a receptive audience, and the faculty data suggest the anticipated sanction exceeds what colleagues report willingness to apply (Yingling and Yingling, 2024).

Institutional Trust Predates the Programme

Institutional trust in this sample is very low, and the most frequent spontaneous concern about hypothetical NHI confirmation was not the intelligence but the possibility that government would not tell the whole truth about it. This should not be attributed to PURSUE: in 2019, seven years before the programme existed, 68% of Americans already believed the government knew more about UAP than it was telling (Saad, 2019). The transparency literature predicts the pattern, since disclosure does not reliably repair confidence and can sharpen attention to what remains withheld (Bastos and Duarte, 2026; Cucciniello et al., 2017; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013), particularly where the claim has been stigmatised and official rejection is itself read as confirmation (Barkun, 2015).

The implication is not that disclosure fails, but that a single programme cannot discharge a deficit built over decades, and that the concerns this audience voices are procedural rather than existential. They potentially ask what is still classified, why it was withheld, and whether the release is complete. Those are answerable questions.

Limitations

The sample is self-selected and UAP-attentive, with a witness rate about 2.4 times the 16% Gallup recorded among US adults (Saad, 2019); every estimate describes that audience, not a population. Probability-sample polls nonetheless show that the beliefs involved are not fringe: in 2021, 65% of US adults told Pew Research Center that intelligent life exists on other planets and 51% judged military-reported UFOs probably or definitely evidence of it (Kennedy and Lau, 2021), and Gallup found 41% believing some UFOs involve alien spacecraft, up from 33% in 2019 (Saad, 2021). The distance between this sample and the general public is therefore one of attentiveness and degree rather than kind, though reactions to disclosure among less attentive publics remain unmeasured (Vilhauer et al., 2026). Within the sample the estimates are stable: the curiosity-dominant reception, the readiness asymmetry, the near-ceiling preference for release and the stigma-funding association each reproduce among US and non-US residents and among men and women (Supplementary Table S4), and participants reporting a UAP sighting differed from non-witnesses in belief, trust, readiness and appraised threat, but not on the two policy outcomes or perceived stigma (Supplementary Table S5). The design is a single cross-section and cannot speak to change across the release programme. Ratings of readiness for, and threat from, hypothetical NHI confirmation are affective forecasts, and people systematically mispredict the intensity and duration of their future emotional reactions (Wilson and Gilbert, 2003); responses to an actual confirmation could depart from these anticipations in either direction.

Conclusion

While public reactions to UAP disclosure has been debated, this study found evidence of a UAP attentive population who are eager for more complete release and government transparency on the UAP overall subject. The audience following the PURSUE releases most closely met them with curiosity, saw almost no threat in them, expected no crisis of faith, and asked for more. They did believe the wider public less prepared than themselves, which is precisely the perception institutions have invoked. That perception carried no meaningful demand for less release. The constraint on disclosure, in this population, is not appetite or resilience. It is credibility, and on this evidence credibility is more likely to be repaired by continuing, with candour about what is withheld, than by pausing.

Declarations

Data availability

The full dataset and the SPSS output are available in the Open Science Framework repository at: https://osf.io/gjfpe. The project carries an Open Science Framework registration at:

https://osf.io/pr9uj.

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Author contributions

O.E., G.T., J.V., T.L., D.S., G.D.T., T.R., M.S. and A.L. conceived the study and designed the survey instrument. O.E., G.T., J.V., T.L., D.S., G.D.T., T.R., M.S. and A.L. contributed to participant recruitment and data collection. O.E. curated the data, performed the statistical analysis and

prepared the figures and tables. J.V., T.L., D.S., G.D.T. and T.R. contributed to interpretation of the results. O.E. and J.V. drafted the manuscript. G.T., T.L., D.S., G.D.T., T.R., M.S. and A.L. reviewed and revised the manuscript. All authors approved the submitted version.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics declarations

***Ethical approval*.** This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the School of Psychology, Reichman University, Herzliya, Israel, on 12 June 2026, ethical clearance number P_2026164.

Informed consent. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Each read an information page describing the purpose, duration, voluntary nature and anonymity of the study before proceeding by affirmative action, and was free to withdraw at any point. No identifying information is reported.

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Figures

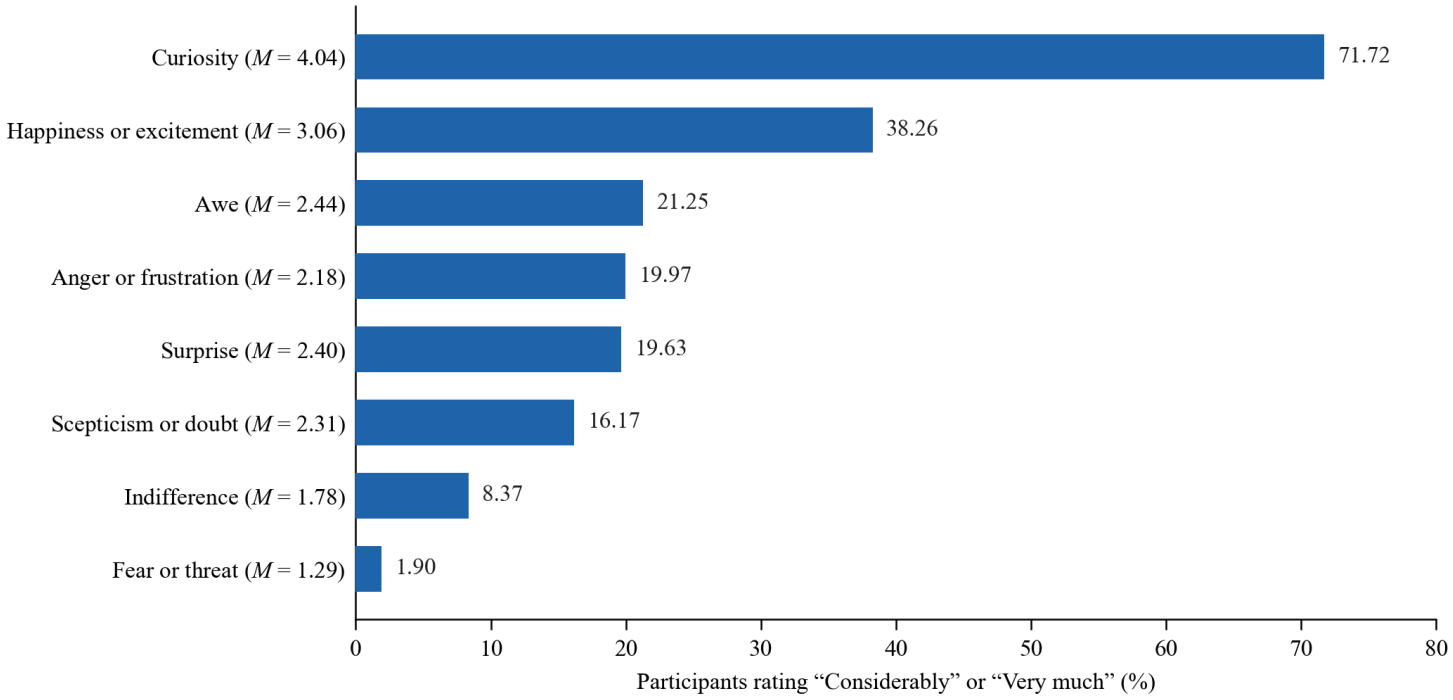


Figure 1

Emotional reactions to the PURSUE releases

Note. Bars show the percentage of participants rating each reaction "Considerably" or "Very much", with scale means (1–5) in parentheses. Fear is the least endorsed of the eight reactions. N = 1,793.

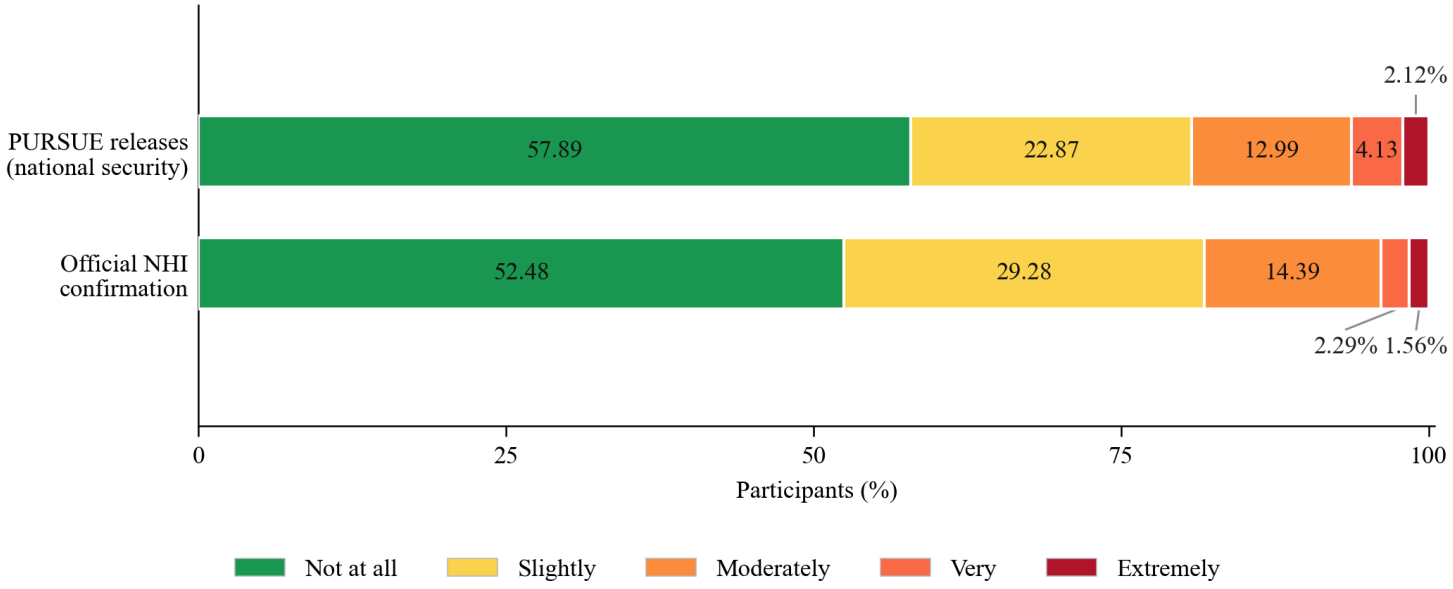


Figure 2

Perceived threat of the PURSUE releases and of hypothetical NHI confirmation.

Note. Perceived threat of the PURSUE releases to national security and of hypothetical official confirmation of non-human intelligence, on five-point threat anchors from “Not at all” to “Extremely”. *N*= 1,793.

Anticipated personal-life disruption is a distinct construct and behaved differently. It was the one measure on which this sample genuinely divided: 33.63% expected NHI confirmation to affect their lives very much or extremely, 24.87% moderately and 41.50% slightly or not at all (*M* = 2.83, *SD* = 1.30). The absence of perceived threat does not indicate an absence of anticipated consequence.

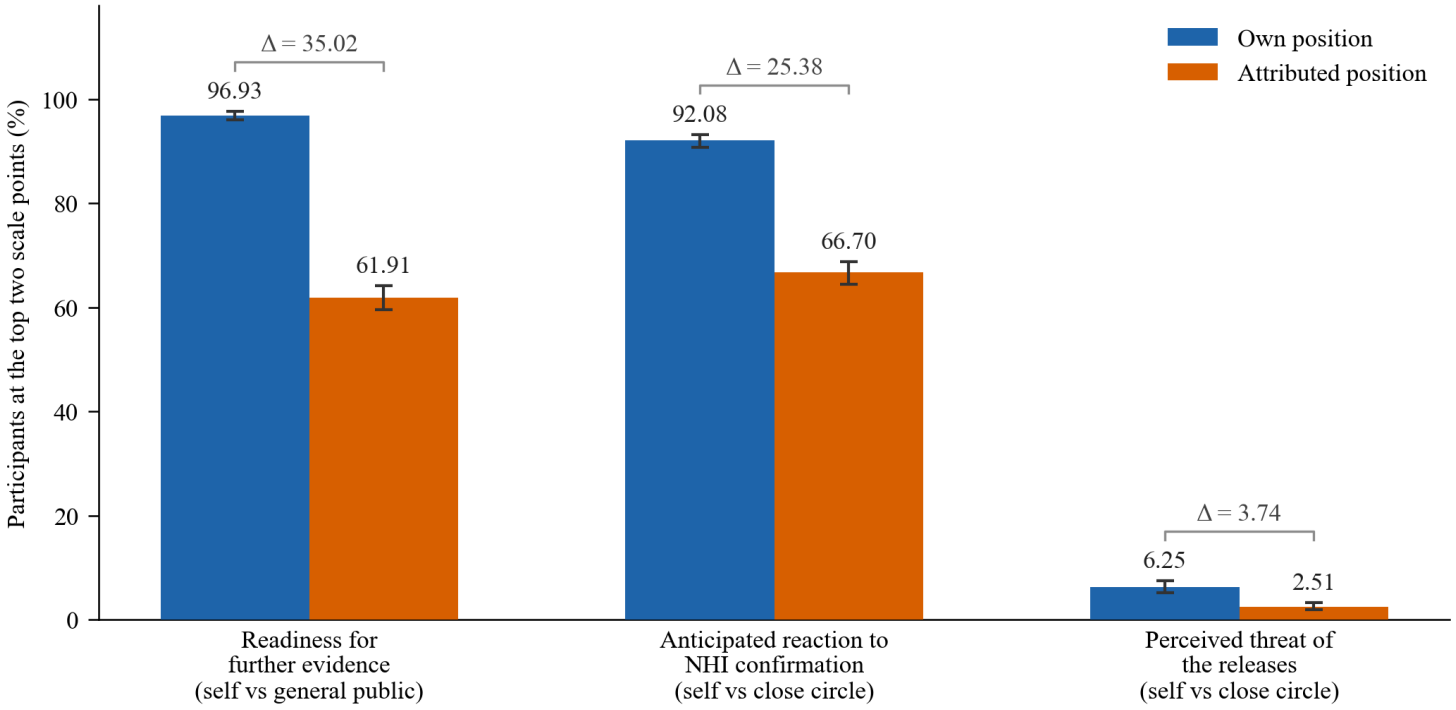


Figure 3

Self–other asymmetries in readiness, anticipated reaction and perceived threat.

Note. Columns show the percentage of participants at the top two scale points (4 or 5) with Wilson 95% confidence intervals: blue for participants' own position and orange for the position they attributed to others; Δ is the difference in percentage points. The paired tests reported in the text are conducted on the full 1–5 scales. The readiness comparison uses the general public as referent while the other two use the close circle, so the ordering of effect sizes is confounded with social distance and is not interpreted. N = 1,793.

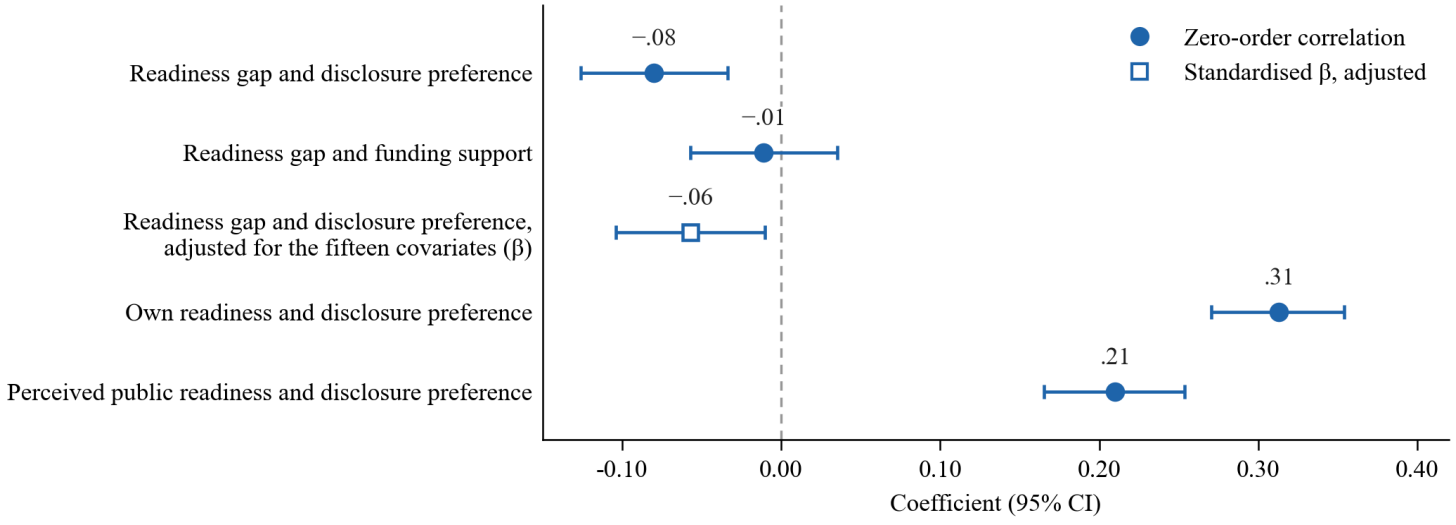


Figure 4

Associations between the readiness gap, its components and policy preferences

Note. Circles are zero-order Pearson correlations and the open square is the standardised coefficient for the readiness gap from the regression entering the fifteen covariates of Table 2; horizontal bars are 95% confidence intervals (Fisher z for correlations). Higher disclosure-preference scores mean releasing more. The gap correlates −.903 with perceived public readiness and .083 with own readiness, so it is dominated by the perceived-public component. N = 1,793; adjusted coefficient n = 1,700.

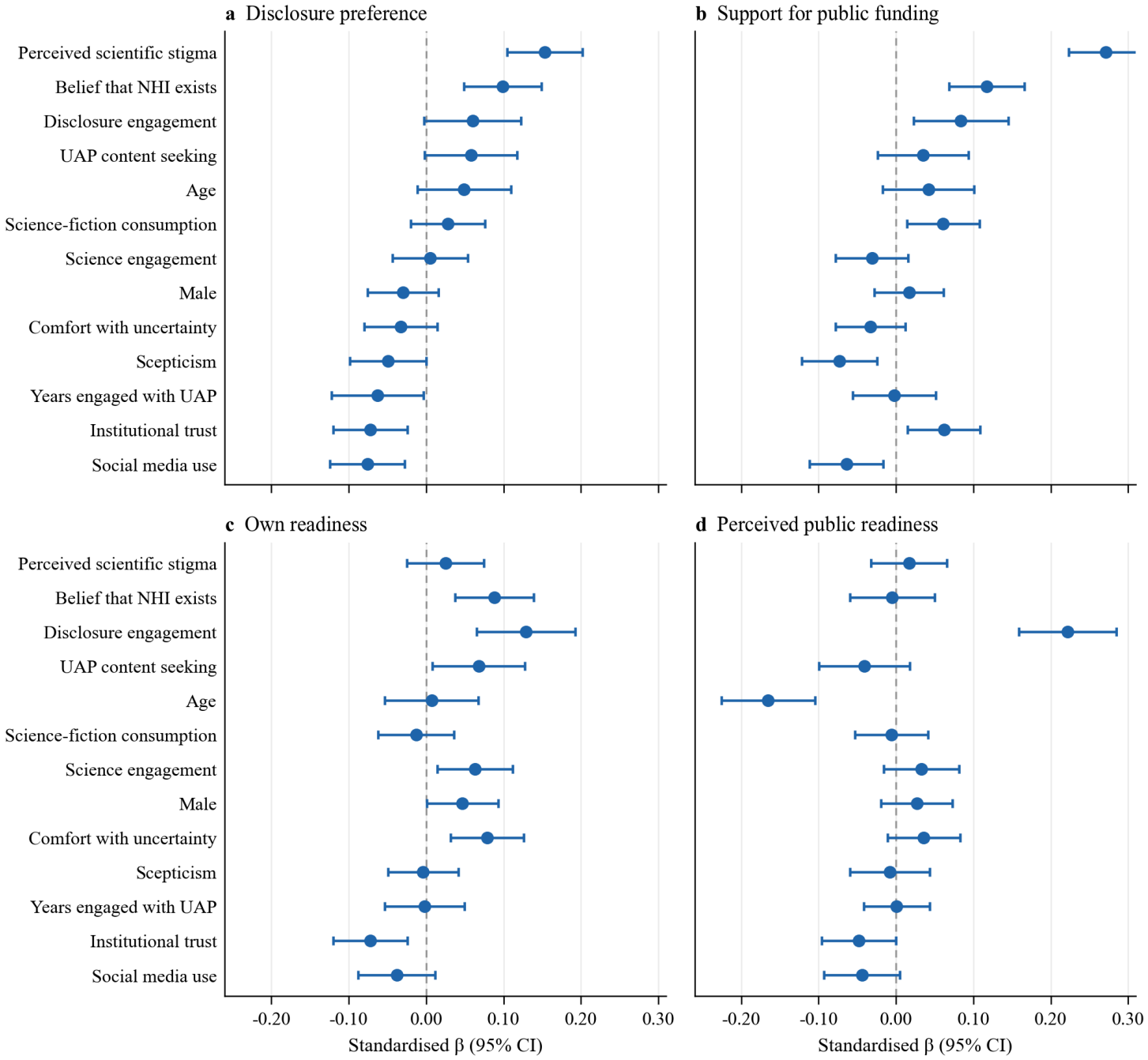


Figure 5

Standardised regression coefficients for four of the seven outcome models.

Note. a Disclosure preference. b Support for public funding. c Own readiness. d Perceived public readiness. All fifteen predictors were entered simultaneously; predictors reaching $p < .05$ in at least one of these four models are shown, ordered by their coefficient in panel a. Horizontal bars are 95% confidence intervals. n = 1,700 with complete data on all predictors; maximum variance inflation factor 1.94. Full

coefficients for the three models not displayed are available in the deposited output; coefficients whose tests do not survive the false discovery rate correction are identified in Table 2 and Supplementary Table S2.

Supplementary Files

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- SupplementaryInformation.docx