

Research shows some people believe scientists threaten their group's power, values

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Increasingly divisive messages about science have led some people to see scientists as a group that is "for" or "against" their political or religious social groups, according to new research.

This skepticism is happening despite scientists having [diverse backgrounds](#), expertise and identities, said study co-author Ariel Hasell, assistant professor of communication and media at the University of Michigan.

In a new study that appears in the *Public Understanding of Science*, researchers at U-M and the University of Wisconsin used data to examine who holds these viewpoints and potential implications of threat perceptions.

A sample of 1,421 respondents participated in the Wave 1 survey, of which 975 also completed the Wave 2 survey between December 2020 and March 2021. They disclosed their age, race, education and [political affiliations](#). The surveys involved questions about perceived threat from scientists, information gathering from news outlets and [social media](#), and overall views about science.

Results suggest Republicans and evangelical-identifying individuals perceive more social threat from scientists. Viewing scientists as a group posing a social threat was associated with having less accurate science beliefs, support for excluding scientists from policymaking, and support for retributive actions toward scientists, the study shows.

"If you view scientists as an opposing social group, you might think they pose threats to your group's political power, [economic resources](#), or values and worldview, and want to take actions to prevent that," said lead author Sedona Chinn, assistant professor of life sciences communication at UW-Madison.

For news media exposure, results show that use of national television news and CNN were significantly associated with less threat perception, while use of Fox News was significantly associated with more threat perception. Other forms of news media exposure had no associations

with threat perception.

"When individuals are personally unfamiliar with scientists, they may form impressions from what they hear or see in media, thus representation in [news coverage](#) is likely to impact how audiences perceive scientists," Chinn said.

"The findings also indicated that using social media to connect with friends and family was significantly associated with less threat perception, while aspirational use of social media (following influencers for inspiration and advice) was significantly associated with more threat perception. However, using social media to seek news and information had no association with threat [perception](#)."

While threat perceptions and mistrust were correlated, perceived threat had a stronger association with support for excluding scientists from policymaking and was associated with support for retributive actions though mistrust was not, the study shows.

"These findings reinforce that perceptions of threat are associated with taking actions to harm the out-group or improve the position of the in-group, above and beyond the effects of mistrust," Chinn said.

When people position science as something we should be for or against, believe or disbelieve, we lose sight of the fact that scientific research is a process, Hasell said.

"Often new evidence renders previous knowledge incorrect or irrelevant," she said. "Distrust, criticism and debate, when done in good faith, are part of this process and should be engaged with rather than demonized or weaponized. Otherwise, as our study shows, people may begin to see science and scientists as a social or political [threat](#), inhibiting society's ability to address large scale problems like hunger,

disease and climate change."

More information: Sedona Chinn et al, Threatening experts: Correlates of viewing scientists as a social threat, *Public Understanding of Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/09636625231183115](https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625231183115)

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