

COGNITIVE BIASES

Authority bias



KEY WORDS

authority | expertise | influence | critical thinking

"They must be right... they're in charge!"

Why do we sometimes believe people just because they look or sound like they know better? It happens more often than we think, whether it's a teacher, a doctor, or someone speaking confidently on TikTok. Without even noticing, we might accept what they say simply because they seem to know more than us. That's the effect of authority bias: we trust people more than we should, just because they appear important or in control.

"What is authority bias?"

Authority bias happens when we believe, agree with, or follow someone just because they seem to be in a position of authority, even if they're not actually qualified, or even if what they say doesn't really make sense. In other words, it's not always about **what** they say, but it's about **who** we think they are!

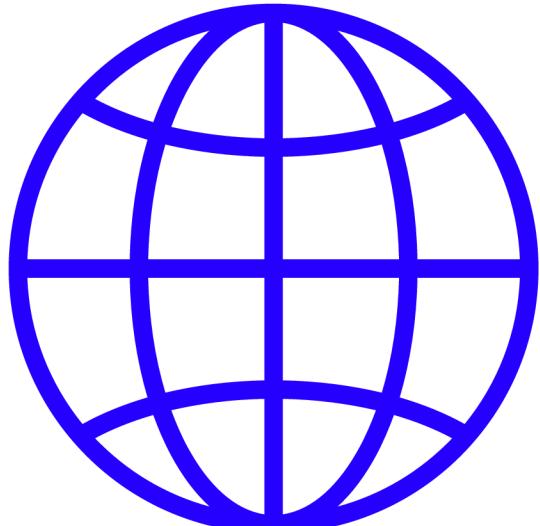
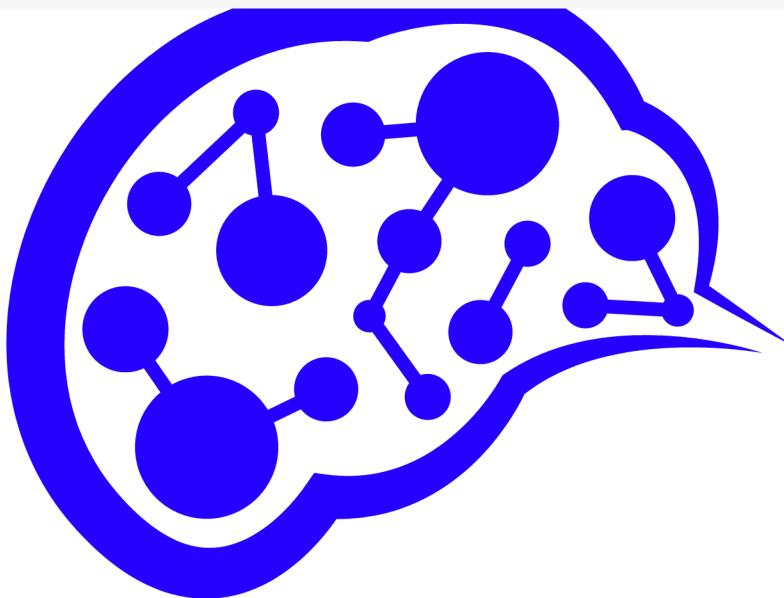




“Ever seen this happen?”

Imagine you’re scrolling through Instagram and a fitness influencer pops up in your feed. She looks super healthy, has glowing skin, and talks with total confidence. She says you should try the Dukan diet or go on a 7-day fast to “reset your body”. It sounds convincing, and the video has thousands of likes. You think: “Well, she looks great... she must know what she’s talking about.” But here’s the thing: she’s not a certified nutritionist, she’s not a doctor, she just seems like she knows, and that’s exactly how authority bias works.

We trust someone because of **how** they present themselves, not **because** they’re actually qualified.





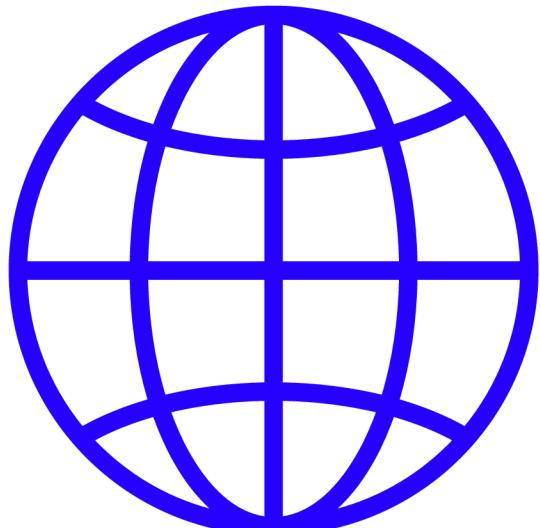
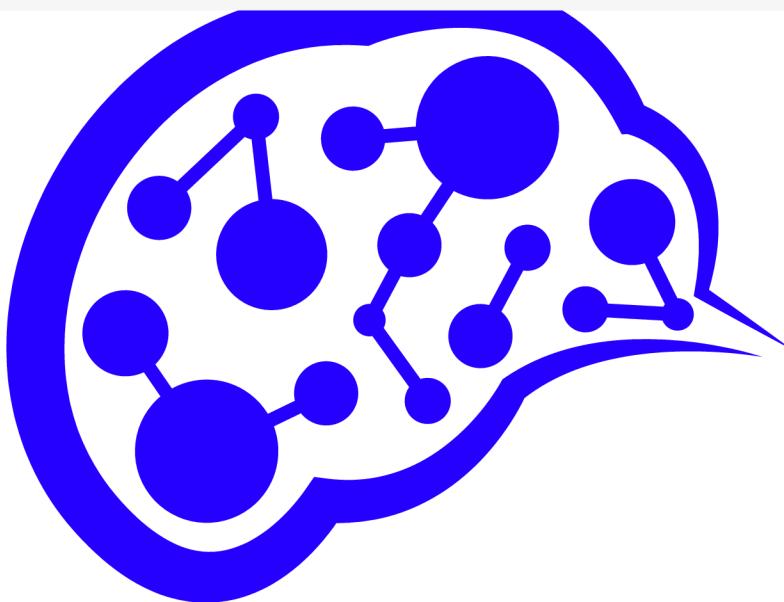
“They probably know better.”

This bias is part of how our brains are wired. When someone appears to be in charge, our instinct kicks in and tells us: “They look confident, so they must be right.”

Here are a few reasons why this happens:

- **It saves mental effort.** Instead of researching or thinking critically, we “outsource” our decision to the expert.
- **We’ve been trained to follow authority figures** since we were kids: parents, teachers, coaches. It feels natural.
- **Confidence is persuasive.** Someone who speaks firmly and looks the part can seem more reliable than they really are.

This doesn’t mean all authority is bad. Doctors, teachers and scientists often are experts. But authority bias kicks in when we stop thinking critically just because of who’s talking.



"Is it fact or just confidence?"

You don't need to be rude, skeptical of everything, or mistrustful of real experts. But you do have the right (and responsibility) to think for yourself!

Here are three simple questions to ask:

- "Is this person actually qualified to speak on this topic?"
(Wearing a stethoscope doesn't make someone a doctor.)
- "Would I trust this advice if it came from someone else?"
(If a random friend said it, would you still agree?)
- "Can I fact-check this from another source?"
(Use websites from universities, scientific journals, official institutions...).

Being respectful doesn't mean agreeing with everything.

Being curious doesn't mean being rude.

Thinking for yourself is not disrespectful: it's smart!



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