The effects of Moral Grandstanding on perceived Credibility

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of moral grandstanding, public moral expression aimed at enhancing one's status, on the perceived credibility of an online commenter and whether this effect was moderated by the observer agreeing or disagreeing with the topic. Two hypotheses were tested, namely whether moral grandstanding reduces perceived credibility and whether this negative effect is less pronounced when the reader agrees with the topic. A between-subjects design was used where 148 participants were randomly assigned to read a comment advocating for genetic modification that either contained manifestations of grandstanding or not. Participants first rated their agreement with genetic modification, then were randomly exposed to one of the two conditions and then rated their perceived credibility of the commenter. The results supported the first hypothesis, the commenter who engaged in moral grandstanding was rated as significantly less credible than the one that did not. The second hypothesis was not supported, agreement with the topic did not moderate the relationship between moral grandstanding and perceived credibility. Interestingly, agreement did increase perceived credibility independent from moral grandstanding. Agreement may not protect against negative evaluations caused by grandstanding since grandstanding may override the effect of agreement on perceived credibility. This research suggests that moral grandstanding can diminish perceived credibility, regardless of whether the audience agrees with the grandstander. This has implications for public discourse where audiences might value authenticity and genuine moral concern more than performative displays used to enhance one's status.

Keywords: moral grandstanding, perceived credibility, agreement, moral discourse, public discourse, communication styles, rhetoric, morality

The effects of Moral Grandstanding on perceived Credibility

During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, critics noted that candidates often relied on spectacle rather than substance, using moral and political talk more to provoke and to impress rather than to solve problems (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). This is illustrated by columnist Ross Douthat critiquing Donald Trump's speech and calling it "the perpetual distraction of Twitter feuds and pseudo-patriotic grandstanding" (Tosi & Warmke, 2020, p. 7). Ironically, Trump's own campaign website declared, "We need real solutions to address real problems. Not grandstanding or political agendas" (Tosi & Warmke, 2020, p. 7). These contrasting statements reflect a key issue in modern public discourse: the use of moral or political language not to solve problems, but to promote oneself (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). This phenomenon is known as moral grandstanding, defined by the process where one tries to convince others that they are 'morally respectable' to seek social status. The idea is that people grandstand to appear righteous and worthy of respect (Tosi & Warmke, 2020).

Moral grandstanding is important to study because it shapes how people engage in public discourse and might greatly influence discussions regarding morality. While moral grandstanding can create the impression of sincerity and moral alignment with the audience, it can also be perceived as performative and manipulative (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). This ambiguity presents us with a critical question: Does grandstanding enhance or reduce a person's credibility in the eyes of others? Understanding how grandstanding influences credibility can help explain why some moral claims are trusted to be genuine while others are seen as performative and disingenuous. This brings us to the main purpose of this paper, namely researching the effect of moral grandstanding on the perceived credibility of an online commenter. Additionally, to make sense

of the mixed findings in the literature regarding grandstanding and credibility, we also examine whether this relationship is moderated by agreement with the topic.

Perceived credibility

Perceived credibility refers to how believable and trustworthy a commenter appears and is based on the subjective judgement of the audience rather than any objective evidence (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Credibility is important since it plays a key role in how we interpret information. Messages that are rated as highly credible are more likely to be accepted, remembered and acted upon, making credibility an important factor in shaping public attitude and behavior (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Additionally, in today's information rich society where people are often exposed to conflicting messages, credibility is a crucial filter to determine what to believe and who to trust. Misjudging credibility might lead to the acceptance of misinformation and the reinforcement of false beliefs (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Lastly, credibility is interesting from a psychological standpoint since the process of credibility assessment is not a purely rational one but is also shaped by metacognitive processes and contextual factors (Tormala & Petty, 2004). In other words, assessing credibility involves a complex interaction between cognition, perception and context (Tormala & Petty, 2004). All in all, the complexity and its important consequences make perceived credibility an interesting variable to study.

Five important factors are known to influence the credibility of a claim. Firstly, McCroskey & Teven (1999) emphasize the importance of the communicator's competence (perceived intelligence and expertise), trustworthiness (perceived sincerity and reliability) and goodwill (perceived concern for the audience's best interests) when it comes to perceived credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Furthermore, Wathen & Burkell (2002) add that the

reputation of the person making a claim is important. Credentials such as 'doctor' or 'professor' were found to enhance credibility. Lastly, well-written arguments supported by citations and data also showed enhanced credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Building on the research mentioned, we can speculate that the mechanisms behind perceived credibility are multifaceted, involving both cognitive and affective processes. One of these mechanisms might be heuristic processing (Bohner et al., 1995). According to the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), people often might rely on mental shortcuts rather than analytical thinking to assess credibility. For example, if someone uses confident and difficult language or holds a prestigious title, people may deem this person as credible without critically evaluating the content itself. A second mechanism is confirmation bias, where people accept information more easily if it aligns with their own attitude (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). All in all, these mechanisms suggest that credibility not only depends on the source of the information but also on the psychological processes and biases of the audience. Moral grandstanding can be expected to affect perceived credibility through these same mechanisms, which we will elaborate on in the next section.

Moral grandstanding

Moral grandstanding refers to the strategic and public use of moral language to enhance one's reputation or status. It has many different manifestations that are all aimed at showing moral superiority (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). One example is ramping up, which is making increasingly stronger claims to show that you are more morally sensitive than others. The goal is to highlight others' perceived lack of moral awareness and to show one's heightened moral insight. Another example is the display of excessive emotion, such as outrage, to signal that the grandstander is most affected by the situation and thus has the greatest moral insight (Tosi &

Warmke, 2020). Using the different manifestations, grandstanding may be used to try to appear as the most emphatic or the most morally sensitive in a discussion, framing others as indifferent and morally unaware (Tosi & Warmke 2020). Ultimately, grandstanding functions to discredit the other person by showing that their arguments and opinions are invalid because this person is less or not morally respectable compared to themselves (Tosi & Warmke, 2020).

Moral grandstanding is said to have several negative effects, three of which we will focus on here. Firstly, according to Grubbs et al., (2019), it might have a dangerous effect on moral discussions. This study showed that moral grandstanding was associated with an increase in moral and political conflict. Secondly, those that engaged in moral grandstanding were more likely to find it difficult to relate to others regarding moral issues (Grubbs et al., 2019). Thirdly, moral grandstanding might be associated with political polarization. The motivation to grandstand was found to be higher for people with an extreme left or right wing political identity (Grubbs et al., 2019; Grubss et al., 2020). These results suggest that moral grandstanding could lead to; moral conflict, intolerance for different opinions and polarization. However, both these studies were correlational and the researchers did not state a mechanism that could explain how moral grandstanding results in polarization.

In the present study we focus on another potentially negative effect of grandstanding, namely its possible effect on the perceived credibility of the grandstander. Through the mechanism of heuristic processing mentioned earlier (Boher et al., 1995), it is argued that grandstanding may either enhance or undermine credibility, depending largely on whether it is recognized as such. When grandstanding goes unnoticed, perhaps because it is expressed subtly or only mildly, it may positively influence credibility. The grandstander may appear as more aligned with the audience's moral compass and more socially attuned, which might enhance their

perceived goodwill and trustworthiness. These are important factors that can enhance credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Even if a person's expertise is questionable, the use of overly emotional and emphatic language may trigger affective trust, meaning that people 'feel' that a person is credible. During this process people might engage in heuristic processing and not engage in critical evaluation (Bohner et al., 1995) and thereby still rate the grandstander as credible. However, we argue that this effect may reverse when grandstanding is clearly present and recognized for what it is. That is why in this study we investigate the possibility that grandstanding may backfire. It is argued that too much grandstanding can lead people to question the speaker's motives and authenticity. Overly dramatic displays of emotion or statements that are clearly made to enhance one's image might come across as manipulative or insincere (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). Especially for the more critical audiences who do not engage in this heuristic processing (Bohner et al., 1995). In such a case, rather than reinforcing trust, clear grandstanding might trigger distrust or cynicism and lower perceived credibility. This might be especially the case when the comments made lack substance and the grandstander appears performative. To summarize, it is suggested that the credibility of a grandstander depends on whether the audience interprets their behavior as grandstanding or if it is mistaken for genuine moral talk. We reason that if someone appears to only participate in a discussion to boost their moral image, their motives might be questioned and they might be perceived as less credible. Following this logic, we hypothesize that moral grandstanding will have a negative effect on perceived credibility. However, we believe the effect of grandstanding on perceived credibility might also be affected by another factor, namely whether someone agrees with the grandstander or not.

Agreement with the Topic

Agreement refers to the extent to which a person supports a message and accepts it as being true. In this study we were interested in the moderating effect that agreement with a topic might have. To illustrate the importance of agreement as a moderator, four interesting effects suggested by previous studies are mentioned. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, agreement is an important variable because people are more likely to trust information that aligns with their already existing knowledge and beliefs (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Secondly, Savejnarong et al., (2022) found results that suggest that participants perceived a grandstander as more moral when they agreed with the statement that was made (Savejnarong et al., 2022). While their study focused on perceived morality rather than credibility, morality is seen as an important factor that influences perceived credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). People may put more trust in those who they believe are acting out of genuine moral concern rather than self-interest, possibly enhancing their credibility. Thirdly, agreement is already a known factor that may directly influence the perceived credibility of a message (Kuutila et al., 2024). This study suggests that readers tend to judge information that aligns with their beliefs as more credible regardless of how it is presented (Kuutila et al., 2024). Lastly, research by Clark & Evans (2014) suggests that a credible source increases confidence in thoughts and strengthens attitudes when the message supports what the person already believes. Conversely, when a message is non-credible and goes against a person's beliefs it might increase confidence in a person's negative reactions and make them resist the message more (Clark & Evans, 2014). Considering these previous studies we suspect that agreement with a topic might influence how the person making a certain statement is evaluated. It is argued that when one already agrees with a statement, moral grandstanding might have little effect on how credible the person seems. On the contrary, when one does not agree with a statement, moral grandstanding might be more striking and the reader might think of the

commenter as less credible. A possible explanation for this is that when someone already agrees with the message, they may perceive the person grandstanding as being on 'their side'. This might buffer negative impressions caused by grandstanding. This aligns with the phenomenon of ingroup bias which states that people tend to view members of their own group more positively and hold negative biases against outgroup members (Castelli et al., 2008). Perceiving someone as part of your ingroup because you agree with them may lead to more lenient judgements, making them seem more credible despite their grandstanding. In contrast, disagreement may make people more sensitive to how the message is delivered, motivating them to pay closer attention to how a person tries to get his point across and to possible hidden motives. Ingroup bias also plays a role here, as outgroups are often evaluated more harshly because of negative stereotypes (Castelli et al., 2008), potentially making the grandstander seem more self-serving or insincere. In other words, perceived credibility may decrease more quickly when the grandstander is seen as part of the outgroup. All in all, agreement with the topic might shape both the motivation to scrutinize the commenter and the social lens through which their behavior is interpreted. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesized that agreement moderates the effect of moral grandstanding on perceived credibility. In line with our first hypothesis, we expect moral grandstanding to have a negative effect on perceived credibility for both people high and low on agreement. However, we expect this effect to be smaller for those high in agreement. In other words, we predict that for people who score low on agreement with the topic, moral grandstanding will have a negative effect on the perceived credibility of the commenter; whereas for those high in agreement , this negative effect will be smaller.

The present research

We think the present study is relevant in three key ways. Firstly, because few studies have looked at how moral grandstanding affects the credibility of the commenter as a whole. Secondly, the study by Savejnarong et al., (2022) already found that people judge a grandstander more positively when they agree with them. However, this study did not look at how this might affect the way that people perceive the credibility of the grandstander. Thirdly, most studies that have investigated the effect of moral grandstanding have been correlational studies, not experimental. Few studies actually manipulate moral grandstanding as an independent variable and look at its effects, like this study did.

Methods

Participants & Design

Our dataset consisted of 254 cases, however 106 cases were removed from the dataset in the following three steps. Firstly, 98 participants were removed due to incompleteness of filling out the survey. The criterion used for this was that any participant that did not get to and filled out the seriousness check would be considered 'incomplete'. This is because not having an answer on this prohibited us from verifying whether these participants took part seriously or not. It is important to note that this also includes people who only opened the survey or who read the information about the study and filled in the survey at a later time. Therefore, many of these removed participants never answered any questions or quit after only answering a few. Only 23 of these removed participants actually made it to the manipulation, others had already quit the survey prior to the manipulation. Furthermore, only 11 of the removed participants filled out any of our dependent variable items. This illustrates that these removed participants were mostly people who did not participate in the study fully. Secondly, two participants were removed because they filled in that they did not participate in the study seriously on our seriousness

check. Thirdly, six participants were removed because they indicated that they wanted their data removed when finding out the true intention of our study at our debrief screen. Of the remaining 148 participants, 84 identified as female, 61 as male, one as nonbinary and two participants preferred not to disclose their gender. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 63 years ($M =$ 27.24, $SD =$ 10.41). Participants were recruited by the students asking people in their personal networks as well as sharing an invitation link with their online network, asking them to take part in a study about how online discussions are experienced.

This study employed a between-subjects design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions of the independent variable moral grandstanding; the moral grandstanding condition or the control condition. The dependent variable was the perceived credibility of the commenter and the moderator was agreement with the topic. This study was part of a larger project involving additional variables, which are beyond the scope of this paper and will therefore not be discussed here. A full list of all the used variables can be found Table A1 of Appendix A.

Materials & Procedure

The ethics committee of the University of Groningen approved our study after reviewing it. Students shared an invitation link with their social network, asking potential participants to take part in a study about how online discussions are experienced. Therefore, the true purpose of the study was not disclosed but concealed with a cover story. The survey used for the study was designed in the form of an online questionnaire using Qualtrics. Participating in the study took about fifteen minutes, and participation was voluntary, meaning that the participants were able to stop the survey at any time. Participants first filled out a consent form and were able to download

an information sheet about the study and a copy of the informed consent form to ensure ethical and authorized collection of their data.

Agreement with the topic

After participants provided their informed consent, the moderator agreement with the topic was measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree) ($\alpha = .85$). This scale assessed to what extent the participants agreed with the use of gene modification. Three questions regarding gene modification were asked, which were made by the researchers themselves. An example of a question is; "The benefits of gene modification for disorder or disability prevention outweigh potential risks". All the questions that were asked can be found in Table B1 of Appendix B. The order of the question was randomized for each participant to rule out possible order effects. Lastly, one question was reverse coded to make sure the participants were paying attention while answering.

Moral grandstanding

After this, participants were exposed to our manipulation. The independent variable was operationalized through exposure to an online discussion on gene modification. The choice was made for the grandstanding to be presented in a fictional social media post because this is a realistic setting for our grandstanding manipulation. According to Grubbs et al., (2019), public discussions are often toxic and filled with conflict. This is especially true when the discussions are related to moral issues and when they take place on social media (Grubbs et al., 2019). Additionally, these social media platforms tend to function like moral echo chambers, where there is little room for ideas that differ from one specific moral perspective and where this one dominating perspective is reinforced by others engaging in the discussion (Grubbs et al., 2019).

This makes social media a good candidate where moral grandstanding can be expressed easily and realistically.

With this in mind, a fictional social media post about gene modification was made. Participants reviewed this online thread involving a screenshot from a discussion on gene modification on the social media platform X. Four factors were taken into consideration when choosing the topic of gene modification: it needed to involve morality, be engaging, avoid extreme polarization and have political relevance. This topic was chosen to ensure participant engagement without provoking such strong opinions that grandstanding might not have an effect. It was also chosen since gene modification raises moral questions of modifying human beings, is engaging and relevant for the future and allows for nuanced perspectives. The varied application of gene modification, such as disease prevention or IQ enhancement, enable a range of opinions and should therefore not have been too polarizing of a subject. Lastly, since one of our researchers focused on politics (see Appendix A Table A1), the subject also had to be political. Gene modification was seen as suitable for a political setting since it raises questions about how society should regulate and apply powerful scientific technologies like gene modification.

The screenshot that participants were exposed to consisted of four commenters who alternatively expressed positions for or against gene modification. This discussion began with one user posting a summary and link to an article on the platform X, initiating a reply chain where each commenter responded to the previous statement. The sequence included two supporters and two opponents of gene modification. The screenshots and exact comments used for both conditions can be found in Appendix C. Crucially, the fourth commenter's tone varied by condition: in the control condition, they expressed support neutrally, without engaging in moral grandstanding. In the moral grandstanding condition, the participants' pro-gene stance

incorporated explicit moral grandstanding behaviors, such as "piling on" or "trumping up". To illustrate, the commenter in the control condition uses a considerate and rational tone and states: "Scientific process has always faced scepticism but if used responsibly this technology could save lives and improve public health.". Contrastingly, the commenter in the grandstanding condition is aggressive and accusatory and states: "How can anyone, in good conscience, stand in the way of such obvious progress? That is clearly not ethical in any way.". The manifestations of moral grandstanding used were based on examples given in the article by Bennett & Grigoropoulou (2024). Furthermore, the discussion was structured in such a way that both pro and anti-gene modification were represented equally. This was done to prevent inducing any potential bias in our participants due to the underrepresentation of either stance. Lastly, by altering only the fourth commenter's expressions and by making the expression of grandstanding clear and not too nuanced we wanted to ensure that any observed differences between conditions could be confidently attributed to moral grandstanding, thereby minimizing confounding variables.

Credibility of the commenter

The credibility of the commenter was measured using 9 selected items from the credibility scale from McCroskey and Teven (1999), which includes three dimensions: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill. A seven-point semantic differential scale with a slider was used and the questions were formed using bipolar adjectives ($\alpha = .89$). For example, competence was measured using the item "This person is: competent (1) - neutral (4) - incompetent (7)". Then participants were instructed to slide the bar to the number that best reflected how they felt about the commenter. Important to note is that every question had different anchors and all measured one of the three dimensions of credibility. One item was

added which did not originate from the credibility scale of McCroskey and Teven (1999). This item simply asked if the participants found the commenter credible or not credible. This was done because the researcher was of the opinion that this item provided a direct measure of perceived credibility, which might enhance the overall validity of the scale. An overview of all the questions used can be found in Table B2 of Appendix B. Lastly, the order of the questions was randomized for each participant to rule out possible order effects and some questions were reverse coded to make sure the participants were paying attention while answering.

Manipulation check

After measuring all the dependent variables, a manipulation check was done to ensure that our manipulation of grandstanding worked as intended. A seven-point Likert scale was used to assess to what extent the participants agreed that the fourth commenter was grandstanding. More specifically, they were asked if this person was commenting primarily out of a desire to come across as morally just, rather than out of genuine moral concern. After the manipulation check, participants were asked about their demographics, including age and gender. This was followed by a seriousness check, where participants were asked if they had taken part in the survey seriously and if they indicated that they did not, their data was removed. Lastly, there was a short debrief about the true purpose of the study, meaning participants were informed that the study was about the effects of a phenomenon called 'moral grandstanding' on the quality of public moral discourse.

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Results

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The statistical analysis of our data was done using SPSS and PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). Assumptions checks were performed and all assumptions required for the inferential analysis were met.

Manipulation check

To assess if our manipulation worked as we intended it to, a manipulation check was

done to examine if we managed to manipulate moral grandstanding. The participants were asked

to rate the extent to which they believed the commenter aimed to appear as morally just rather

than expressing genuine moral concern. We expected the perception of grandstanding to be

higher in the grandstanding condition than the non-grandstanding condition. To test this, an

ANOVA was done with the grandstanding manipulation as the independent variable and the

manipulation check item as the dependent variable. A positive effect was found; participants in

the grandstanding condition ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.32$) scored higher on our manipulation check than

participants in the control condition ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.40$). This was a significant effect

($F(1,146) = 24.20$, $p < .001$) and was in line with what was expected.

Hypothesis tests

Consequently, an inferential analysis was done to test our two hypotheses. The first

hypothesis stated that moral grandstanding will have a negative effect on the perceived

credibility. The second stated that for people who score high on agreement with the topic, moral

grandstanding will only have a small effect on perceived credibility and that for people who

score low on agreement with the topic, moral grandstanding will have a negative effect on

perceived credibility. The inferential analysis was done with the grandstanding manipulation as

the independent variable, perceived credibility as the dependent variable and agreement with the

topic of genetic modification as the moderator. A negative main effect was found, which was in

line with our first hypothesis. Participants in the control condition ($M = 4.94$, $SD = .70$) scored

higher on perceived credibility of the commenter than those in the grandstanding condition ($M =$

3.80, $SD = .93$). This effect was significant ($t(144) = -8.31$, $p < .001$). Additionally, contrary to

the second hypothesis, no interaction effect was found between the manipulation and agreement with the topic ($t(144) = -1.12$, $p = .30$). Lastly, a positive main effect was found for the moderator agreement with the topic. This effect was significant ($t(144) = 2.71$, $p = .01$): independent from which condition the participants were in, those who agreed with the topic scored higher on perceived credibility.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate whether moral grandstanding negatively affects perceived credibility and whether this relationship is moderated by the participant's agreement with the topic. The results supported the first hypothesis; moral grandstanding significantly reduced the perceived credibility of the commenter. Participants in the grandstanding condition rated the commenter as less credible than those in the control condition. However, the second hypothesis was not supported. The interaction between moral grandstanding and topic agreement was not significant, suggesting that the negative effect of grandstanding on credibility occurs independently of participants' attitudes toward the subject of discussion. Lastly, a significant and positive main effect was found for the moderator agreement with the topic. Those who agreed with the topic scored higher on perceived credibility, independent from which condition they were in.

The results supported our first hypothesis, which was based on the idea that grandstanding might backfire and make people question if the grandstanders' motivations are genuine or motivated by other factors (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). People may view grandstanding as a tool to promote oneself and gain social status rather than a genuine effort to contribute to a meaningful discourse. This can undermine credibility by making the grandstander seem insincere or manipulative.

While there is a lack of empirical research directly measuring the impact of grandstanding on perceived credibility specifically, several studies discuss the potential negative effects of moral grandstanding. One example of this is a study done by Savejnarong et al., (2022), which focused on the effect of moral grandstanding on status and moral respectability. However, an important difference with our study is that this study made the distinction between prestige-based and dominance-based grandstanding and found mixed outcomes. Prestige-based moral talk is centered around gaining admiration by emphasizing one's moral sensitivity and commitment and dominance-based moral talk is centered around imposing one's moral views through shaming and intimidation (Savejnarong et al., 2022). Interestingly, dominance-based grandstanding was found to always reduce one's status, while prestige-based grandstanders that were viewed as authentic were found to be perceived as having a higher status and being more morally respectable. This is an interesting result since our study did not find any positive effect of moral grandstanding. While these mixed outcomes do not match our study since we did not make this distinction between the two modes of grandstanding, our findings are still comparable. This is the case because, in general the study found that when people suspected that the grandstander had hidden motives for their moral talk and was inauthentic, they might be evaluated more negatively (Savejnarong et al., 2022). Given this, it seems probable that these negative perceptions might extend to evaluations of the person's credibility as well. Secondly, it is argued by Tosi & Warmke (2020) that grandstanding leads to cynicism about moral talk. When audiences perceive moral talk as status seeking it may lead to skepticism about the sincerity of their contribution to the moral discussion (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). It can be argued that perceptions of insincerity might also lead to one's credibility being questioned. In light of these studies, it can be argued that our findings are not surprising: when a grandstander is perceived as

inauthentic, insincere and with hidden motives, their perceived credibility is also likely to decrease.

There are two interesting alternative explanations that can also explain the results. These explanations involve factors outside of the moral grandstanding that might also have reduced the perceived credibility. Firstly, it may be that the hostile and emotionally intense tone of the grandstanding comment was seen as aggressive and a violation of how one should engage in online discussions. This may have reduced the perceived credibility regardless of what the grandstanders' motivations were for using such an intense tone. Secondly, it is possible that participants were already skeptical of overly moralizing language, regardless of what the intent of the commenter was. Perhaps the overly moralizing tone of the grandstander reduced credibility because of a general dislike of people using moral language and not necessarily because participants were suspicious of the grandstander's motives. Additionally, it is interesting to consider that in different situations we may not have found the same effect. For instance, Voelkel & Brandt (2018) found results that suggest that people more quickly support moral acts from ingroup than from outgroup members. When a grandstander is perceived to be part of the same ingroup, for instance the same political identity, participants might have been less critical of the intentions of a grandstander and may have rated them as more credible. This is the same reasoning used to support the initial hypothesis that agreement would moderate the relationship between grandstanding and perceived credibility (Castelli et al., 2008). Perhaps, when the commenter that was grandstanding was more clearly perceived as part of the same ingroup we would have found different results. Furthermore, grandstanding might also have been evaluated less critically in a different context. For example, in emotionally intense situations such as natural disasters, dramatic moral expressions might be seen as more appropriate and less

performative. This might have even enhanced perceived credibility because the grandstanders' extreme emotional displays are perceived as genuine due to the emotional intensity of such a situation.

The absence of a moderation effect of agreement with the topic was unexpected since many studies have shown that agreement has a strong moderation effect. While these studies did not look at the moderation of agreement on perceived credibility specifically, they still showed that agreement can have a significant effect on how a person is perceived. As stated before, it was found that agreement with the moral grandstander might enhance perception of morality (Savejnarong et al., 2022). This study had a similar method, using a fake online discussion to manipulate grandstanding, making it comparable to our study. Additionally, as previously noted, Clark & Evans (2014) found results that suggest that when a message comes from a credible source and aligns with existing beliefs, it increases confidence in one's thoughts and strengthens attitudes. Conversely, when the message is non-credible and contradicts existing beliefs, it can reinforce negative reactions and increase resistance (Clark & Evans, 2014). While these studies do not clearly show that agreement moderates the relationship between moral grandstanding and credibility, they do show that agreement is an important moderator when it comes to how information is interpreted and how a person is perceived. Which is why it is surprising that no moderation effect was found in our study.

When considering why we did not find the expected moderation effect, five possible explanations stand out. Firstly, it could be that grandstanding as a phenomenon is too overpowering and overruled any influence that agreement with the topic might have had. The results suggest that even when participants supported gene modification, grandstanding still led them to perceive the commenter as less credible. Interestingly, this point can also be viewed from

a methodological perspective. The rationale of our study was that there needed to be a clear difference between the two conditions in order to ensure that any observed effects could be attributed to the grandstanding itself and not to outside factors. However, in doing so we might have made the grandstanding too obvious, which may have resulted in agreement not having an effect. However, this point is not supported by our data because the mean of the 7-point Likert scale used for the manipulation check in the grandstanding condition was not dramatically high ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.32$). That is, this result does not suggest that the grandstanding manipulation was too strong. Secondly, the topic we picked might not have been engaging enough. It could be the case that gene modification is not something people think about enough or that it does not have a big enough influence on people's everyday lives. Therefore, this topic may not have sparked an extreme enough reaction or may not have been emotionally engaging enough such that agreeing or disagreeing with it could have influenced how the commenter was perceived. Perhaps a topic that was more engaging might have caused moral grandstanding to have a different effect based on agreement or disagreement with the topic. Thirdly, it may be that gene modification as a topic is too nuanced to elicit clear agreement or disagreement, thereby possibly limiting its effectiveness as a moderator. People's opinions on gene modification might be too context-dependent, making agreement harder to measure. For example, many people might support gene modification if it is able to treat serious genetic disorders but oppose it if it enhances intelligence. Research by Scheufele et al., (2017) supports this point by examining the opinions of U.S. citizens on gene editing. A majority of respondents (59%) expressed support for gene editing when used to treat or prevent diseases, while only a third (33%) supported gene editing to enhance human abilities (Scheufele et al., 2017). In other words, people might agree with certain applications of gene modification but not others, making it difficult to design a

questionnaire that measures agreement with such a nuanced topic. Fourth, relating to the previous point, it could be that our questionnaire did not measure agreement with the topic properly. This study only used three questions to assess agreement and these only focused on disorder and disability prevention. Considering that there is evidence that suggests that people's opinions differ for different uses of gene modification (Scheufele et al., 2017), this questionnaire might have benefited from more questions to measure agreement regarding different applications of gene modification. This might have captured agreement on such a nuanced topic better and could have revealed a moderation effect. Lastly, it may simply be the case that agreement with the topic is not an effective moderator in the relationship between moral grandstanding and perceived credibility. It might be that the assumption that agreement with a topic shapes how people perceive the credibility of a grandstander oversimplifies the complex psychological process involved in credibility judgements. It might be that other factors are better suited as a moderator, for example, how emotionally engaged somebody is with the topic.

Lastly, the positive main effect for the moderator agreement with the topic on perceived credibility is not surprising. Participants rated speakers as more credible when they agreed with their stance, regardless of how the message was communicated. This was likely due to confirmation bias, where people are more likely to trust information that aligns with their own beliefs (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). However, the point made earlier that agreement may have served as a cognitive shortcut (Bohner et al., 1995), reducing participants' motivation to critically evaluate the speaker's tone or intent, was not supported. Agreement was not found to be a significant moderator which suggests that it does not protect for or enhance the effects of grandstanding on credibility judgements. In other words, our results suggest that people may not use these cognitive shortcuts (Bohner et al., 1995) when agreeing with a grandstander.

The results from this study have three key theoretical implications. Firstly, our findings support the idea that, despite aiming to boost one's social status, moral grandstanding can have negative effects (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). When participants viewed moral expressions as self-serving the perceived credibility was reduced. Furthermore, the grandstander's strong emotional display and resulting lower credibility support the claim made by Tosi & Warmke (2020) that excessive emotion may appear manipulative and insincere, especially when perceived to be disconnected from genuine concern. Secondly, our results reinforce the point made by Tormala and Petty (2004). Namely, that credibility depends not just on logic or truth, but is heavily influenced by the perceived intention of the speaker (Tormala & Petty, 2004). Lastly, our finding did not support the prediction that agreement would moderate the relationship between grandstanding and credibility. While our results suggest that agreement generally boosts credibility, it does not buffer against the negative effects of grandstanding. In other words, agreement and grandstanding affect credibility independently. Additionally, grandstanding possibly overrides any positive influences of agreement, rendering agreement as an unsuitable moderator.

Limitations

While this study does give important insights into the effect of moral grandstanding on perceived credibility and the influence of agreement with the topic, there are three limitations that are important to acknowledge. Firstly, using an online questionnaire limited participants' ability to engage in real-life moral discussions, which may have affected our findings. Savejnarong et al., (2022) argue that accurate judgments of authenticity require repeated interaction with this person. Consequently, it might be difficult to judge a person's moral hypocrisy or hidden motives from a one-time online interaction (Savejnarong et al., 2022). From

this it can be argued that an online questionnaire is possibly not as strong of a manipulation as exposing participants to a face-to-face setting of grandstanding. However, despite possible negative effects, social media was chosen because it was seen as a suitable context for grandstanding. As stated before, according to Grubbs et al., (2019), moral discussions on social media are often toxic and filled with conflict. Furthermore, they function as moral echo chambers where dominant viewpoints are reinforced and any opposing views are discouraged, creating an environment where moral grandstanding can be realistically portrayed (Grubbs et al., 2019). Additionally, for the sake of having an easy and fast way to collect a lot of data and considering the limited resources of this study, an online questionnaire was the best option. Future research might benefit from using a more face-to-face setting where people are repeatedly exposed to the same grandstander. Secondly, the sample used may have been too homogeneous, considering that the participants were largely drawn from the network of Dutch and German psychology students. This might have resulted in an educated and culturally similar participant pool. While practical constraints made this recruitment strategy most feasible, it does raise questions regarding the generalizability of our findings. Studies argue that perceptions of morality might be shaped by broader cultural norms or different generational attitudes towards moral discourse (Friesen, 2019; Graham et al., 2016). For instance, it may be that collectivistic societies interpret moral grandstanding as self-serving, whereas individualistic societies might perceive it as authentic. Future studies should focus on a more varied sample that might improve generalization and could reveal whether perceptions of grandstanding differ by age, education or cultural background. Thirdly, this study may have suffered from demand characteristics. While it was stated that this study was about the experience of online discourse and not moral grandstanding specifically, the questions assessing our moderator variables may have given the

study's intent away and possibly have influenced the results. Asking participants about their moral cynicism, political identity strength and moral sensitivity (see Appendix A Table A1), might have made it too transparent that our research was focused on how morality is perceived by our participants. Assessing these moderators before participants were exposed to our manipulation may have primed them to already think about morality and might have influenced how they perceived the commentator that they then had to focus on. Since the moderators had to be measured, there is no easy solution for this, but this study may have benefited from a more believable cover story that possibly reduced demand characteristics. All in all, while our study design allowed for efficient data collection and offered valuable insight into the effect of moral grandstanding and agreement, several improvements can be made. It might be good to focus on the limitations of the artificial setting of an online questionnaire, limitations of the homogeneous sample and potential demand characteristics. Future research with more resources might help solve some of these problems.

Future research

Future studies can explore broader and more nuanced questions concerning the effect of grandstanding in four interesting ways. Firstly, it might be interesting to examine how individual differences, such as political identity, influence perceptions of moral grandstanding. As stated before, research by Voelkel & Brandt (2018) suggests that people are more likely to support moral acts from ingroup than from outgroup members. Applying these results to our research, it is possible that people are more critical of grandstanding from those on the opposing side of the political spectrum. This could mean that perceptions of grandstanding are not uniform but are instead shaped by people's own political identity. Researching this can deepen our understanding of how these individual differences can moderate the relationship between moral grandstanding

and perceived credibility. Practically, promoting self-awareness of this possible bias on how moral acts are perceived might promote more reflective and less polarized discussion regarding morality. Secondly, it might be interesting to look at the possible influence that cultural contexts might have on the perception of moral grandstanding and credibility. As stated before, studies suggest that perceptions of morality might be shaped by cultural and generational differences (Friesen, 2019; Graham et al., 2016). However, few studies have looked at the possible moderating effect of culture on the relationship between moral grandstanding and perceived credibility. It may be that people from different cultures interpret grandstanding differently, which in turn might have a fluctuating effect on perceived credibility. To illustrate this, what may be perceived as a self-serving or opportunistic argument in one culture could be regarded as a passionate and principled moral expression in another. Therefore, grandstanding might have positive or negative effects on credibility depending on culture. Cross-cultural research might reveal whether this is the case and whether culture might be an important moderator to consider. In practice, this may have implications for messages tailored to an international audience. For example, when making claims in a setting that involves different cultures, it might be beneficial to be cautious when making moral claims. What might be viewed as inspiring in one culture may be seen as arrogant and insincere in another. Lastly, it might be interesting to look at possible longitudinal effects of grandstanding. An example of such an effect is the phenomenon of "outrage exhaustion" from Tosi & Warmke (2020). This is the idea that audiences may become desensitized or skeptical over time when frequently exposed to exaggerated and overly emotional moral expression (Tosi & Warmke , 2020). While our results suggested a drop in perceived credibility due to grandstanding, it is unclear if this effect will stay the same with repeated exposure. Tosi & Warmke (2020), argue that when people are exposed to outrage too often they

may no longer be able to tell what is genuinely worth being outraged about. However, few studies have looked at the effect of long-term exposure to moral grandstanding. For instance, longitudinal studies might reveal whether participants become more cynical, tolerant or indifferent towards moral grandstanding over time. Practically, if it is really the case that people become desensitized to repeated displays of outrage, it might be of value to be careful not to use outrage too often to get your point across. Lastly, it might be interesting to look at possible positive effects of moral grandstanding, especially regarding the difference between prestige-based and dominance-based grandstanding. This is the case because, as mentioned before, Savejnarong et al., (2022) were able to find a positive effect of grandstanding; people who engaged in prestige-based moral talk and were perceived as authentic actually gained moral respectability and status. Future research might focus on other factors that might contribute to a grandstander being evaluated more positively. In practice this might enable public figures to use certain grandstanding techniques to enhance their status. To summarize, promising directions for future research might include, exploring how political identity and cultural context shape perception of grandstanding, examining its long-term effect through repeated exposure and investigating potential positive outcomes of grandstanding.

The results of this study give three interesting practical implications. Firstly, our results suggest that when making a moral claim, you should be cautious about using self-promotional moral language since it might reduce your perceived credibility. Public figures should prioritize authenticity and genuine moral concern over performative displays to help maintain trust. Secondly, our results suggest that grandstanding is a powerful tool and can reduce the perceived credibility regardless of whether someone agrees with the grandstander or not. So even in settings where people might already agree with a speaker, it warrants to be careful to not appear

as moral grandstanding since it might still reduce your credibility. Lastly, it might be of value to educate the public to recognize moral grandstanding and its negative effects. Training people to be critical of clear status-seeking moral talk can improve the quality of public discourse.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate if moral grandstanding, or the use of moral talk to enhance one's status, negatively affected perceived credibility and whether agreement moderated this relationship. Our findings suggest that moral grandstanding is a powerful phenomenon and may undermine credibility no matter how much it aligns with someone's values. The way a message is phrased might be more important for credibility than the exact arguments made. To be perceived as credible, one should focus on appearing authentic and with clear motives. Additionally, one should avoid performative displays that might appear to solely be focused on wanting to be perceived as morally superior rather than having genuine moral concern. Our society may greatly benefit from our public dialogue not being focused on who appears as morally superior. Instead, we should focus on who is truly sincere and respectful in their engagement and provides actual motivations for their claims that are based on rationale instead of manipulation.

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Appendix A

Variables used in the study

The following table shows all the variables that were used in this study by the different researchers that were involved.

Table A1

Variables used

Moderator	Dependent variable
Agreement with the topic	Perceived consensus
Agreeableness	Likability
Moral cynicism	Perception of moral grandstanding
Political identity strength	Ideological extremism
Moral sensitivity	Credibility of the commenter
	Engagement with the topic

Appendix B

Scales used in the study

The following tables show the items of the scales that were used to measure the agreement with the topic and the perceived credibility of the commenter.

Table B1

Items from the agreement scale

Item number	Item text
1	I support the use of gene modification in unborn children to reduce the risk of disorders or disabilities.
2	I find gene modification, even for the purpose of disorder or disability prevention, unethical.
3	The benefits of gene modification for disorder or disability prevention outweigh potential risks.

Table B2

Items from the credibility scale

Item number	Dimension	Item Prompt	Scale Anchors
1	Credibility	This person is:	1 = not credible, 4 = neutral, 7 = credible
2	Competence	This person is:	1 = unintelligent, 4 = neutral, 7 = intelligent
3	Competence	This person is:	1 = competent, 4 = neutral, 7 = incompetent
4	Goodwill	This person is:	1 = self-centered, 4 = neutral, 7 = not self-centered
5	Goodwill	This person is:	1 = concerned with me, 4 = neutral, 7 = not concerned with me
6	Goodwill	This person is:	1 = not-understanding, 4 = neutral, 7 = understanding

7	Competence	This person is:	1 = Informed, 4 = neutral, 7 = Uninformed
8	Trustworthiness	This person is:	1 = untrustworthy, 4 = neutral, 7 = trustworthy
9	Trustworthiness	This person is:	1 = immoral, 4 = neutral, 7 = moral
10	Trustworthiness	This person is:	1 = fake, 4 = neutral, 7 = genuine

Appendix C

The Comments of the Non-grandstanding and Grandstanding Conditions

This appendix shows the two screenshots used for the grandstanding and the control condition. It also shows the fourth comment that was altered in the non-grandstanding and grandstanding conditions, where it is illustrated what exact manifestations of grandstanding were used to create the comment in the grandstanding condition.

Figure C1

The screenshot exposed to participants in the control condition
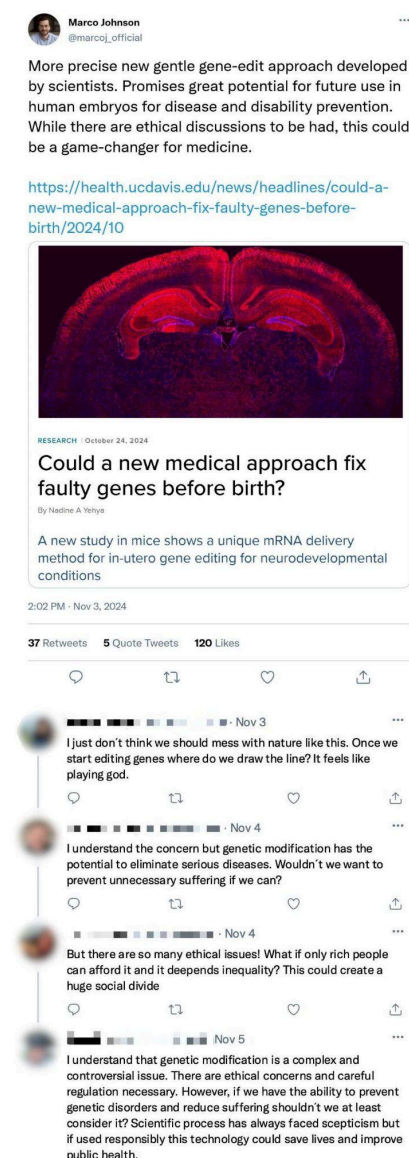
Figure C2

The screenshot exposed to participants in the grandstanding condition

Comment used for the Non-Grandstanding Condition

I understand that genetic modification is a complex and controversial issue. There are ethical concerns and careful regulations necessary. However, if we have the ability to prevent genetic disorders and reduce suffering shouldn't we at least consider it? Scientific process has always faced scepticism but if used responsibly this technology could save lives and improve public health.

Comment used for the Grandstanding Condition

I'm honestly deeply shocked (Displays of strong emotion) that some people still resist genetic modification, despite the overwhelming evidence that it could save millions of lives! (Ramping up). How can anyone, in good conscience, stand in the way of such obvious progress? (Claims of Self-evidence). That is clearly not ethical in any way (Ramping up). I stand by those who care about our future generation and who embrace this technology instead of clinging to outdated fears (Piling on). Refusing to support it is irresponsible and egoistic! (Ramping up). It is that simple.

Appendix D

Acknowledgement of the Usage of AI

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (https://chatgpt.com) during the development of this thesis. This AI tool was used to generate ideas, assist with the literature search, check for grammatical errors and to give suggestions on how to write more concisely. Importantly, this AI tool was not used to generate any of the content presented in this thesis. Furthermore, this AI tool did not assist with making any interpretations, all the analysis, argumentation and interpretations presented were my own work. Lastly, any suggested change to my writing style was still based on my own judgement and any literature that was suggested was thoroughly reviewed to see if it was reliable to use a source.