

**The Influence of Moral Grandstanding on Ideological Extremism: Investigating Political
Identity Strength as a Moderator**

Lilly Schönleiter

S5104823

Department of Psychology, University of Groningen

PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

Group number: 27

Supervisor: Dr. E.W. Meerholz

Second evaluator: Dr. T. Kuppens

Collaborating with fellow students: Antonia Jager, Eline Jansen, Berk Muratoglu, Daan van der
Veen, Linde van Loon

June 26, 2025

Abstract

As shown by studies and polling data, political polarization is increasing among young voters, many of whom identify with ideologically extreme parties. Moral grandstanding, which is the use of moral discourse to seek social status, has been theorized to be a driving factor of this trend by promoting ideological extremism. This study investigated whether exposure to moral grandstanding indeed increases ideological extremism and whether this effect is moderated by political identity strength. Using a between-subjects experiment, participants were randomly assigned to read a neutral or morally grandstanding comment in an online debate on gene modification. Ideological extremism and political identity strength were measured via self-assessment. The success of the manipulation was confirmed with a manipulation check where participants indicated their perception of moral grandstanding. Despite this, our results showed no significant effect of moral grandstanding exposure on ideological extremism, nor did political identity strength moderate this relationship. Additionally, political identity strength was positively associated with ideological extremism. These findings suggest that moral grandstanding may be a manifestation of ideological extremism rather than a cause that influences ideologically extreme attitudes. The present study highlights the stability of political attitudes and suggests that future research should focus on long-term exposure, topic salience, and emotionally charged discourse as factors driving ideological polarization.

Keywords: Moral Grandstanding, Ideological Extremism, Political Identity, Social Identity, Group Polarization

The Influence of Moral Grandstanding on Ideological Extremism: Investigating Political Identity Strength as a Moderator

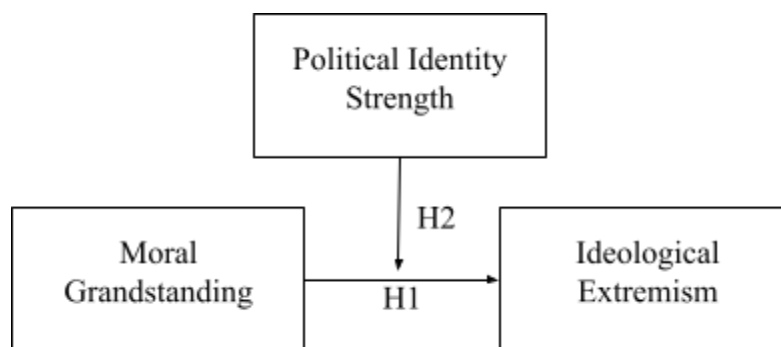
The recent 2025 federal elections in Germany have shown that young voters seem to be growing further apart, gathering at either end of the political extremes rather than meeting in the middle. Accordingly, in the age group 18-24, the party receiving the most votes was a far-left party (*Die Linke*) with 25%, whereas a far-right party (*AfD*) followed closely with 21% (tagesschau.de, 2025). Moreover, political polarization among the youth appears to be a global phenomenon, evident in countries such as the United States, across Latin America, and throughout various European nations (Hohagen, 2024; Oden & Porter, 2023; Tyler & Iyengar, 2022). Deep ideological differences make constructive discussions nearly impossible, promoting intolerance and leading to polarized groups that are often unwilling to engage with opposing perspectives (Bosi et al., 2021; Prassek, 2024). Among other things, this growing polarization finds its key manifestation in ideological extremism, which threatens democratic discourse and social cohesion (Whitford et al., 2025).

Understanding the mechanisms behind ideological extremism is crucial in addressing these divisive societal challenges that promote intolerance among people of opposing groups. One key, understudied, factor that may contribute to the rise of ideological extremism is moral grandstanding, the use of moral talk to seek social status and recognition (Tosi & Warmke, 2016). Moral talk refers to communication that concerns moral topics, involving moral judgments, values, or norms (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). When public discourse becomes a competition for moral superiority, it may inadvertently push individuals toward more extreme ideological positions and, thus, contribute to the rise of ideological extremism (Grubbs et al., 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the effects of moral grandstanding on ideological

extremism, and the extent to which this is moderated by an individual's political identity strength (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The effect of moral grandstanding (IV) on ideological extremism (DV) moderated by political identity strength (W).



Ideological Extremism

Ideological extremism is conceptually related to group polarization and can be defined as “the extent to which people report extreme political or ideological views at either end of the political spectrum” (Grubbs et al., 2020, p.2). Though previous research suggests that ideological extremism is a relatively rare phenomenon within Western European populations, it remains relevant in understanding societal divisions between opposing groups (Jungkunz et al., 2024; Torcal & Magalhães, 2022).

Ideological extremism has several consequences concerning the division of society and democracies, three of which are key to mention here. Firstly, extremism fosters strong ingroup bias and hostility toward outgroups, leading extremists to reject alternative viewpoints and

oversimplify complex political issues (Grubbs et al., 2020; Le et al., 2022). Secondly, extreme ideologies threaten democracy by encouraging selective support for democratic norms. This implies that individuals tend to tolerate undemocratic practices as long as these align with their ideological beliefs (Torcal & Magalhães, 2022). Thirdly, previous research has explored the real-world effects of growing ideological extremism, showing that it undermines meaningful discourse across different areas (Norris, 2021; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Thus, understanding the psychological and social mechanisms driving ideological extremism is essential to mitigating its divisive effects on society.

While it is crucial to understand the consequences of ideological extremism, the underlying factors that have been found to influence it must also be taken into account. Three of these are particularly relevant here. First, psychological distress, such as anxiety and uncertainty, can drive individuals toward extreme ideologies as a way to regain control and meaning. This often results in black-and-white thinking, oversimplified views, and overconfidence (FERNBACH et al., 2013; van Prooijen et al., 2015; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Further, ideological extremism can be understood as a relational phenomenon, shaped by social dynamics that reinforce group conformity and outgroup rejection (Zhao, 2021). Lastly, recent research has identified moral grandstanding as a significant driver of ideological extremism (Grubbs et al., 2020). Building on these findings, the present study focuses on moral grandstanding as a significant contributor to ideological polarization and extremism. The next sections further explore moral grandstanding and its role in shaping political discourse.

Moral Grandstanding

The concept of moral grandstanding was first introduced by Tosi and Warmke (2016) and can be defined as the self-serving use of moral discourse aimed at social recognition rather than

truth-seeking or meaningful moral engagement. Unlike genuine moral engagement, grandstanding is primarily motivated by the desire for recognition, meaning the desire to be perceived as morally respectable, rather than sincere moral concern (Grubbs et al., 2019; Tosi & Warmke, 2016). Grandstanders seek to signal moral superiority, whether through their beliefs, emotions, priorities, or judgments (Tosi & Warmke, 2016).

These underlying motives manifest in specific behaviors that signal virtue, escalate moral competition, and intensify polarization (Tosi & Warmke, 2016). Common manifestations of moral grandstanding include piling on, ramping up, trumping up, excessive emotional display, and claims of self-evidence. Particularly, ramping up (escalating moral claims to outdo others) and trumping up (exaggerating or fabricating moral issues to signal heightened sensitivity) are thought to contribute to group polarization (Tosi & Warmke, 2016). These behaviors have been shown to have several effects, two of which are important to consider here. Firstly, they weaken political and social cohesion by undermining meaningful discourse and compromise. This is particularly evident through claims of self-evidence and emotional displays that portray disagreement as irrational or immoral (Grubbs et al., 2019). Secondly, moral grandstanding promotes interpersonal conflict, as those who engage in it report higher levels of moral and political disputes (Grubbs et al., 2019).

Further, grandstanding has been shown to push individuals toward more extreme ideological positions, with several manifestations of grandstanding intensifying in-group radicalization, which leads to ideological extremism (Grubbs et al., 2020). However, this link has solely been studied from the perspective of the grandstander, meaning the person engaging in moral grandstanding. To contextualize the present study, one must first consider some key findings from existing literature on moral grandstanding. Recent studies have consistently found

that individuals more motivated to engage in moral grandstanding also tend to hold stronger and more extreme ideological views (Grubbs et al., 2019; Grubbs et al., 2020; Tosi & Warmke, 2016). Moreover, individuals who identify as ideologically extreme (left or right) seem to feel a greater desire to use moral talk as a means of seeking status (Grubbs et al., 2019). The ‘moral arms race’ resulting from people ‘ramping up’ their ideological positions leads to further polarization and ideological extremism, making it a predictable outcome of grandstanding (Grubbs et al., 2020). Furthermore, past research on ingroup bias and group polarization suggests that moral grandstanding fuels extremism by reinforcing group-based identity competition (Mackie & Cooper, 1984).

While previous studies have primarily focused on the grandstander’s motivations, there are several reasons to expect similar effects on those exposed to moral grandstanding, two of which are particularly relevant. Primarily, encounters with extreme and status-driven moral discourse may provoke defensiveness, identity threat, or reciprocal extremism in the receiver, especially when the counterpart is perceived as morally superior or condescending (Tosi & Warmke, 2020). This, in turn, may lead to higher levels of ideological extremism. Additionally, such exposure to extreme moral discourse may also reinforce group boundaries, strengthening ingroup loyalty and rejection of the outgroup (Zhao, 2021). This aligns with the view of ideological extremism as a relational phenomenon, shaped by social dynamics that encourage conformity within groups and hostility toward outsiders (Zhao, 2021). Therefore, we predict that exposure to moral grandstanding leads to increased levels of ideological extremism (H1).

Furthermore, this study builds on previous research by viewing political identity strength as a possible moderator of the relationship between moral grandstanding and ideological extremism (Grubbs et al., 2020).

Political Identity Strength

Political identity strength can be understood in many ways; here it is defined as the degree to which individuals define themselves through their political identity and view it as a central part of their self-concept. It is considered in light of social identity and self-categorization theories, which suggest that salient and central social identities shape perceptions, attitudes, and behavior (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Reynolds, 2012).

The multiple identities an individual possesses are arranged in a hierarchical structure, with some identities being more central to the self-concept than others (Mesler et al., 2024). Those whose political identity centrality is high may act in line with the beliefs associated with that identity, engaging in behaviors that reinforce and prioritize this identity over others (Carter, 2013; Ebtsam & Neama, 2014; Mesler et al., 2024). However, while strong political identities increase behaviors such as political engagement, they also shape affective polarization and are associated with more rigid and extreme political beliefs (Le et al., 2022; Mason, 2018; Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2023).

Beyond strengthening negative attitudes toward political opponents, a strong political identity can also contribute to the radicalization of political beliefs. Recent studies support the notion that individuals becoming increasingly attached to their political identity may develop stronger emotional biases and shift toward more extreme ideological positions (Le et al., 2022). Furthermore, political identity strength is a key factor in political animosity, which refers to strong negative attitudes held toward those with opposing political views; therefore, it is a mechanism reinforcing ideological extremism (Brandt & Vallabha, 2023).

Building on prior research (e.g., Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2023), two central arguments cause us to expect that political identity strength moderates the relationship between moral

grandstanding and extremism. First, individuals with strong political identities may be more likely to interpret moral grandstanding as personally and group-relevant. This identity salience could trigger heightened emotional and ideological reactions, leading to an increased impact of exposure to moral grandstanding on ideological extremism. Moreover, when exposed to moral grandstanding, individuals high in political identity strength will likely respond with reduced openness, perceiving it as an attack on their values and groups (e.g., Le et al., 2022; Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2023). This, in turn, heightens the probability of a polarized or ideologically extreme response. Therefore, we predict that exposure to moral grandstanding will increase ideological extremism for all individuals (as stated in H1), but that this increase will be significantly stronger among those with high political identity strength (H2).

The Present Research

The present study is relevant in four ways. Firstly, moral grandstanding is a rather new concept that has rarely been explored in experimental work, with most existing studies on it being of a correlational nature rather than empirical. Secondly, previous research linking political identity to ideological extremism has mainly focused on political identity as an individual's attachment to a political party. This study explores it in terms of its centrality within one's self-concept. This is important because it captures a different facet of political identity and focuses on the idea of different identities shaping people's behaviors. Thirdly, most research conducted in the areas of interest is based on samples from the US, while this study considers a European sample, providing a new and further generalizable context. Lastly, while the link between ideological extremism and moral grandstanding has been explored, most existing research on this link has focused on the grandstander rather than exposure to grandstanding. The focus on exposure and the moderating effect of political identity strength is novel.

Method

Participants & Design

Our study's original dataset consisted of 254 cases. After examining the data, we applied exclusion criteria to ensure data quality for the final analysis. In total, 106 cases were excluded through a step-by-step process. Firstly, 98 were removed due to incompleteness; this included individuals who either did not begin the survey, dropped out early, or did not reach or complete the seriousness check. Of these 98, only 23 reached the point of manipulation, and just 11 answered any items related to the dependent variable. Therefore, the cases removed due to incompleteness mostly include people who did not properly participate in the survey. Secondly, of the remaining participants, two indicated during the seriousness check that they did not participate seriously and were therefore excluded. Lastly, six of the remaining cases were removed because they wanted their data removed after the debrief. The total sample size after excluding cases was $N = 148$, with 56.76% ($n = 84$) of participants being female and 41.21% ($n = 61$) being male (2 participants preferred not to say). Furthermore, participants' ages ranged from 18 to 63 ($M = 27.24$, $SD = 10.41$).

After the ethics committee of the University of Groningen (RUG) approved the study, the researchers recruited participants by reaching out to their networks and sharing the link to the online survey via WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit. Therefore, the data was collected from a convenience sample. In the case that the link was shared in publicly accessible spaces, participants were told the study was about how online discussions are experienced, using a text provided by the ethics committee of the RUG. Thus, the true purpose of the study was not disclosed but concealed with a cover story.

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 (grandstanding condition vs. control condition). Moreover, we assessed ideological extremism as the dependent variable and political identity strength as the moderator. This study was part of a bigger research project in which additional variables were included. These are beyond the scope of this paper and will, therefore, not be discussed here. A complete list of all the variables used can be found in Appendix A (see Table 1).

Materials & Procedure

The study's survey was designed as an online questionnaire using Qualtrics. Participating in the study took about fifteen minutes, and participation was voluntary, meaning that the participants could stop the survey at any time.

Political Identity Strength

After providing informed consent, participants first filled out a measure of political identity strength, which was assessed with 8 items, using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” ($\alpha = .90$). The items have been adapted from the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) (Sellers et al., 1997). This approach was chosen because our definition of political identity aligned with the conceptualization of identity strength in the MIBI items. Specifically, the strength of a political identity is defined by how well it is integrated into and influences a person's self-concept, which is similar to the way that identity strength is defined in the MIBI. The phrasing of the items was changed to fit the context of political identity strength; a full list of the changed items can be found in Appendix B (see Table 2). Examples of such items are “*My political identity is an important reflection of who I am*” and “*Overall, my political identity has very little to do with how I feel about myself*”. Three

of the items were reverse-coded to control for response biases and ensure an accurate measure of the construct.

Moral Grandstanding

Next, we operationalized the independent variable by exposing participants to an online discussion on gene modification. Participants reviewed a structured online thread in the form of a screenshot involving four commenters who alternately expressed positions for or against gene modification and were asked to read this thoroughly. The topic of gene modification was chosen because it was considered polarizing enough to elicit participant reactions but not so political that opinions were already firmly established. We also believed it to be a ‘grandstandable’ topic due to its moral nature. Additionally, since other researchers in the project focused on non-political variables, the topic needed to be broadly suitable for all researchers involved.

The fictional discussion began with one user posting a summary and link to an article on platform X, initiating a sequence in which each subsequent commenter responded directly to the previous user’s statement. The discussion consisted of two commenters advocating for gene modification and two opposing it. Crucially, the fourth commenter’s mode of expression varied by condition. In the control condition, this participant expressed support neutrally, without engaging in moral grandstanding behaviors (e.g., *“There are ethical concerns and careful regulation necessary [...] but if used responsibly, this technology could save lives and improve public health”*), whereas in the moral grandstanding condition, the participant’s pro-gene stance incorporated explicit moral grandstanding behaviors such as ‘piling on’ or ‘trumping up’ moral claims (e.g., *“Refusing to support it is irresponsible and egoistic! It is that simple ...”*). By altering only the fourth commenter’s expression, we made sure that the observed differences between conditions could reliably be attributed to moral grandstanding. Thereby, the effects of

confounding variables were minimized. Structuring the discussion to represent both pro and anti-gene modification positions prevented potential bias due to the underrepresentation of either stance. Additionally, participants were able to take a second look at the comment of interest and to download the picture so that they could look back at it at later points of the study. Images of the discussion in each condition are included in Appendix C (see Figure 2) to provide a clear view of the manipulation.

Ideological Extremism

After exposing participants to the manipulation, we measured ideological extremism as the extent to which people report extreme political or ideological views at either end of the political spectrum, on a left-right scale adapted from Grubbs et al. (2020). Participants were asked, “*Please indicate where you would place yourself on the following scale when it comes to your political ideology*”. The sliding scale ranged from -100 (extremely left) to +100 (extremely right). This scale was used because it is a simple measure allowing individuals to place themselves on a dimension.

Manipulation Check

To evaluate whether the manipulation of the independent variable (moral grandstanding) was successful, participants rated their agreement with a single manipulation-check statement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The manipulation-check item was explicitly developed for this study and stated, “*The last person to comment (the one you were asked to focus on) was commenting primarily out of a desire to appear morally just, rather than out of genuine moral concern.*”

Additionally, demographic information was collected after the survey, including participants’ gender and age. Participants also completed a seriousness check, indicating whether

they participated sincerely or merely clicked through without genuine engagement. Following data collection, participants received a comprehensive debriefing that explained the study's objectives, addressed any misleading instructions, and emphasized the significance of their participation. After the debrief, participants were asked to consent once again for their data to be used.

Results

The statistical analysis of our data was conducted using SPSS and PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). The assumptions of linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were all met, and the inferential analysis of the data was continued without any obstacles.

Manipulation Check

To test whether our manipulation of the independent variable worked as intended, we conducted a manipulation check. Particularly, we ran an ANOVA with our grandstanding manipulation (control vs. grandstanding condition) as the independent variable and our manipulation check item, which assessed the extent to which participants felt the person was grandstanding, as the dependent variable. As expected, participants in the grandstanding condition ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.32$) scored higher on our manipulation check than those in the control condition ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.40$). This effect was positive and significant, $F(1, 146) = 24.12$, $p < .001$.

Hypothesis Tests

To test our hypotheses that exposure to moral grandstanding leads to increased levels of ideological extremism (H1) and that this increase will be significantly stronger among those with high political identity strength (H2), we ran an ANOVA analysis with our grandstanding manipulation as the independent variable, ideological extremism as the dependent variable, and

political identity strength as the moderator. Contrary to our first hypothesis, there was no significant difference in levels of ideological extremism between participants in the grandstanding condition ($M = -25.38$, $SD = 47.94$) and the control condition ($M = -26.72$, $SD = 48.15$), $t(146) = -0.17$, $p = .87$. Similarly, contrary to the second hypothesis, political identity strength did not moderate the relationship between grandstanding and ideological extremism, $t(144) = -0.08$, $p = .93$. Our moderator, political identity strength, did have a positive main effect on ideological extremism, $t(144) = -6.93$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Previous research and philosophical work have argued that moral grandstanding contributes to ideological extremism (e.g., Grubbs et al., 2020; Tosi & Warmke, 2020). We tested this idea, hypothesizing that exposure to moral grandstanding will increase ideological extremism for all individuals (H1), but that this effect will be significantly stronger among those with high political identity strength (H2). Our results did not support either hypothesis. Participants in the grandstanding condition did not report significantly more extreme ideological positions than those in the control group, and political identity strength did not moderate this relationship. Below, we summarize and interpret our findings, discuss implications, and consider limitations and directions for future research.

While the exact reasons for the lack of support for our hypothesis regarding the main effect of moral grandstanding on ideological extremism are unclear, five possible explanations stand out. Firstly, the absence of an effect could be explained by contrasting our findings with existing literature. At first glance, our findings might seem surprising, given that those who engage in moral grandstanding often hold more extreme views (Grubbs et al., 2019; Grubbs et al., 2020; Tosi & Warmke, 2016). However, previous research has primarily focused on the

grandstanders themselves, rather than on how others perceive their behavior. In this context, the lack of the anticipated effect is not entirely surprising, as our study explores a novel perspective. Since previous studies do not indicate whether grandstanding causes extremism in observers, our study intentionally tested this potential effect.

Secondly, the manipulation that was used may have been too brief and limited in scope to produce measurable outcomes. A single exposure in the form of a screenshot may not have been strong or provocative enough to evoke a change in levels of ideological extremism. This reasoning is in line with previous work, which suggests that only repeated exposure to grandstanding in a large population contributes to a deepening of ideological extremism (Tosi & Warmke, 2016).

Thirdly, moral grandstanding may not have significant effects if participants are not engaged with or passionate about the topic. Since the topic of gene modification is rather novel, the implications of gene editing may feel vague or speculative, especially to someone without the needed scientific knowledge to understand the underlying processes. Moreover, there may be a lack of personal relevance as well as an unclear moral narrative present, as this topic does not have a clear ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ narrative but rather elicits moral ambiguity, with people being unsure how to feel about it (e.g., Gyngell et al., 2019; Savulescu et al., 2015).

Fourthly, it is possible that the brief exposure to grandstanding was insufficient to shift participants’ ideological positions, which may have already been relatively fixed. Research suggests that individuals with extreme ideologies are particularly resistant to change, as their beliefs tend to remain consistent over time (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2023; Zwicker et al., 2020). Even beyond extremity, ideological positions in general are quite stable and fixed, making them harder to manipulate (Jost et al., 2008; Turner-Zwinkels & Brandt, 2023). This resistance to

change may have limited the effectiveness of our manipulation. However, this explanation is less likely to be relevant in our case, as it applies more strongly to individuals with extreme ideological positions, while our sample did not score at the ideological extremes ($M = -26.06$).

Lastly, certain methodological differences with previous studies may explain why we did not find similar effects. While ideological extremism was measured the same as in previous work concerning this relationship, moral grandstanding was manipulated differently (Grubbs et al., 2020). Specifically, prior work has relied on correlational measures focusing on the grandstander's motivation, while this study focuses on the effect of observing others grandstand, utilizing an experimental design. Based on the former arguments, our findings suggest that moral grandstanding may function more as a manifestation of ideological extremism rather than a preceding factor that influences the observers' attitudes.

Building on the exploration of explanations for the absence of a main effect, we must also look into possible explanations for the lack of a moderation effect. We hypothesized the moderation effect to appear based on substantial research showing that how strongly someone identifies with their political beliefs affects ideological extremism. However, these previously documented connections did not consider moral grandstanding as a factor. This could help explain the absence of a moderation effect in our study. Four possible reasons for this lack of effect stand out. First, the manipulation of moral grandstanding might not have been powerful enough to elicit different reactions between individuals low and high in political identity strength. As mentioned earlier, people's political views are not easily shifted by a single exposure to discourse (Zwicker et al., 2020).

Second, although the topic of gene modification is ethically relevant, it may not have been strongly identity-relevant for many participants. Existing research on identity salience

proposes that behavior is only influenced by political identity when it is made salient or central in a certain context, which may not have been the case here (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2023; Zhao, 2021). If participants did not perceive the topic as relevant to their political group, political identity strength might not have been sufficiently ‘triggered’ to show a moderating effect.

Third, we acknowledge the possibility that the manipulation of moral grandstanding was too powerful or emotionally charged, thereby overriding individual differences in political identity strength. If the stimulus provoked a strong reaction in all participants regardless of their political identity strength, differences could have been flattened, leaving little room for a moderation effect to emerge. The results of our manipulation check show a rather large mean difference between the control and grandstanding conditions, but the absolute values were not high enough to indicate a ceiling effect (most of the values scoring at the upper limit of the scale, APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018), making it unlikely that this explains the absence of a moderation effect. However, our data suggests that the grandstanding manipulation was powerful and detected by participants, allowing for the possibility that its emotional impact still reduced variability and affected the moderation effect. Based on our findings and the previously discussed points, we believe that political identity strength might correlate with baseline extremism, but that it does not necessarily amplify reactions to political cues like moral grandstanding in every context.

Finally, political identity strength and ideological extremism could be too closely related as constructs to evaluate them as separate variables. According to previous research, they are conceptually and empirically linked, with strong political identification often leading individuals to adopt more extreme ideological positions (Mason, 2018; Bankert et al., 2016). This substantial overlap makes it difficult to treat them as fully distinct constructs, which may explain the

absence of a moderation effect, especially in studies like ours, with limited sample sizes. Nevertheless, we had good reason to design the study this way. In our research, ideological extremism refers to the actual attitudes and ideological positions people hold, while political identity strength refers to the psychological and self-conceptual importance of a political identity. We thought it interesting to explore whether one's political identity strength in their self-concept influences their extremity of ideological views while treating both as distinct constructs.

While our moderation hypothesis was not supported, we did find a main effect of political identity strength on ideological extremism. This finding is not surprising and is in line with past research showing that individuals with strong political identities often have more extreme ideological views (Zwicker et al., 2020). We attribute this link to the centrality of political identity in shaping people's worldviews and attitudes. However, the absence of a moderation effect raises questions about the specific conditions under which identity strength influences reactions to political cues.

Theoretical Implications

Although our hypotheses were not supported, the findings of our study offer several theoretical implications, five of which are important to mention here. Firstly, our manipulation check confirmed that moral grandstanding is a strong and identifiable phenomenon that can be manipulated, which provides a useful tool for future experimental work. Secondly, our findings suggest that simply being exposed to moral grandstanding may not be enough to elicit measurable changes in others' ideological positions, especially in the short term or when the topic lacks emotional salience. This challenges the assumption, as implied in previous literature, that moral grandstanding inherently has persuasive or radicalizing effects on its audience (Grubbs et al., 2019; Tosi & Warmke, 2016). Thirdly, in line with social identity theory (Tajfel &

Turner, 1979), political identity strength may only moderate ideological responses when the context activates group-based concerns. Hence, the moderating effect may depend on the type of stimulus provided. Fourthly, in line with previous research (Zwicker et al., 2020), our study suggests that the stability of ideological extremism may make it less susceptible to brief manipulations. Therefore, theories that treat extremism as a stable disposition may be better suited to reflect social realities than those treating it as highly malleable. Finally, our results suggest that the polarizing effects of moral grandstanding may depend on other factors like emotional resonance, topic salience, and group identity relevance. Future theoretical models should account for these boundaries when describing how moral discourse influences political polarization.

Limitations

This study gave essential insights into the relationship between moral grandstanding, political identity strength, and ideological extremism; however, several limitations must be acknowledged, three of which are key to mention here.

Firstly, we relied purely on self-assessment of participants and a self-selected sample. These could have led to social desirability biases and limited variability. Previous research consistently suggests that measures of sensitive issues, such as political ideologies, are vulnerable to social desirability bias, with respondents underreporting extreme attitudes to maintain a socially acceptable self-image (e.g., Berinsky, 1999; Carmines & Nassar, 2021; Heide-Jørgensen, 2023; Krumpal, 2013; Persson & Solevid, 2013). Although this method was appropriate for our study, future research could complement self-report measures with behavioral indicators or implicit measures of ideological attitudes, which reduce bias and may reveal more complex attitudes.

Furthermore, our use of a social media setting introduces limitations related to both participant predispositions and ecological validity of the study. Specifically, participants may have had pre-existing attitudes toward online discourse, particularly on social media, that influenced their interpretation of the manipulation. Past research suggests that individuals differ in how they perceive moral discourse online, with some viewing it as genuine, while others view it through a more cynical lens (Brady et al., 2023; Grubbs et al., 2019). These predispositions are often shaped by personal experience with social media (Brady et al., 2023). Since our sample was relatively young ($M = 27.24$), we believe participants to have been quite familiar and experienced with online discourse. Such differences limit the generalizability of our findings to the broader population. Additionally, we had good reason to create our manipulation in a social media setting, as past research supports the notion that social media algorithms contribute to the growing development of political polarization (Oden & Porter, 2023; Van Bavel et al., 2021). However, this setting also limits ecological validity. Unlike an online setting, real-world grandstanding includes facial expressions, tone, and body language, which can significantly influence the interpretation of the message. Therefore, we suggest that future research examine grandstanding in face-to-face contexts instead.

Lastly, since our sample consisted mainly of students in a European context, with most participants scoring on the left side of the ideological spectrum ($M = -26.06$), it was relatively politically homogeneous. This lack of variation in ideological views limits the ability to detect shifts toward extremism and reduces generalizability. Given the discussed shortcomings, further research should be conducted longitudinally, with more ideological diversity. Despite these limitations, we can still acknowledge that our study design was grounded in relevant theoretical

work. Moreover, the mentioned limitations do not undermine the value of our findings, which still provide a meaningful foundation for future research.

Future Directions & Practical Implications

In addition to the suggestions for future studies that were mentioned in the previous section, our findings also point to four new avenues for further exploration. First, future studies could make use of more polarizing, identity-relevant, and emotionally charged political topics. For example, issues like immigration policies, abortion rights, or taxation laws may be better suited to activate political identity salience.

Second, future research could examine whether participants' agreement with the topic and the grandstanders' position affects their responses to grandstanding in a similar methodological setting. If agreement with the topic decreases the negative effects of grandstanding, this might explain why it thrives in ideologically homogeneous environments, such as social media echo chambers (environments in which people are confronted only with information and opinions that reflect their own, Van Bavel et al., 2021). This would explore whether grandstanding can also be a reinforcing factor in group cohesion rather than just leading to a greater divide between people.

Additionally, we would advise that following studies examine how people shift toward more extreme views during a political discussion, rather than just measuring general ideological extremism. This approach shifts the focus from ideological extremism to group polarization and the way it occurs in the moment. One way to implement this would be by creating discussions with two opposing sides, where some participants use grandstanding strategies, and measuring whether this leads to greater polarization in real time. It could then be explored whether individuals who become more easily polarized in the moment also tend to hold more extreme

beliefs in general. Thus, showing how situational adjustments are linked to broader political ideology and how political cues might affect a person's political viewpoint.

Lastly, we suggest that future research examine the effects of repeated exposure to moral grandstanding, especially in situations where political identity is relevant. Our findings indicate that a single exposure may not influence ideological extremism, but it remains unclear whether repeated exposure in identity-relevant contexts might have an effect, something that future studies could explore.

Building on directions for future research, our findings offer three crucial practical implications. To begin with, while moral grandstanding does not always affect attitudes in a single exposure, it may still encourage polarizing behaviors. Recent research found that individuals with stronger grandstanding tendencies are more likely to engage in online shaming, a form of public moral punishment (Grubbs et al., 2020; Muir et al., 2023). This indicates that grandstanding may contribute to extreme social actions that promote division and hostility in discourse. Therefore, we suggest that social media platforms monitor patterns of highly moralized content and online shaming. Additionally, programs should prevent over-identification with political affiliations, promote communication among various groups, and encourage reflection on group identity in light of available studies. Finally, understanding the role of grandstanding in political discourse could inform media endeavors. Teaching people to recognize moral grandstanding as a persuasive strategy could reduce its emotional and polarizing impact.

Conclusion

Public discourse and political ideologies seem to be continuously polarizing. The present study introduces moral grandstanding as a possible factor contributing to this phenomenon. While our findings did not support our hypotheses, they did give meaningful insight into the

phenomenon of moral grandstanding and highlight the stability of political beliefs. We recommend that future studies further investigate moral grandstanding in combination with moderators and conditions that may affect its influence on political attitudes. By continuing to explore this phenomenon, we can better understand the psychological mechanisms underlying polarization and the role of moral discourse. Generally, understanding how and when moral grandstanding may influence political ideologies can help us stay positive in increasingly polarized societies and promote more thoughtful and less performative public discourse.

References

- APA Dictionary of Psychology*. (2018, April 19). Dictionary.apa.org.
<https://dictionary.apa.org/ceiling-effect>
- Bankert, A., Huddy, L., & Rosema, M. (2016). Measuring Partisanship as a Social Identity in Multi-Party Systems. *Political Behavior*, 39(1), 103–132.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9349-5>
- Berinsky, A. J. (1999). The Two Faces of Public Opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, 43(4), 1209. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2991824>
- Bosi, L., Lavizzari, A., & Portos, M. (2021). The Impact of Intolerance on Young People's Online Political Participation. *Politics*, 42(1), 026339572110144.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211014453>
- Brady, W. J., McLoughlin, K. L., Torres, M. P., Luo, K. F., Gendron, M., & Crockett, M. J. (2023). Overperception of moral outrage in online social networks inflates beliefs about intergroup hostility. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7, 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01582-0>
- Brandt, M. J., & Vallabha, S. (2023). Intraindividual Changes in Political Identity Strength (But Not Direction) Are Associated With Political Animosity in the United States and the Netherlands. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231203471>
- Carmines, E., & Nassar, R. (2021). How Social Desirability Bias Affects Immigration Attitudes in a Hyperpolarized Political Environment. *Social Science Quarterly*.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12982>

- Carter, M. J. (2013). Advancing Identity Theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 76(3), 203–223.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272513493095>
- Ebtsam, A. A. H., & Neama, M. F. K. (2014). Identity, political efficacy and expected political participation among nursing students after 25th January revolution. *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research*, 6(4), 69–76. <https://doi.org/10.5897/jpapr2014.0283>
- Fernbach, P. M., Rogers, T., Fox, C. R., & Sloman, S. A. (2013). Political Extremism Is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding. *Psychological Science*, 24(6), 939–946.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612464058>
- Grubbs, J. B., Warmke, B., Tosi, J., James, A. S., & Campbell, W. K. (2019). Moral grandstanding in public discourse: Status-seeking motives as a potential explanatory mechanism in predicting conflict. *PLOS ONE*, 14(10), e0223749.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0223749>
- Grubbs, J., Warmke, B., Tosi, J., & James, A. (2020). *Moral grandstanding and political polarization: A multi-study consideration*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2020.104009>
- Gyngell, C., Bowman-Smart, H., & Savulescu, J. (2019). Moral reasons to edit the human genome: picking up from the Nuffield report. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 45(8), 514–523.
<https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2018-105084>
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach. New York: Guilford Press.
- Heide-Jørgensen, T. (2023). Does Social Desirability Bias Distort Survey Analyses of Ideology and Self-Interest? Evidence from a List Experiment on Progressive Taxation. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 86(4). <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfac050>

- Hogg, M.A. (2016). Social Identity Theory. In: McKeown, S., Haji, R., Ferguson, N. (eds) Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory. Peace Psychology Book Series. Springer, Cham.
https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1007/978-3-319-29869-6_1
- Hohagen, C. (2024, July 19). *Gen Z: The Polarization Generation*. Global Americans.
<https://globalamericans.org/gen-z-the-polarization-generation/>
- Jost, J. T., Nosek, B. A., & Gosling, S. D. (2008). Ideology: Its Resurgence in Social, Personality, and Political Psychology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(2), 126–136. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2008.00070.x>
- Jungkunz, S., Helbling, M., & Osenbrügge, N. (2024). Measuring political radicalism and extremism in surveys: Three new scales. *PloS One*, 19(5), e0300661–e0300661.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0300661>
- Krumpal, I. (2013). Determinants of Social Desirability Bias in Sensitive surveys: a Literature Review. *Quality & Quantity*, 47(4), 2025–2047.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-011-9640-9>
- Le, A., Brown, J., & Hohman, Z. (2022). Social identity processes predicting post-election 2020 ideological extremism. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 22(3), 1058–1071.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12331>
- Mackie, D., & Cooper, J. (1984). Attitude polarization: Effects of group membership. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46(3), 575–585.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.46.3.575>

- Mason, L. (2018). Ideologues without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 82(S1), 866–887.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfy005>
- Mesler, R. M., Howie, K., Chernishenko, J., Shen, M. N., & Vredenburg, J. (2024). The association between political identity centrality and cancelling proclivity. *Acta Psychologica*, 244, 104140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104140>
- Muir, S. R., Roberts, L. D., Sheridan, L., & Coleman, A. R. (2023). Examining the role of moral, emotional, behavioural, and personality factors in predicting online shaming. *PLOS ONE*, 18(3), e0279750–e0279750. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0279750>
- Norris, P. (2021). Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality? *Political Studies*, 71(1), 1–30. Sage Journals.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/003232172111037023>
- Oden, A., & Porter, L. (2023). The Kids Are Online: Teen Social Media Use, Civic Engagement, and Affective Polarization. *Social Media and Society*, 9(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231186364>
- Persson, M., & Solevid, M. (2013). Measuring Political Participation—Testing Social Desirability Bias in a Web-Survey Experiment. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 26(1), 98–112. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edt002>
- Prassek, S. (2024, March 13). *What does polarisation mean for our society?* Vostel Blog.
<https://vostel.de/blog/en/what-does-polarization-mean-for-our-society/#Folgen%20von%20Polarisierung>
- Savulescu, J., Pugh, J., Douglas, T., & Gyngell, C. (2015). The moral imperative to continue gene editing research on human embryos. *Protein & Cell*, 6(7), 476–479.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13238-015-0184-y>

- Sellers, R. M., Rowley, S. A. J., Chavous, T. M., Shelton, J. N., & Smith, M. A. (1997). Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity: A preliminary investigation of reliability and construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(4), 805–815. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.4.805>
- tagesschau.de. (2025, February 26). *Jungwähler in Ulm zur Bundestagswahl: "Geht jetzt so weiter wie die letzten 20 Jahre."* Tagesschau.de. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/regional/badenwuerttemberg/swr-junge-menschen-zur-bundestagswahl-geht-jetzt-so-weiter-wie-die-letzten-20-jahre-100.html>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Torcal, M., & Magalhães, P. C. (2022). Ideological extremism, perceived party system polarization, and support for democracy. *European Political Science Review*, 14(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773922000066>
- Tosi, J., & Warmke, B. (2016). Moral Grandstanding. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 44(3), 197–217. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12075>
- Tosi, J., & Warmke, B. (2020). *Grandstanding: the use and abuse of moral talk*. Oxford University Press. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlabk&db=nlabk&AN=2398778>
- Turner, J. C., & Reynolds, K. J. (2012). Self-Categorization Theory. *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, 2, 399–417. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n46>

- Turner-Zwinkels, F. M., & Brandt, M. J. (2023). Ideology Strength Versus Party Identity Strength: Ideology Strength Is the Key Predictor of Attitude Stability. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231189015>
- Turner-Zwinkels, F. M., Noord, J. V., Kesberg, R., García-Sánchez, E., Brandt, M. J., Kuppens, T., Easterbrook, M. J., Smets, L., Gorska, P., Marchlewska, M., & Turner-Zwinkels, T. (2025). Affective Polarization and Political Belief Systems: The Role of Political Identity and the Content and Structure of Political Beliefs. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 51(2), 222-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231183935>
- Tyler, M., & Iyengar, S. (2022). Learning to Dislike Your Opponents: Political Socialization in the Era of Polarization. *American Political Science Review*, 117(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s000305542200048x>
- Van Bavel, J. J., Rathje, S., Harris, E., Robertson, C., & Sternisko, A. (2021). How social media shapes polarization. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 25(11), 913–916. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2021.07.013>
- van Prooijen, J.-W., & Krouwel, A. P. M. (2019). Psychological Features of Extreme Political Ideologies. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28(2), 159–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721418817755>
- van Prooijen, J.-W., Krouwel, A. P. M., & Pollet, T. V. (2015). Political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6(5), 570–578. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550614567356>
- Whitford, A., Yates, J., & Ochs, H. (2025). Ideological Extremism and Public Participation. *Social Science Quarterly*, 87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0038-4941.2006.00367.x>

Zhao, S. (2021). The Existential-Phenomenological Situation of Ideological Extremism.

Educational Theory, 71(4), 475–495. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12489>

Zwicker, M. V., van Prooijen, J.-W., & Krouwel, A. P. M. (2020). Persistent beliefs: Political extremism predicts ideological stability over time. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 23(8), 1137–1149. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220917753>

Appendix A

Variables used in this Research

Table 1

Complete list of all variables included in this study

Independent Variable	Moderators	Dependent Variables
Moral Grandstanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political Identity Strength - Agreement with the Topic - Agreeableness - Moral Cynicism - Moral Sensitivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ideological Extremism - Perceived Consensus - Likability - Perception of Moral Grandstanding - Credibility of Speaker - Engagement with Topic

Appendix B
Scale Modification

Table 2*Political Identity Measurement Scale Modification*

Identity Centrality Scale Item	Political Identity Strength Modification
Overall, being black has very little to do with how I feel about myself.	Overall, my political identity has very little to do with how I feel about myself.
In general, being black is an important part of my self-image.	In general, my political identity is an important part of my self-image.
My destiny is tied to the destiny of other black people.	My destiny is tied to the destiny of other people sharing the same political identity.
Being black is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am.	My political identity is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am.
I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people.	I have a strong sense of belonging to people who share the same political identity.
I have a strong attachment to other black people.	I have a strong attachment to other people who share the same political identity.
Being black is an important reflection of who I am.	My political identity is an important reflection of who I am.
Being black is not a major factor in my social relationships.	My political identity is not a major factor in my social relationships.

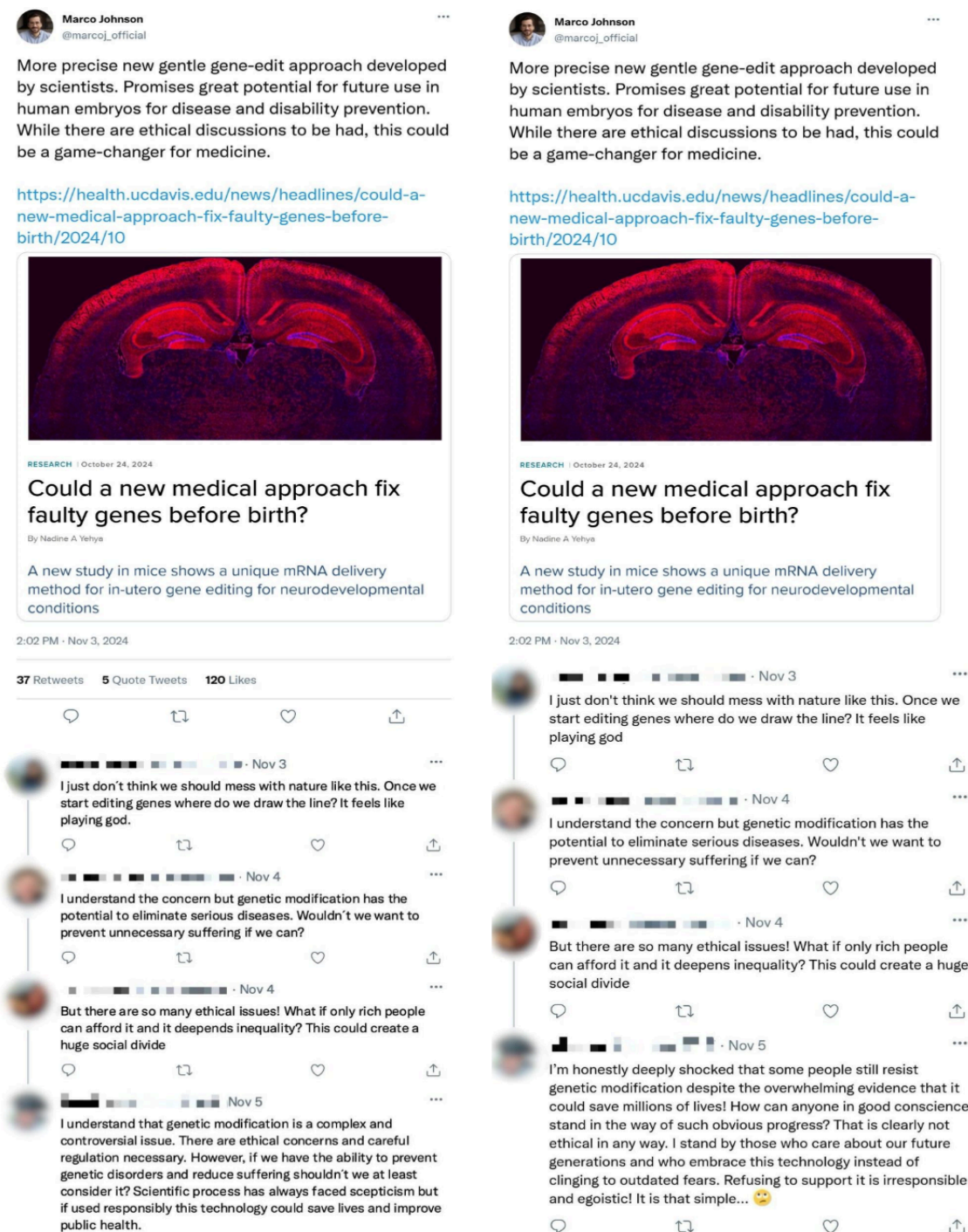
Note: Identity Centrality Scale (Sellers et al., 1998)

Appendix C

Image of Manipulation

Figure 2

Screenshot of the control condition on the left; Screenshot of the experimental condition on the right.



Appendix D

Transparency on the usage of AI Tools

I acknowledge the use of AI tools in the development of this thesis. I used OpenAI's ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com>) to assist me in the search for background literature and improve grammatical structures. AI tools did not generate any of the content I presented in my work. Moreover, it did not assist me in the development of arguments or analysis; all interpretations presented in this thesis are my own work.