

## **How Does Cynicism Influence the Perception of Moral Grandstanding?**

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*Your thesis is not just an academic exercise, but a significant contribution to the field of psychology. It is an important exploration of the relationship between cynicism and perceptions of moral grandstanding in public discourse. This research, while demonstrating your research and reporting skills, also serves as a potential catalyst for more constructive dialogues in the future. Its approval does not guarantee the quality of the research and its results, but it does open the door for further exploration and understanding. Therefore, the thesis may not be suitable as an academic source. If you wish to learn more about the research discussed in this thesis and any publications based on it, please contact the mentioned supervisor.*

(keep the above text as it is)

### **Abstract**

Moral grandstanding—the strategic use of moral language to enhance one’s status—has been widely theorized to erode trust in moral discourse and fuel public polarization. While previous research has identified its performative nature, little is known about how it affects perceptions of sincerity or how individual dispositions shape these perceptions. This study experimentally investigated the effect of moral grandstanding on perceived sincerity and examined whether this relationship is moderated by cynicism, a generalized distrust of others’ motives. In a between-subjects design, 148 participants were randomly assigned to read either a morally grandstanding or a neutral comment embedded in a social media discussion on gene modification. Perceptions of sincerity and individual levels of cynicism were assessed using validated measures. Results showed that participants in the grandstanding condition perceived the speaker as significantly less sincere, confirming the hypothesized effect of grandstanding on perceived sincerity. Contrary to expectations, cynicism did not moderate this relationship. Instead, it emerged as an independent predictor: individuals high in cynicism consistently evaluated the speaker as less sincere, regardless of condition. These findings suggest that moral grandstanding functions as a salient cue of insincerity, detectable even in the absence of dispositional cynicism, and that cynical individuals are predisposed to interpret moral communication with suspicion. The study contributes to a growing body of literature on moral psychology by clarifying how message-driven and person-driven factors influence perceptions of sincerity in digital moral discourse.

*Keywords:* Moral Grandstanding, Perceived Sincerity, Cynicism, Moral Communication, Digital Discourse

## **How Does Cynicism Influence the Perception of Moral Grandstanding?**

Moral and political conversations have increasingly moved into the public sphere, accompanied by a rise in behaviors that appear more performative than sincere (Tosi & Warmke, 2016; Grubbs et al., 2019). One such behavior is moral grandstanding, which refers to making moral claims primarily to gain status rather than out of genuine concern (Tosi & Warmke, 2016). While moral grandstanding may sometimes help raise awareness about important issues, research has shown that it can fuel polarization, lead to interpersonal conflict, and prompt skepticism about the speaker's sincerity (Grubbs et al., 2019; Crockett, 2017). These reactions are particularly relevant in today's climate, where audiences increasingly evaluate moral statements through the lens of motive, questioning whether expressions of outrage or virtue are genuine or strategic (Jordan & Rand, 2020).

Significantly, these perceptions may depend on how individuals view others' moral motivations. Specifically, cynicism—a tendency to believe others act out of self-interest—may shape whether people consider moral speech sincere or self-serving (Wright & Nichols, 2014).

This study examined the effect of exposure to moral grandstanding on perceptions of sincerity and authenticity in moral communication, as well as whether individual differences in cynicism moderate this relationship.

### **Moral Grandstanding**

Moral grandstanding, as defined by Tosi and Warmke (2016), refers to the strategic use of moral talk primarily to enhance one's social standing rather than to engage sincerely in ethical reflection or dialogue. It is marked by an intent to appear morally impressive to others, often at the expense of constructive conversation. While moral discourse can be a powerful tool for collective problem-solving, grandstanding may undermine this function by

prioritizing impression management over genuine moral concern (Tosi & Warmke, 2016; Grubbs et al., 2019). This behavior is particularly prevalent in digital environments, where moral statements are often apparent and frequently rewarded through social validation mechanisms, such as likes, shares, and retweets. Online platforms have been shown to amplify moral content and encourage performative expression, especially when emotionally charged or extreme (Brady et al., 2021; Crockett, 2017).

Grandstanding manifests in various forms. Tosi and Warmke (2016) outline three core behaviors: ramping up or escalating moral claims to appear more virtuous; piling on, where individuals join moral condemnation to display group alignment; and trumping up, which involves exaggerating or inventing moral concerns. Related behaviors include outrage expressions—often emotionally intense and hyperbolic—and moral posturing, where individuals assert moral superiority through dramatic condemnation or virtue signaling (Crockett, 2017; Grubbs et al., 2019).

These behaviors have four key consequences for public discourse. First, grandstanding undermines trust in moral conversations by provoking skepticism toward the speaker's sincerity, especially in online contexts that lack nonverbal cues (Crockett, 2017). Second, it contributes to political and ideological polarization, deepening intergroup divides and impeding constructive dialogue (Grubbs et al., 2019). Third, it facilitates reputation signaling, allowing individuals to align with socially desirable identities while potentially compromising authenticity (Jordan & Rand, 2020). Fourth, repeated exposure to grandstanding can lead to audience fatigue and disengagement, weakening the quality of public moral discourse (Bail et al., 2018).

Crucially, the diverse social consequences of moral grandstanding—such as eroded trust, intensified polarization, and audience disengagement—fundamentally depend on how

audiences perceive these moral expressions. Moral grandstanding, characterized by exaggerated, emotionally charged, or status-driven statements, typically elicits skepticism because audiences often interpret it as insincere or attention-seeking (Grubbs et al., 2019; Crockett, 2017). Consequently, the central mechanism driving the varied effects of grandstanding is the audience's perception of sincerity. Despite this centrality, the formation of sincerity perceptions remains underexplored, particularly in moral psychology. A deeper understanding of how observers judge whether a moral statement reflects genuine ethical concern or merely performative virtue signaling is thus essential for clarifying why moral grandstanding produces such profound yet variable societal outcomes.

To date, empirical evidence explicitly investigating the psychological processes and contextual factors shaping perceptions of sincerity in moral grandstanding is limited. Although existing literature underscores the importance of sincerity in moral communication, few studies have systematically examined why audiences perceive certain moral statements as authentic and others as performative. Given the broad societal implications of moral grandstanding, including reduced trust in moral discourse and heightened polarization, filling this knowledge gap is practically and theoretically valuable. Identifying the factors that influence perceived sincerity could inform interventions aimed at reducing the negative social consequences of moral grandstanding.

Therefore, this research addresses an important gap by focusing explicitly on perceptions of sincerity as a critical mediator of the social effects of moral grandstanding. Understanding what drives these perceptions—and why audiences interpret similar moral statements in fundamentally different ways—is essential to explaining and ultimately mitigating the adverse outcomes associated with performative moral communication.

### **Perceived Sincerity in Moral Discourse**

Understanding how individuals perceive moral grandstanding requires examining how people assess the sincerity and authenticity of moral discourse more generally. Sincerity, within the context of moral communication, refers to observers' judgments regarding whether a speaker's moral expressions reflect genuine ethical concern or if these expressions primarily serve ulterior motives such as gaining social status, validation, or approval (Grubbs et al., 2019). Perceived sincerity is fundamental in moral interactions because it directly impacts the speaker's credibility, trustworthiness, and persuasive influence. In moral discourse, sincerity judgments often determine the extent to which an audience engages meaningfully with a moral message, making perceived sincerity a central construct in moral psychology and communication research.

Several psychological and contextual factors have been identified as influencing perceptions of sincerity. Observers typically rely on various cognitive and communicative cues, such as consistency in moral statements over time, the logical coherence of arguments, the emotional intensity displayed, and perceived alignment with audience values (Batson et al., 1997; Crockett, 2017). Furthermore, according to social identity theory, perceptions of sincerity also depend on the social relationship between speaker and audience; in-group speakers typically receive more favorable sincerity judgments than out-group speakers (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, motivated reasoning theory suggests that individuals perceive morally congruent claims as more authentic and opposing views as manipulative or insincere (Kunda, 1990). These previously studied factors form the broader theoretical backdrop for understanding how sincerity perceptions are formed and shaped.

However, despite considerable knowledge regarding general influences on perceived sincerity, the role of moral grandstanding as a distinct communicative behavior remains insufficiently explored. Moral grandstanding is particularly relevant due to its inherently performative and exaggerated nature, often employing emotional intensity, moral outrage, and

overt rhetoric that emphasizes status. Observers who encounter moral grandstanding might interpret such expressions as insincere or manipulative, precisely because these statements appear primarily designed for social approval rather than genuine moral engagement (Grubbs et al., 2019; Crockett, 2017). The digital environments in which grandstanding frequently occurs further complicate sincerity judgments, as traditional non-verbal sincerity cues (e.g., facial expressions, vocal tone) are largely unavailable (Burgoon et al., 2016; Walther & Parks, 2002). Thus, moral grandstanding potentially amplifies perceptions of insincerity, as its hallmark behaviors directly conflict with the criteria commonly applied by observers for sincerity.

Given these considerations, we hypothesize that moral grandstanding will hurt observers' perceptions of sincerity. Specifically, we predict that exposure to moral grandstanding behaviors, compared to neutral moral statements, will result in significantly lower perceptions of sincerity and authenticity in moral discourse.

H1: Higher levels of moral grandstanding will result in lower perceptions of sincerity and authenticity in moral discourse.

Understanding the conditions under which grandstanding influences perceptions of sincerity is crucial. Therefore, the following section explores the potential moderating role of individual differences in cynicism.

### **Cynicism as a Moderator**

Cynicism is a significant dispositional factor that influences how individuals interpret moral and political discourse. Broadly defined, cynicism refers to a generalized distrust of others' motives, characterized by the belief that people commonly act primarily out of self-interest rather than genuine ethical concern (Wright & Nichols, 2014; Grubbs et al., 2019). Previous psychological research highlights cynicism as a multidimensional trait,



encompassing interpersonal suspicion, political disillusionment, and skepticism toward moral claims (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016). This general distrust can manifest across various domains of social interaction, influencing how individuals interpret and respond to persuasive messages, trustworthiness of institutions, and authenticity of interpersonal communication (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016).

Importantly, cynical individuals exhibit a cognitive bias toward attributing others' morally charged actions and statements to manipulative or self-serving motives, particularly when encountering unfamiliar or incongruent viewpoints (Wright & Nichols, 2014; Batson et al., 1997). Research in social and political psychology consistently shows that cynical individuals are less receptive to persuasive messages and more resistant to attitude change, as they automatically discount the sincerity of communicators stated intentions (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Pattyn et al., 2012).

Given this predisposition, cynicism will likely play a significant role in shaping perceptions of moral grandstanding. Moral grandstanding typically involves morally performative behaviors, such as exaggerated emotional expression, heightened moral language, or virtue signaling, which inherently raise questions about sincerity and underlying motives. Consequently, cynical observers may interpret these exaggerated moral expressions as deliberate attempts to gain social approval or enhance personal status rather than authentic expressions of moral conviction (Grubbs et al., 2019; Crockett, 2017). By contrast, individuals lower in cynicism might perceive similar moral expressions more positively, taking them at face value as sincere demonstrations of genuine moral commitment.

Therefore, we expect cynicism to moderate the relationship between moral grandstanding and perceptions of sincerity. Specifically, we predict that the adverse effect of moral grandstanding on perceived sincerity will be more pronounced for individuals who are

highly cynical. Conversely, this effect will be weaker, possibly even absent, among individuals with lower levels of cynicism.

H2: For individuals high in cynicism, moral grandstanding will lead to lower perceptions of sincerity and authenticity in moral discourse. For individuals low in cynicism, the effect of moral grandstanding on perceived sincerity will be weaker or absent.

### **The Present Research**

Our study makes a unique contribution to the literature in three significant ways. Firstly, it addresses crucial gaps identified in previous research, particularly the causal relationship between moral grandstanding and perceived sincerity. While earlier studies often failed to establish clear causal relationships, our research, which employs an experimental approach and systematically manipulates moral grandstanding in controlled conditions, provides robust empirical evidence on how different moral discourses impact perceptions of sincerity. This causal evidence substantially strengthens existing theoretical claims, which previously relied primarily on correlational findings.

Secondly, our study introduces cynicism as a moderating variable—a critical individual difference that has received insufficient attention in prior work on moral communication. Exploring the role of cynicism enables us to understand better the variability in how moral grandstanding is perceived, clarifying why some individuals are predisposed to interpreting moral grandstanding as insincere, while others perceive it more favorably. By examining this dispositional factor, our study sheds light on the complex psychological processes underpinning audience interpretations of moral discourse, enriching theoretical models of moral communication.

Thirdly, our research provides practical insights into how moral grandstanding is perceived within digital contexts, where moral and political discourse is increasingly

prevalent. Given the prevalence of online communication, our findings offer valuable guidance for mitigating polarization and fostering constructive dialogue in digital spaces. By demonstrating how specific behaviors, such as exaggerated moral claims, affect perceptions of sincerity, our study informs strategies that could help communicators and policymakers reduce performative moralizing and enhance authenticity in public interactions.

These contributions significantly advance our understanding of moral grandstanding, emphasizing the importance of contextual factors and individual differences in shaping moral evaluations. As digital communication continues to evolve, gaining clarity on how moral discourse is perceived remains essential for encouraging authentic and respectful public dialogue. The significance and impact of our findings cannot be overstated, as they provide a crucial foundation for future research and practical applications in moral communication.

## **Method Section**

### **Participants & Design**

Our dataset originally contained 254 cases. However, 106 participants were excluded through a rigorous three-step process, ensuring the highest standards of participant selection. Participants were removed from the initial dataset based on three exclusion criteria.

First, 98 participants were excluded due to incompleteness. Individuals were classified as incomplete if they failed to reach and complete the seriousness check at the end of the survey. Many of these individuals exited the survey after viewing the opening screen or reading the information page; notably, only 23 participants reached the manipulation, and only 11 completed any dependent variable items. Thus, this group primarily consisted of individuals who never meaningfully engaged with the survey, rather than participants who dropped out during the study. Second, two additional participants were removed because they indicated in the seriousness check that they did not take the survey seriously. Lastly, six

participants withdrew their data after reading the debriefing screen, revealing the study's true purpose. Following these exclusions, the final sample consisted of 148 participants. Of these, 84 identified as female, 61 as male, one as non-binary, and two preferred not to disclose their gender. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 63, with a mean age of 27.24 ( $SD = 10.41$ ).

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. Initially, researchers contacted their networks and shared the online survey link through WhatsApp, Instagram, and Reddit platforms. When the survey was distributed in publicly accessible spaces, participants were informed that the study aimed to examine how online discussions are experienced.

The study employed a between-subjects experimental design to investigate the impact of moral grandstanding on perceived sincerity, with moral grandstanding serving as the independent variable and consisting of two levels (grandstanding vs. control condition). Participants were randomly assigned to one of these conditions. Cynicism served as the moderator variable, and the dependent variable was the perception of moral grandstanding. This study was part of a broader research project that included several other variables not discussed in this paper. (A comprehensive list of all variables measured, including their roles as moderators or dependent variables, is provided in Appendix A.)

## **Materials & Procedure**

The survey for this study was designed and distributed using Qualtrics, an online questionnaire platform. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, where researchers shared an invitation link on their social networks and across various online platforms, including WhatsApp, Instagram, and Reddit. The invitation described the study as examining experiences with online discussions, thereby concealing the proper focus on moral grandstanding to minimize response biases.

Participation was voluntary and required approximately fifteen minutes. Upon starting the survey, Participants first reviewed and completed an informed consent form detailing their participation rights, the ethical safeguards in place, and the general nature of the study.

### **Cynicism**

After participants provided their informed consent, we first measured our moderator, cynicism, using a scale comprising seven items adapted from established measures assessing general skepticism toward others' moral motivations ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Participants responded to each item using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). An example item was: "Most people only pretend to care about moral issues." Several items were reverse-coded to balance responses and minimize acquiescence bias (e.g., "You can usually trust others to act morally"). The complete set of items is provided in Appendix B.

### **Moral grandstanding**

Participants were subsequently exposed to our manipulation of moral grandstanding. The discussion was presented as a mock thread on platform X and shown to participants as a screenshot designed to closely resemble genuine social media discourse. The topic of gene modification was selected for its moral relevance, relative neutrality, and capacity to evoke both support and opposition without relying on politically polarizing cues, allowing for clearer tone manipulation while minimizing the impact of preexisting ideological alignment.

Participants reviewed a structured thread involving five commenters who alternately expressed positions for or against gene modification. The sequence was initiated by one user posting a summary and linking it to an article, followed by four commenters alternating between pro- and anti-gene positions. The fifth and final commenter also supported gene modification; however, their tone varied depending on the condition. In the control condition, this final comment was supportive but neutral in tone (e.g., "I believe gene modification has

many benefits and is worth considering if it can improve lives.”). In the moral grandstanding condition, the same position was presented with exaggerated emotional language and virtue signaling (e.g., “I am honestly deeply shocked that some people still resist gene modification despite overwhelming evidence—it is simply irresponsible not to support it!”). These expressions included known markers of moral grandstanding, such as piling on, trumping up, and claims of self-evidence. By altering only the fifth commenter's tone, while maintaining the content of the discussion and its structure, we ensured that differences between conditions could be confidently attributed to the presence or absence of moral grandstanding, thereby reducing the risk of confounding variables. Moreover, by structuring the debate to include both supporting and opposing views on gene modification, we avoided bias due to the underrepresentation of either stance.

Screenshots of the manipulation used in both the control and grandstanding conditions are provided in Appendix B.

### **Perceived sincerity**

The dependent variable in this study measured participants' perceptions of moral grandstanding through their evaluations of a specific commenter's motivations within an online discussion. Participants responded to several items assessing the commenter's intentions, sincerity, and authenticity, using a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) ( $\alpha = .74$ ). The scale included items adapted from established measures used in prior research on moral grandstanding. An example item assessing moral grandstanding perceptions was: "This commenter is trying to showcase their moral superiority." To enhance validity and mitigate response bias, reverse-coded items were incorporated, such as: "I believe the commenter is genuinely concerned about the issue." The complete list of items is available in Appendix C. Overall, this scale aimed to capture nuanced

perceptions regarding moral grandstanding, evaluating overt and subtle indicators to determine whether a moral expression was viewed as genuine or performative.

### **Manipulation Check**

A manipulation check was conducted to ensure the effectiveness of the manipulation regarding the independent variable (moral grandstanding). This check was designed to assess participants' agreement with a statement that explicitly addressed the concept of moral grandstanding. Participants responded using a 7-point Likert scale, where one indicated "strongly disagree" and seven indicated "strongly agree." The manipulation checks asked participants to evaluate whether "the last person to comment (the one you were instructed to focus on) was motivated more by a desire to appear morally upright than by sincere moral conviction." This item served to verify whether the manipulation effectively shaped participants' perceptions of moral grandstanding. Demographic data, such as age and gender, were collected at the end of the survey. Additionally, participants completed a seriousness check, in which they indicated whether they had engaged thoughtfully with the survey or had clicked through without paying attention. After completing the survey, participants were fully debriefed, receiving a clear explanation of the study's true aims, any deceptive elements involved, and the relevance of their contribution to the research.

### **Results section**

All assumptions necessary for the analyses were rigorously tested and met. The statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS (Version XX) and the PROCESS macro by Hayes (Version 4.2). Before conducting the inferential analysis, we carefully assessed the linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and independence of residuals. No violations were identified, ensuring the analysis was valid and reliable, providing a solid foundation for our results.

## Manipulation Check

To verify the effectiveness of our manipulation of moral grandstanding, we conducted an ANOVA with moral grandstanding (grandstanding vs. control) as the independent variable and participants' scores on the manipulation check item as the dependent variable. The manipulation checks assessed participants' perceptions of moral grandstanding. Results indicated a significant effect,  $F(1, 146) = 24.12, p < .001$ . As expected, participants in the moral grandstanding condition ( $M = 4.25, SD = 1.32$ ) rated the target commenter as engaging in more grandstanding than participants in the control condition ( $M = 3.15, SD = 1.40$ ), confirming that our manipulation successfully influenced perceived sincerity in the intended direction.

## Hypothesis Tests

To test our hypotheses, we examined the effect of moral grandstanding on perceived sincerity and assessed whether this relationship was moderated by cynicism. In line with our first hypothesis, we found that participants exposed to moral grandstanding perceived the speaker as less sincere than those in the control condition. Participants in the grandstanding condition ( $M = 4.07, SD = 0.883$ ) reported higher perceptions of grandstanding than those in the control group ( $M = 3.05, SD = 0.836$ ),  $F(1, 146) = 21.743, p < .001$ , supporting our first hypothesis.

Contrary to expectations, the interaction effect between moral grandstanding and cynicism on perceived sincerity was not significant,  $t(144) = 0.14, p = .89$ , suggesting that cynicism did not moderate the effect of moral grandstanding. The moderator's cynicism, however, significantly affected perceptions of moral grandstanding across conditions,  $t(144) = 3.08, p = .003$ . Participants with higher levels of cynicism consistently perceived greater



degrees of moral grandstanding, regardless of the condition to which they were assigned. In summary, while our first hypothesis was supported, the second hypothesis was not.

### **Discussion**

This study tested two hypotheses. The first hypothesis proposed that higher levels of moral grandstanding would lead to stronger perceptions of grandstanding. The second hypothesis proposed that cynicism would moderate the relationship between moral grandstanding and perceived sincerity, such that individuals higher in cynicism would perceive moral grandstanding as less sincere than individuals lower in cynicism. The results supported the first hypothesis: participants in the moral grandstanding condition reported significantly higher perceptions of grandstanding than those in the control condition. The second hypothesis was not supported, as cynicism did not significantly moderate the relationship between moral grandstanding and perceived sincerity.

The findings from our study partially align with expectations derived from existing literature, yet they also present some intriguing nuances. The strong confirmation of our first hypothesis—that exposure to moral grandstanding significantly reduces perceived sincerity is consistent with theoretical frameworks highlighting the performative nature of online moral expression (Tosi & Warmke, 2016; Grubbs et al., 2019). Given that prior studies suggested that audiences are generally sensitive to cues of moral authenticity, this result was not entirely surprising. However, the absence of a moderate effect from cynicism was unexpected. Previous literature indicated that cynicism, characterized by a general distrust in others' motives, would likely amplify skepticism towards performative moral statements, making grandstanding especially detectable and objectionable to highly cynical individuals (Wright & Nichols, 2014; Batson et al., 1997). Our results indicate that this anticipated interaction did not materialize. Instead, cynicism independently increased the perception of moral

grandstanding, irrespective of the experimental condition. This outcome suggests that the influence of cynicism may be robust enough to overshadow any subtle interactions with moral grandstanding, highlighting the need for further research to disentangle the complex relationships between individual dispositions and perceptions of moral communication in digital contexts.

Three potential explanations might clarify this unexpected finding. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, the phenomenon of moral grandstanding itself may be so inherently off-putting or universally unappealing that subtle variations, typically introduced by individual differences such as cynicism, become overshadowed or irrelevant. In other words, moral grandstanding might universally evoke negative evaluations, thereby minimizing the moderating impact of individual traits. However, when considering methodological explanations, the strong and clear-cut nature of our manipulation might have indeed limited the detection of subtler individual differences. Participants' nuanced engagement with moral content minimizes the moderating impact of cynicism. Previous literature suggests that online contexts might amplify, rather than minimize, cynicism due to the perceived anonymity and detachment inherent in digital interactions, rendering people harsher, socially dismissive, and less inhibited towards one another (Jordan & Rand, 2020). However, one could argue that the controlled experimental design employed in this study, which explicitly asked participants to focus intensely and repeatedly on specific moral comments, may have inadvertently encouraged more thoughtful and deliberate evaluations. This heightened engagement could reduce instinctive, cynical responses, which typically arise from rapid judgments and superficial information processing (Grubbs et al., 2019). Hence, participants may have approached the moral claims more analytically, reducing the impact of individual dispositional differences such as cynicism. Further empirical studies explicitly comparing online and face-to-face interactions could clarify whether such careful, prompted engagement

consistently moderates the influence of cynicism. Finally, while cynicism did not moderate the relationship, it significantly impacted perceptions of grandstanding independently, suggesting cynicism's role might be more direct and less interactive than previously hypothesized. Indeed, higher cynicism consistently correlated with higher perceptions of moral grandstanding regardless of experimental condition. This finding aligns well with prior research that describes cynicism as a dispositional factor influencing the general evaluation of moral and social behaviors (Batson et al., 1997; Grubbs et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the absence of a significant interaction effect highlights the potential robustness and universal recognizability of moral grandstanding as a perceptual cue. Specifically, once individuals encounter language characterized by performative morality, their perception of that behavior as grandstanding appears relatively unaffected by individual differences in cynicism. This finding contributes to theoretical frameworks on social cognition and moral evaluation by suggesting a boundary condition on the role of dispositional factors: despite prior literature emphasizing cynicism as a significant filter in moral judgments (Grubbs et al., 2019; Wright & Nichols, 2014), grandstanding may represent a sufficiently salient social signal that overrides nuanced individual differences. This theoretical insight provides new avenues for future research, particularly regarding how robust cues, such as grandstanding, shape public judgments related to authenticity, trustworthiness, and ideological extremity. While social cognitive theories often highlight the interplay between message-driven (external cues) and perceiver-driven (internal dispositions) processing routes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), our results suggest the intriguing possibility that certain forms of moral communication may be primarily message-driven. This aligns with dual-route processing models but simultaneously refines them by proposing conditions under which internal traits (e.g., cynicism) exert limited moderating influence. Moreover, our results underscore the importance of understanding digital contexts as environments where moral

communication is actively and thoughtfully evaluated by individuals, leveraging both contextual presentation and their internal frameworks. These observations align well with social cognitive theories that conceptualize moral evaluations as dynamic interactions between situational cues and dispositional attitudes. Future studies could further explore the theoretical boundaries of this interaction, clarifying precisely when and why perceiver-driven factors, such as cynicism, become overshadowed by the inherent salience and recognizability of moral grandstanding.

These results highlight the psychological salience of moral grandstanding and the cognitive filters, such as cynicism, that shape our perception of it. They contribute to growing empirical efforts to unpack the dynamics of moral signaling in increasingly polarized and performative communication environments.

## **Limitations**

This study provided important insights into the relationship between moral grandstanding, perceived sincerity, and cynicism; however, four limitations must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study employed an online experimental design with a self-selected sample. Although this approach enabled efficient data collection and facilitated access to a diverse range of participants, it potentially introduced self-selection bias. Specifically, individuals voluntarily participating in research focused on moral discourse may already possess attitudes, such as heightened skepticism toward performative morality (i.e., moral grandstanding) or strong preferences regarding digital interactions. Prior research indicates that individuals who frequently engage in or critically observe online discussions might develop specific cognitive schemas and biases related to digital behavior, potentially amplifying perceptions of insincerity or virtue signaling compared to the general population

(Jordan & Rand, 2020). Furthermore, regular participants in online moral debates may hold polarized views about acceptable digital conduct, leading them to either strongly endorse or sharply criticize morally charged communications. Consequently, their responses may not accurately reflect the reactions of broader populations who engage less frequently in such discussions. To enhance generalizability, future research might utilize stratified sampling techniques or actively recruit participants from diverse cultural contexts and demographic backgrounds.

Secondly, moral grandstanding was manipulated through text-based scenarios delivered online. While this allowed for experimental control, it limited the richness of the stimuli. Real-world grandstanding often incorporates paralinguistic features, facial expressions, and body language that significantly contribute to the interpretation of messages (Burgoon et al., 2016;). As such, the ecological validity of the current study is constrained. Future research could address this by incorporating video stimuli or live interactions, which may better capture the nuance of performative moral behavior.

Thirdly, the measurement of cynicism was based on self-reported trait-level items. While this approach captures stable individual dispositions, it does not account for momentary or situational fluctuations in skepticism that may arise in response to specific communicative contexts. Prior research suggests that situational cynicism can indeed fluctuate based on contextual variables, such as the source's credibility or perceived sincerity (Stanley et al., 2005). If participants experienced varying degrees of skepticism during the experiment due to factors such as mood, prior exposure to similar content, or immediate social cues, this could have affected their perceptions and evaluations of moral grandstanding in ways not captured by our trait-level measure. Additionally, the measurement in our study was not multidimensional, as we aimed for a concise assessment suited for online administration to minimize participant fatigue and maximize data quality. However, future research could

enhance explanatory power by incorporating both trait-level and state-level cynicism measures, thus providing a more nuanced understanding of how cynicism dynamically influences the perception of moral discourse.

Lastly, this study examined participants' immediate responses to a single exposure to moral grandstanding. However, individuals are often repeatedly exposed to performative moral communication in digital contexts, which may lead to more pronounced effects, such as increasing cynicism or moral disengagement over time (Crockett, 2017). Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to assess how repeated exposure influences the evolution of perceptions of moral grandstanding and their implications for civic engagement. Addressing these limitations through targeted methodological refinements could enhance both the theoretical clarity and real-world applicability of future findings.

### **Future Research and Practical Implications**

Given this study's findings, several promising avenues for future research can be identified, beyond merely addressing the previously mentioned limitations.

Firstly, future research should explore moral grandstanding across different cultural contexts. Considering that cultural norms and values significantly influence moral judgments and perceptions (Haidt, 2012), investigating cross-cultural differences could provide valuable insights into how cultural variables impact the perception and evaluation of grandstanding behaviors. Cultures that emphasize collectivism, for example, may be more likely to interpret moral grandstanding as a breach of group harmony, as such behavior disrupts social cohesion and conformity, which are highly valued in these settings (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, more individualistic cultures may be more tolerant—or even rewarding—of such self-promotion, viewing it as a form of authentic self-expression (Triandis, 1995). Cross-

cultural comparison could help determine whether moral grandstanding is universally recognized or contextually constructed.

Secondly, future studies should examine the role of moral grandstanding within various moral and political domains. The perception and interpretation of grandstanding may vary substantially depending on the issue being addressed. For example, moral grandstanding on topics like climate change—an issue with widespread scientific consensus—may be viewed as more legitimate or less self-serving than grandstanding about divisive or identity-based issues such as immigration or gender rights. Prior research has shown that people tend to process information differently based on the emotional salience or moral polarization of a topic (Feinberg & Willer, 2013), which may shape how sincere or performative a message appears. Consequently, audience sensitivity to grandstanding may be heightened when a topic is perceived as highly controversial, threatening to group values, or emotionally charged. Exploring how perceived threat, controversy, or emotionality moderates the impact of grandstanding on perceived credibility and engagement would provide valuable nuance to understanding moral communication.

Thirdly, investigating the effects of moral grandstanding on actual behavioral outcomes is essential. While this study focused on perceived sincerity and cynicism, future work should examine whether exposure to moral grandstanding influences participants' willingness to engage in real-world actions, such as participating in online or offline activism, joining moral discussions, or altering social media interaction patterns. For instance, do individuals avoid conversing with those perceived as grandstanders, or are they more likely to respond with criticism or support? Experimental or longitudinal research could help determine whether grandstanding elicits persuasion, backlash, or disengagement.

Moreover, it is worth exploring the potential psychological costs of prolonged exposure to grandstanding. Prior research has linked repeated exposure to moral outrage or virtue signaling to outcomes such as political polarization and emotional exhaustion (Brady et al., 2020). These effects may manifest as increased cynicism, reduced motivation to participate in public discourse, or aversion to moral messaging. Thus, studying the cumulative impact of grandstanding could clarify how it affects individuals' long-term attitudes toward public engagement, trust, and moral dialogue.

Regarding practical implications, our findings have several applications for policymakers, educators, and media platforms. Online environments that amplify moral grandstanding may inadvertently foster divisiveness. Social media developers could consider implementing algorithmic changes—such as downranking content with strong moralizing or outrage-based markers—to reduce performative moral discourse and promote more constructive engagement. For example, emphasizing posts that display nuance, empathy, and deliberation could help reshape online moral conversations.

In education, media literacy programs could include components that help individuals recognize the difference between performative and genuine moral expression. Given the strong influence of cynicism on how moral content is perceived, such programs could also aim to raise awareness of one's interpretive biases. Encouraging reflection on one's motivations in moral communication, whether the goal is to signal virtue or foster understanding, may reduce polarization and promote healthier digital discourse.

In summary, future research should expand our understanding of how moral grandstanding operates across diverse contexts, including its behavioral, psychological, and societal consequences. Concurrently, practical efforts should aim to mitigate its polarizing effects and promote sincere, respectful, and effective moral communication.



## Conclusion

This study examined how moral grandstanding affects observers' perceptions and whether individual differences influence this effect in cynicism. The results revealed that moral grandstanding significantly increased perceptions of self-serving or performative intent in moral discourse, supporting our first hypothesis. Contrary to expectations, cynicism did not moderate this effect. Instead, it emerged as an independent predictor: participants high in cynicism were generally more likely to interpret moral claims as disingenuous, regardless of the condition. These findings highlight two distinct but complementary routes in the perception of moral communication—one driven by the content of the message and another by stable personality traits. The widespread recognizability of grandstanding behaviors, even among individuals low in cynicism, suggests that such rhetorical patterns are especially salient in digital contexts, where cues for authenticity may be limited.

Understanding how moral communication is evaluated—and how personal dispositions interact with message features—is essential for improving public moral discourse. As online platforms remain central venues for value-driven debate, the need for strategies that promote constructive and sincere engagement becomes increasingly pressing. This study contributes to that goal by clarifying how grandstanding is perceived and by identifying cynicism as a key lens through which moral discourse is filtered. Future research should explore how repeated exposure to grandstanding, different moral domains, and cross-cultural differences shapes these evaluations over time. Ultimately, recognizing the dual influence of rhetorical style and audience disposition is vital for navigating moral disagreement in increasingly polarized social environments.

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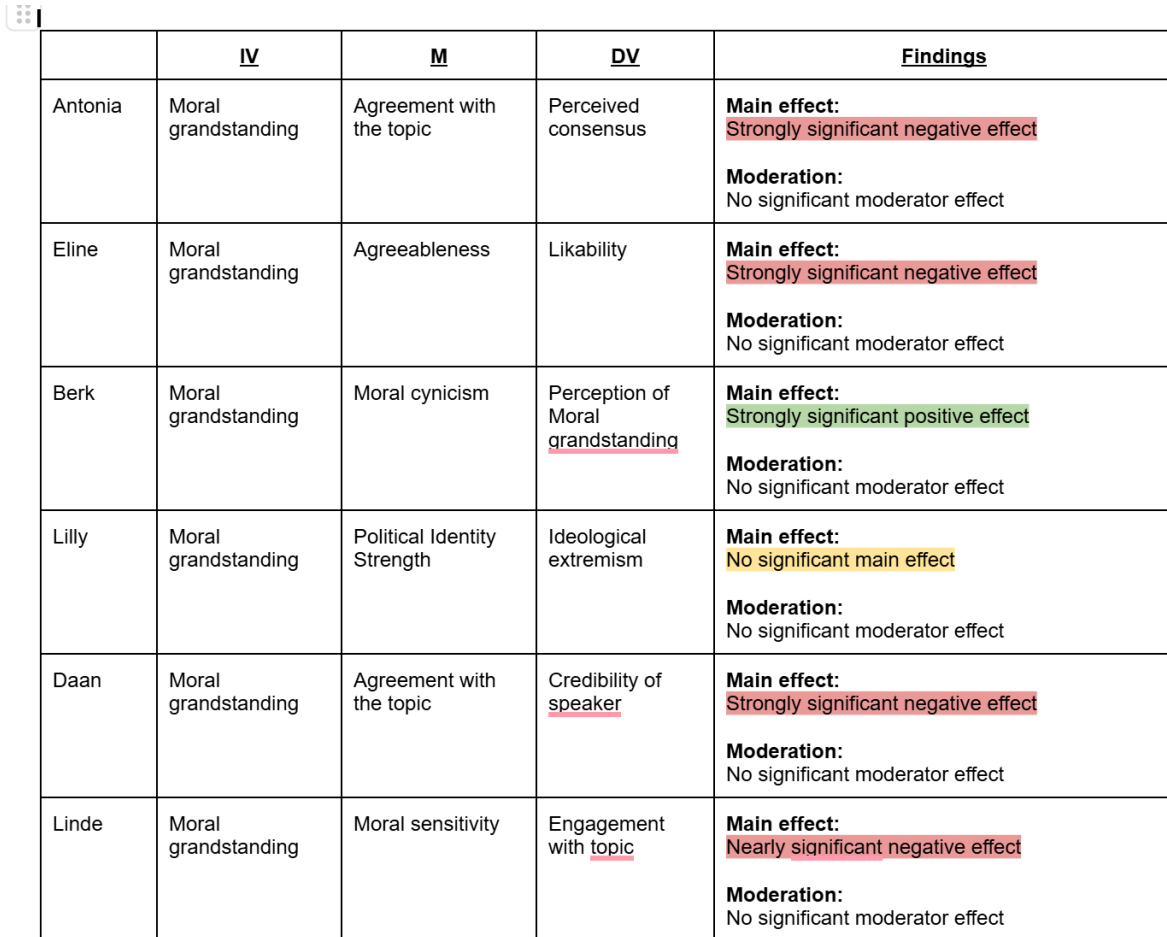
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## Appendix A

**Table A1**

*Summary of Experimental Variables and Key Findings*



	<b>IV</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>DV</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Antonia	Moral grandstanding	Agreement with the topic	Perceived consensus	<b>Main effect:</b> Strongly significant negative effect  <b>Moderation:</b> No significant moderator effect
Eline	Moral grandstanding	Agreeableness	Likability	<b>Main effect:</b> Strongly significant negative effect  <b>Moderation:</b> No significant moderator effect
Berk	Moral grandstanding	Moral cynicism	Perception of Moral grandstanding	<b>Main effect:</b> Strongly significant positive effect  <b>Moderation:</b> No significant moderator effect
Lilly	Moral grandstanding	Political Identity Strength	Ideological extremism	<b>Main effect:</b> No significant main effect  <b>Moderation:</b> No significant moderator effect
Daan	Moral grandstanding	Agreement with the topic	Credibility of speaker	<b>Main effect:</b> Strongly significant negative effect  <b>Moderation:</b> No significant moderator effect
Linde	Moral grandstanding	Moral sensitivity	Engagement with topic	<b>Main effect:</b> Nearly significant negative effect  <b>Moderation:</b> No significant moderator effect

Note. "Strong negative effect" refers to a significant negative statistical relationship; "strong positive effect" refers to a significant positive statistical relationship; "no significant effect" indicates the absence of statistically significant findings.

## Appendix B

**Figure B1**

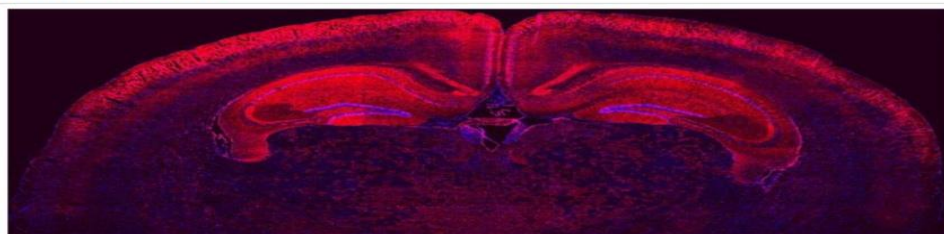
This screenshot depicts the online discussion used as the control condition. The fifth user (dated November 5) expresses their opinion neutrally, without engaging in moral grandstanding behaviors.



**Marco Johnson**  
@marcoj\_official

More precise new gentle gene-edit approach developed by scientists. Promises great potential for future use in human embryos for disease and disability prevention. While there are ethical discussions to be had, this could be a game-changer for medicine.

<https://health.ucdavis.edu/news/headlines/could-a-new-medical-approach-fix-faulty-genes-before-birth/2024/10>



RESEARCH | October 24, 2024

## Could a new medical approach fix faulty genes before birth?

By Nadine A Yehya

A new study in mice shows a unique mRNA delivery method for in-utero gene editing for neurodevelopmental conditions

2:02 PM · Nov 3, 2024

37 Retweets 5 Quote Tweets 120 Likes



██████████ · Nov 3

I just don't think we should mess with nature like this. Once we start editing genes where do we draw the line? It feels like playing god.



██████████ · Nov 4

I understand the concern but genetic modification has the potential to eliminate serious diseases. Wouldn't we want to prevent unnecessary suffering if we can?



██████████ · Nov 4

But there are so many ethical issues! What if only rich people can afford it and it deepends inequality? This could create a huge social divide



██████████ · Nov 5

I understand that genetic modification is a complex and controversial issue. There are ethical concerns and careful regulation 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.

*Screenshot of the Control Condition*

**Figure B2**

This screenshot depicts the online discussion used to operationalize moral grandstanding. The comment by the fifth user (dated November 5) includes emotionally charged statements and exaggerated moral language indicative of moral grandstanding.



*Screenshot of the Moral Grandstanding Condition*

Note. Screenshots were explicitly created for experimental manipulation in this study.

## Appendix C

**Table C1**

*Cynicism Scale Items*

Participants responded to the following items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

No.	Item
1	Most people only pretend to care about moral issues.
2	Most individuals are motivated by self-interest rather than genuine concern for others.
3	When people make public moral statements, they often have hidden agendas.
4	You can usually trust others to act morally. ( <i>r</i> )
5	When people express strong moral opinions, they usually mean what they say. ( <i>r</i> )
6	Most people genuinely try to do what is best for others. ( <i>r</i> )
7	People talk about morality to make themselves look good.

Note. Items marked with (r) were reverse-coded, so higher scores reflect greater cynicism.

## Appendix D

### Usage of AI

During the writing of this thesis, I utilized the AI tool ChatGPT by OpenAI (<https://chat.openai.com>) to assist me in identifying relevant background literature and refining my grammar and sentence structure. At no point was AI used to generate content or develop the arguments and analyses within this work. All interpretations and conclusions are entirely my own.