



Moral Elevation and Prosocial Action in Online Communities

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Abstract

Online communities have become important environments in which individuals observe generosity, solidarity, volunteerism, emotional support, charitable action, and other forms of morally commendable conduct. Such exposure may produce moral elevation, a positive self-transcendent emotion characterized by feelings of inspiration, admiration, warmth, and motivation to emulate exemplary behavior. Although experimental and media-effects research has repeatedly connected moral elevation with helping, generosity, and other prosocial outcomes, considerably less attention has been devoted to how this emotional process may operate within digitally mediated communities where moral exemplars are encountered through posts, short videos, comments, livestreams, testimonials, peer-support exchanges, and algorithmically circulated stories. Recent research continues to support a positive association between moral elevation and prosocial behavior while identifying gratitude, empathy, moral identity, personality, and media context as important mechanisms or boundary conditions.

This study develops an integrated framework connecting moral elevation, gratitude, community belonging, and prosocial action in online communities. Because no original participant dataset was supplied, the quantitative component uses a transparent synthetic sample of 420 observations rather than presenting invented empirical evidence. The simulation generated standardized constructs corresponding to moral elevation, gratitude, perceived community belonging, and prosocial action. Descriptive analysis, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and exploratory mediation analysis were then applied. The simulated dataset produced a strong positive correlation between moral elevation and prosocial action ($r = .67$). In the multivariable model, moral elevation remained the strongest predictor of prosocial action (standardized $\beta = .486$), followed by gratitude ($\beta = .215$) and community belonging ($\beta = .153$), with the model accounting for approximately 49.3% of variance in the simulated outcome. An exploratory indirect pathway through gratitude was also positive.

The paper argues that moral elevation offers a useful psychological explanation for how exposure to visible goodness can translate into constructive participation in online communities, but that this process should not be reduced to emotional stimulation alone. Authenticity, contextual credibility, social identification, platform norms, opportunity for action, and ethical design may determine whether inspiration becomes meaningful helping rather than temporary engagement.

Keywords: moral elevation; prosocial behavior; online communities; digital prosociality; gratitude; community belonging; social media; moral emotions; helping behavior; online participation



1. Introduction

Digital communication environments have become deeply embedded in contemporary social life. Online communities now support interpersonal communication, peer assistance, professional collaboration, charitable mobilization, educational interaction, health-related support, neighborhood coordination, disaster response, and social advocacy. These environments are frequently discussed in relation to misinformation, polarization, harassment, social comparison, and other harmful outcomes. Yet digital communities also expose users to expressions of compassion, self-sacrifice, generosity, courage, fairness, reconciliation, and mutual assistance. A community member may encounter a stranger organizing emergency support, a volunteer assisting a vulnerable family, an individual publicly defending someone experiencing mistreatment, or thousands of users contributing resources to a person they have never met. Such encounters raise an important behavioral question: can witnessing morally admirable action online generate an emotional response that encourages observers to help others themselves? Research on prosocial media suggests that positive digital and media exposure can influence subsequent helping behavior, and recent work on short-video platforms has shown that the content and perceived consequences of prosocial acts may affect subsequent prosocial responses.

Moral elevation provides a theoretically compelling mechanism for explaining this process. The construct emerged from research on positive moral emotions and refers to the affective response produced when individuals witness exceptional goodness, kindness, generosity, courage, or other forms of moral excellence. Algoré and Haidt distinguished elevation from more general positive emotions by emphasizing its connection to witnessing moral virtue, while Schnall, Roper, and Fessler subsequently demonstrated experimentally that elevation can increase tangible helping behavior. Thomson and Siegel's review further consolidated evidence that elevation involves affective, cognitive, motivational, and sometimes physiological responses oriented toward moral improvement and affiliation. Moral elevation is therefore not simply feeling pleased by another person's success. It involves perceiving conduct as morally admirable and experiencing a motivation to become better, behave more generously, or strengthen one's connection with other people.

The digital setting adds important complexity. Online observers frequently receive moral information through compressed and highly mediated formats: short videos, photographs, captions, comments, livestream excerpts, viral narratives, crowdfunding pages, or algorithmically prioritized posts. The emotional effect of these materials may therefore depend not only on the moral character of the behavior being observed but also on perceived authenticity, narrative framing, social identity, reward cues, visibility, platform norms, and the observer's existing moral dispositions. Research among adolescents has demonstrated that prosocial short-video content can influence helping behavior, although effects vary according to social-value orientation and whether the displayed behavior appears rewarded or punished. Research on online prosocial behavior likewise identifies moral identity, empathy, and social self-efficacy as important mechanisms connecting social-media engagement to constructive digital behavior. These findings indicate that online prosociality cannot be understood through exposure alone. Emotional interpretation and the psychological meaning assigned to the observed behavior appear central.

A further theoretical issue concerns the transition from emotional experience to behavioral action. Feeling inspired does not necessarily guarantee that an individual will donate money, comfort

another user, share useful information, volunteer, defend a vulnerable community member, or participate constructively in collective action. Moral elevation may facilitate this transition by changing perceptions of other people, strengthening gratitude, increasing identification with moral standards, and creating an approach-oriented motivation to act. Recent evidence from Zhang, Bu, and Liu, based on 1,261 college students, indicates that moral elevation is positively related to prosocial behavior, that gratitude partly mediates this association, and that empathy alters its strength. Earlier experimental work also indicates that the behavioral expression of elevation varies with context and individual differences, including engagement with moral beauty and need for cognition. The present study therefore conceptualizes digital prosociality as a process in which moral elevation interacts with relational and emotional resources rather than functioning as an isolated emotional stimulus.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 Examination of Moral Elevation as a Predictor of Online Prosocial Action

The first objective is to clarify whether moral elevation provides a theoretically plausible predictor of prosocial action within online communities. Prosocial action in this context includes digitally mediated behaviors intended to benefit other people or communities, such as providing emotional support, sharing useful information, donating resources, volunteering, defending vulnerable users, contributing to collaborative problem solving, and amplifying verified requests for assistance. The study treats moral elevation as an emotion arising from exposure to perceived moral excellence rather than as a general measure of positive mood.

The analytical expectation is that higher moral-elevation scores should correspond with stronger prosocial-action scores. This expectation is grounded in experimental findings showing that witnessing virtuous conduct can increase helping and generosity, as well as recent evidence showing a positive association between moral elevation and broader prosocial behavior.

2.2 Assessment of Gratitude as an Emotional Transmission Mechanism

The second objective is to examine gratitude as a mechanism through which elevation may be translated into prosocial motivation. Moral elevation and gratitude are conceptually distinct: elevation commonly follows observation of another person's moral excellence, whereas gratitude often concerns recognition of benefits, care, or benevolence. Nevertheless, both belong to the broader family of other-oriented positive emotions and may reinforce constructive interpersonal orientation.

Recent empirical work indicates that gratitude can partially mediate the association between moral elevation and prosocial behavior. The present model therefore evaluates whether the simulated relationship between moral elevation and prosocial action contains an indirect pathway through gratitude.

2.3 Evaluation of Community Belonging as a Relational Resource

The third objective is to evaluate whether perceived belonging within an online community contributes independently to prosocial action. Online helping is rarely performed in a purely psychological vacuum. A person's willingness to support others may be affected by whether the online environment is perceived as trustworthy, relationally meaningful, reciprocal, and socially cohesive.



This objective consequently broadens the elevation–behavior model by treating community belonging as a relational condition capable of supporting prosocial action alongside moral elevation and gratitude. Rather than assuming that emotional inspiration alone determines behavior, the model recognizes that socially embedded motivation may be particularly important in digital settings where interpersonal relationships are often distributed, asynchronous, and partly anonymous.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Moral Elevation and the Conversion of Moral Observation Into Action

Algoe and Haidt's foundational account of elevation positioned the emotion among other-praising responses that arise when individuals encounter moral excellence. Their work distinguished elevation from admiration and gratitude and emphasized that elevation can generate a desire to become a better person and behave more prosocially. This distinction remains important because a digital user may admire another person's competence, popularity, appearance, or achievement without experiencing moral elevation. Elevation is more specifically linked with perceived virtue.

Schnall, Roper, and Fessler provided experimental evidence that exposure to morally elevating material can increase helping behavior. Their experiments contributed to an important shift from merely describing elevation as an emotional experience toward evaluating whether it produces observable behavioral consequences. Schnall and Roper later examined whether elevation could translate existing moral values into behavior, reinforcing the idea that elevation may operate as an activation mechanism rather than creating moral values from nothing. This interpretation is especially relevant online, where users already possess moral identities and social commitments before encountering a particular post, video, or story.

Thomson and Siegel's review synthesized the expanding literature and emphasized that elevation incorporates emotional, motivational, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Their synthesis also highlights a methodological problem that remains relevant: researchers do not always use identical stimuli or behavioral outcomes. Some studies examine volunteering intentions; others evaluate donations, economic-game behavior, interpersonal helping, or self-reported intentions. Consequently, the claim that elevation promotes “prosocial behavior” should not be understood as implying equal effects across every form of helping.

3.2 Prosocial Media, Online Communities, and Digital Helping

Research on media effects provides an important second foundation. Prosocial media content does not merely depict helping; it can serve as a social-learning environment in which observers encounter examples of cooperation, generosity, and care. Longitudinal research on prosocial media has connected media exposure with empathy and prosocial behavior, while experimental research on prosocial video games and related content has identified behavioral consequences of exposure to constructive social models.

Fryburg and colleagues tested kindness-focused media in a real-world pediatric healthcare environment. Participants viewing kindness material reported greater inspiration and other positive emotional changes, demonstrating that uplifting media effects are not restricted to highly controlled laboratory contexts. Although that setting differs from a conventional social-media platform, the study is



informative because contemporary online communities continuously circulate comparable micro-narratives of generosity and compassionate action.

Short-video research offers even closer relevance to contemporary online communication. Li, Mao, and Hu experimentally manipulated the consequences associated with prosocial behavior portrayed in short videos. Their findings indicated that punishment attached to displayed prosocial action could negatively influence subsequent behavior through moral elevation, while empathy moderated the elevation-behavior relationship. These findings challenge a simplistic model in which displaying a good deed is automatically beneficial. Users evaluate what happens to the person performing the deed. If virtuous behavior appears punished, exploited, or socially rejected, the observational lesson may differ substantially from content in which helping receives positive social acknowledgment.

3.3 Gratitude, Empathy, Belonging, and Boundary Conditions

The connection between elevation and helping cannot be separated from related social emotions. Algoe and Haidt's early formulation already emphasized that elevation, gratitude, and admiration share an other-praising orientation but have distinguishable elicitors and action tendencies. In online communities, these emotions may occur sequentially or simultaneously. A user may feel elevated by witnessing someone organize a rescue effort, grateful that community members are willing to help strangers, and motivated to participate in the same effort.

Belonging provides a complementary relational mechanism. Online users are more likely to interpret collective behavior meaningfully when they perceive themselves as members of a community rather than as detached spectators. A strong sense of membership can make another user's welfare socially consequential, create expectations of reciprocity, and increase the perceived legitimacy of communal norms. Thus, community belonging may convert elevation from a brief emotional state into behavior directed toward a recognizable social group.

The literature consequently supports an integrated account in which moral elevation generates approach-oriented moral motivation, gratitude deepens appreciation of benevolence, empathy shapes responsiveness to others, moral identity influences behavioral consistency, and belonging situates the resulting motivation within a social network. The remaining gap is that these mechanisms are rarely integrated specifically around ongoing online-community participation. The present simulation addresses this conceptual gap by demonstrating an analytical model suitable for future empirical testing.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Analytical Position

The study adopts a simulation-based quantitative design supported by an integrative literature synthesis. This design was selected because no authentic participant dataset was supplied. Creating fictional respondents and presenting their responses as an empirical survey would violate appropriate standards of research transparency. Accordingly, published literature is used to establish theoretical expectations, while synthetic observations are used exclusively to demonstrate the proposed statistical model.

The simulation is not intended to establish population prevalence, causal effects, or generalizable estimates. Its purpose is methodological: to show how a future empirical study could operationalize

moral elevation, gratitude, community belonging, and prosocial action and evaluate their interrelationships.

A synthetic sample size of $N = 420$ was selected to provide stable illustrative estimates for multivariable analysis. All constructs were represented on continuous scales bounded between 1 and 5, corresponding to the range commonly associated with Likert-type composite measures. A fixed random seed was used to ensure reproducibility.

Table 1: Proposed Construct Operationalization and Analytical Role

Construct	Conceptual Meaning	Illustrative Measurement Approach	Analytical Role
Moral Elevation	Inspiration and moral uplift arising from witnessing virtuous behavior	Multi-item 1–5 composite assessing inspiration, admiration, warmth, and desire for moral improvement	Primary predictor
Gratitude	Appreciation of benevolence and socially beneficial action	Multi-item 1–5 gratitude composite	Proposed mediator
Community Belonging	Perceived identification, connection, and membership within the online community	Multi-item 1–5 belonging composite	Relational predictor
Prosocial Action	Intention or behavior directed toward benefiting other community members	Composite covering helping, information sharing, emotional support, volunteering, and resource contribution	Outcome variable

Source/Note: Construct selection was informed by published moral-elevation and prosocial-behavior literature. The quantitative observations analyzed in this manuscript are synthetic rather than participant responses. Empirical studies have connected elevation with helping and generosity and have identified gratitude, empathy, and online social mechanisms as important explanatory variables.

4.2 Synthetic Data Generation and Variable Construction

Synthetic moral-elevation scores were generated from an approximately normal distribution centered above the scale midpoint and bounded between 1 and 5. Gratitude was generated as a function of moral elevation plus independent variation, reflecting the theoretical expectation that elevated individuals may experience stronger gratitude without assuming perfect correspondence between the constructs.



Community belonging was generated as a weaker function of moral elevation plus substantial independent variance. This design reflects the theoretical distinction between an immediate emotional response and the more durable relational experience of belonging to a community.

Prosocial action was generated as a function of moral elevation, gratitude, community belonging, and random error. Moral elevation received the largest structural coefficient, followed by gratitude and belonging. These coefficients were chosen for simulation rather than estimated from a real population and should therefore not be interpreted as empirical effect sizes.

4.3 Statistical Procedures and Reproducibility

Analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, standardized multiple linear regression, and exploratory mediation analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the central tendency and dispersion of the four synthetic variables. Pearson's r was used to describe bivariate association between moral elevation and prosocial action.

The regression model estimated the independent contribution of moral elevation, gratitude, and community belonging to prosocial action. Standardized coefficients were calculated so that the relative magnitude of predictors could be compared on a common scale. Model explanatory performance was summarized with (R^2).

An exploratory mediation model tested whether gratitude carried part of the statistical association between moral elevation and prosocial action. A bootstrap procedure with 3,000 resamples was used to estimate the simulated indirect effect. Because the data are cross-sectional and synthetic, this analysis is an illustration of an indirect statistical pathway rather than evidence of causal mediation.

No ethics approval or informed consent was required for the simulation because no human participants, identifiable records, private communications, platform-user profiles, or scraped social-media content were used. A future empirical implementation involving human users would require appropriate institutional ethics review, informed-consent procedures where applicable, privacy protection, data minimization, and platform-compliant data collection.

5. Analysis

5.1 Descriptive and Correlational Pattern

The synthetic dataset produced average scores above the theoretical midpoint for all four constructs. Mean moral elevation was 3.29 with a standard deviation of 0.79. Gratitude averaged 3.11, community belonging 3.14, and prosocial action 3.26.

The strongest bivariate association relevant to the principal research objective occurred between moral elevation and prosocial action, with Pearson's ($r=.665$), rounded to .67. Gratitude was also positively correlated with prosocial action ($(r=.518)$), while community belonging displayed a moderate positive relationship ($(r=.374)$). Moral elevation correlated positively with gratitude ($(r=.565)$) and belonging ($(r=.372)$).

These coefficients are internally generated features of the simulation. They should be interpreted as a demonstration of what a theoretically coherent dataset might look like rather than as estimates of the actual relationship among online-community users.

Table 2: Simulated Descriptive Statistics and Multivariable Results

Variable / Statistic	Mean	SD	Correlation With Prosocial Action	Standardized Regression β	Statistical Interpretation
Moral Elevation	3.29	0.79	.665	.486	Strongest independent predictor
Gratitude	3.11	0.67	.518	.215	Positive secondary predictor
Community Belonging	3.14	0.66	.374	.153	Positive relational contribution
Prosocial Action	3.26	0.68	1.000	—	Outcome
Overall Model	—	—	—	($R^2=.493$)	Approximately 49.3% of simulated variance explained

Note: N = 420 synthetic observations. Regression coefficients are standardized. The model was statistically significant within the generated dataset, ($F(3,416)=134.6$), $p < .001$. These statistics are reproducible simulation outputs and must not be presented as evidence collected from real online-community members.

5.2 Multivariable Prediction of Prosocial Action

The standardized regression model indicated that moral elevation remained the strongest predictor after gratitude and community belonging were entered simultaneously. Its standardized coefficient was $\beta = .486$, with a simulated 95% confidence interval of approximately .398 to .575. Gratitude contributed independently with $\beta = .215$, while community belonging contributed $\beta = .153$.

The complete model explained approximately 49.3% of the variance in prosocial action within the synthetic dataset. This pattern illustrates an important theoretical point. Even when moral elevation is assigned a central role, prosocial behavior can be modeled more realistically as a multicomponent outcome. Emotional activation, appreciation of benevolence, and social embeddedness can each provide statistically distinguishable contributions.

The results also indicate why online-community research should avoid treating “inspiration” and “helping” as interchangeable measures. Elevation may increase motivational readiness, but actual action can still depend on relational opportunities, community norms, perceived efficacy, resources, and the availability of a concrete helping target.

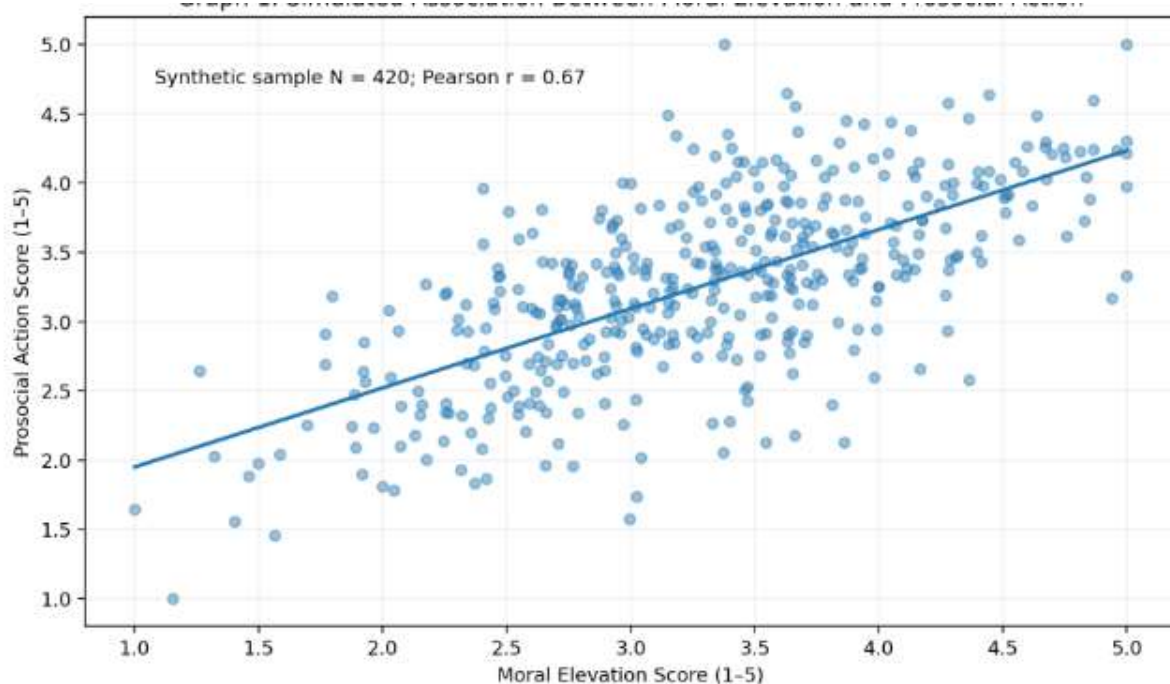
5.3 Gratitude Pathway and Graphical Relationship

The exploratory mediation analysis produced a standardized indirect effect of approximately 0.118 through gratitude. The 3,000-resample bootstrap interval was approximately 0.076 to 0.163, excluding

zero in the synthetic dataset. The result illustrates a theoretical sequence in which moral elevation is associated with stronger gratitude and gratitude, in turn, contributes to prosocial action.

This simulated pathway is broadly compatible with recent empirical research in which gratitude partly mediated the relationship between moral elevation and prosocial behavior. It should nevertheless be emphasized that temporal order cannot be established through a single cross-sectional simulation. A future empirical study would require experimental manipulation, repeated measurements, or longitudinal designs to evaluate whether elevation precedes gratitude and whether gratitude subsequently increases observable helping.

Graph 1: Simulated Association Between Moral Elevation and Prosocial Action



Interpretation: The scatter distribution shows a clear positive relationship between moral elevation and prosocial action. Individuals represented by higher simulated elevation scores tend to occupy higher positions on the prosocial-action scale. The fitted regression line reflects the positive direction of the relationship, while the dispersion of observations around the line indicates that elevation does not fully determine behavior.

Key Finding: Within the simulation, moral elevation and prosocial action show a strong positive correlation of approximately ($r=0.67$). The remaining dispersion is theoretically important because it reflects the influence of other emotional, relational, individual, and situational determinants.

6. Discussion

6.1 Moral Elevation as a Digital Catalyst for Prosociality

The central theoretical implication of this study is that moral elevation can be understood as a plausible emotional catalyst linking observation of online moral exemplars with subsequent prosocial action. The simulated results are intentionally consistent with this theoretical expectation, but the substantive

justification comes from published evidence rather than the simulation itself. Experimental studies have shown that elevation can increase helping, generosity, or selected prosocial behaviors, while recent observational research has reported a positive association between elevation and prosocial behavior.

This process is especially relevant in online communities because digital communication greatly expands the number of moral exemplars a person can encounter. In an offline setting, an observer's exposure to exceptional generosity may depend on direct experience or conventional media. Online environments can make such behavior immediately visible across social and geographic distance. Acts of mutual aid, crowdfunding, volunteerism, public defense of vulnerable users, peer mentoring, emergency assistance, and community-organized resource sharing can be observed, discussed, endorsed, criticized, or imitated by large audiences.

Visibility, however, should not be confused with psychological effectiveness. Research on short videos indicates that observers respond not only to the existence of a prosocial act but also to its consequences. When prosocial behavior is portrayed as punished, elevation and subsequent helping may decline. Likewise, social-value orientation influences how audiences respond to rewarding or punitive outcomes. Online moral exemplars therefore operate within a social-learning environment. Users are not simply asking, consciously or unconsciously, whether an act is good. They may also be evaluating whether the act is authentic, socially supported, effective, costly, safe, and consistent with community norms.

6.2 Gratitude, Empathy, and Belonging as Mechanisms of Behavioral Translation

The second major implication concerns the pathway from emotional response to action. The simulated mediation through gratitude illustrates a theoretically plausible mechanism that has received empirical support in recent research. Zhang, Bu, and Liu found that gratitude partially mediated the positive relationship between moral elevation and prosocial behavior. In digital communities, gratitude may broaden the meaning of a specific moral exemplar. An observer may initially feel inspired by one person's behavior but subsequently become grateful for belonging to a community in which such behavior occurs. This shift can transform a discrete observation into a relational motivation.

The role of empathy is more complex. Conventional reasoning might suggest that elevation should always produce stronger effects among highly empathetic individuals. Yet recent research has shown that the incremental effect of elevation can be stronger at lower levels of empathy. One explanation is that highly empathetic individuals already possess relatively strong motivation to respond to others' needs, making additional emotional activation less influential. For lower-empathy users, exposure to moral excellence may provide a more noticeable motivational shift.

This suggests that online interventions should not assume a single emotional pathway. Some users may respond most strongly to direct narratives of moral exemplars. Others may be influenced by opportunities for perspective taking, clear demonstrations of need, visible norms of reciprocity, or low-barrier opportunities to contribute.

6.3 Implications for Online-Community Governance and Future Research

The findings support a shift from harm-only models of online governance toward a broader concern with the conditions that enable constructive digital behavior. Safety remains essential, but healthy online



communities are not created solely by removing harmful content. They also require structures through which supportive behavior becomes visible, credible, socially reinforced, and practically actionable.

Community administrators could, for example, make verified examples of successful peer assistance more visible without converting helping into competitive status performance. Recognition systems should be designed carefully because extrinsic incentives may alter the moral meaning of an action. If helping appears primarily motivated by badges, follower growth, financial reward, or visibility, observers may infer self-interest rather than virtue. The elevation mechanism depends substantially on the perception that behavior expresses genuine moral concern.

Future empirical studies should therefore manipulate not only the content of morally elevating posts but also their contextual framing. Experimental conditions could compare anonymous versus highly publicized helping, intrinsic versus extrinsic motives, verified versus ambiguous authenticity, in-group versus out-group beneficiaries, and reward versus sacrifice. Outcome measures should extend beyond self-reported intentions to include observable helping, donations, information sharing, supportive commenting, volunteering, and persistence over time.

7. Conclusion

Moral elevation offers a productive framework for understanding why observing goodness in online communities may encourage individuals to behave more constructively themselves. Unlike general positive emotion, elevation is specifically tied to perceived moral excellence and to motivation toward moral improvement, affiliation, and helping. Existing experimental and media research provides substantial support for a relationship between elevation and selected forms of prosocial behavior, while contemporary studies increasingly demonstrate that this relationship is shaped by gratitude, empathy, moral identity, personality, social-value orientation, and media context.

The simulation developed in this paper demonstrates how these theoretical relationships could be evaluated quantitatively without fabricating empirical participants. Within the generated sample of 420 observations, moral elevation showed a strong positive association with prosocial action and remained the strongest predictor after gratitude and community belonging were considered. Gratitude also contributed independently and carried a positive indirect pathway between elevation and prosocial action. These numerical results are methodological demonstrations rather than claims about a real population, but they provide a transparent analytical architecture for future empirical work.

The wider theoretical conclusion is that moral elevation should not be treated as a stand-alone emotional intervention. Online prosocial behavior emerges from the interaction of emotional experience, individual dispositions, perceived authenticity, community norms, social belonging, available opportunities for action, and the consequences associated with helping. A morally inspiring story may increase readiness to act, but communities must also provide credible and accessible pathways through which that motivation can become meaningful support.

Online environments are often evaluated primarily through the harms they generate or amplify. A complete behavioral account should also investigate the mechanisms through which digital communities enable generosity, solidarity, courage, care, and collective responsibility. Moral elevation provides one such mechanism. Properly studied, it can contribute to a more balanced understanding of digital social life and inform community designs that do not merely reduce harmful conduct but create conditions



under which constructive participation becomes psychologically meaningful, socially supported, and increasingly self-sustaining.

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