

Unraveling Moral and Emotional Contagion Dynamics in Online Discourse

Elliott Lee

Received September 10, 2023

Accepted December 14, 2023

Electronic access December 31, 2023

This research paper thoroughly explores moral contagion within online social networks, delving into the intricate landscape where moral and political ideas propagate through tweets, posts, blogs, interactive activities, and virtual interactions. Utilizing recent empirical findings, we reveal the profound impact of moral-emotional language in catalyzing idea diffusion across dynamic social media platforms. Our study elucidates insights from recent research on moral and emotional contagion, underscoring the pivotal role of moral-emotional language in driving idea dissemination within social media realms. Through meticulous exploration, we analyze how group identity and associative behavior shape the contours of moral contagion, unraveling nuanced interactions within different ideological networks and opinions, influencing the evolution of collective online ethos. Critically examining online internet culture, we draw on previous studies to emphasize the observed interplay between culture, emotion, and online interactions. We highlight the potential transformation of digital enclaves into echo chambers, where shared moral beliefs are reinforced and may, in some instances, devolve into hate-driven expressions. This examination serves as a clarion call, urging consideration of digital communities' far-reaching implications on contemporary moral discourse and ideological pathways. Synthesizing motivations intrinsic to group identities, the allure of moral-emotional content, and the influential role of platform design, our research offers multifaceted insights into the intricate processes underlying online diffusion of moral and political concepts. This interdisciplinary framework contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how digital networks amplify, circulate, and perpetuate specific moral viewpoints. Practical implications extend to various online settings, including online courses, discussion platforms, and the complex landscape of social media, where we explore instances of prominently observed moral contagion phenomena and discuss potential strategies and interventions to navigate its effects. Our research advocates for further inquiry, urging an extended exploration into the profound implications of moral contagion on individuals and diverse online communities. As we unravel the multifarious ways moral contagion intersects with digital culture, collective behavior, and socio-political discourse, we illuminate a path toward a more insightful, informed, and empathetic digital landscape. In this study, the intricate interplay between moral contagion and emotional contagion unfolds within online social networks, where the emotional resonance embedded in moral-emotional language serves as a catalyst for the transmission of moral and political ideas. Recognizing the symbiotic relationship between these contagions is essential for comprehending the nuanced dynamics that shape online discourse and collective behavior in the digital age.

Introduction

In addressing the emergent challenges of online social networks, this paper aims to systematically investigate the intricate dynamics of moral contagion and its profound impact on the dissemination of moral and political ideas. Focused on bridging the gap in existing literature, our research delves into the role of moral-emotional language, group identity, and online culture, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these factors shape collective ethos in the digital age. This exploration lays the foundation for actionable insights and interventions to navigate the complexities of contemporary online interactions.

Virtual cultures among young individuals often emerge within online communities where shared values, beliefs, and practices develop, forming a distinct cultural identity. These cultures sig-

nificantly influence behavior by shaping perceptions, feelings, and values about the group they identify with. The Internet's anonymity fosters a unique space for the expression of extreme opinions and emotional responses. For young people, virtual cultures can serve as influential spaces where they find identity, interact, and align with specific beliefs. The implications include the potential for such cultures to perpetuate hate, influence political opinions, and impact behavioral norms, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and digital literacy programs tailored to young internet users.

In the contemporary digital age, online social networks have become critical platforms for engaging in moral and political discussions, significantly impacting various societal aspects. Notably, the phenomenon of "moral contagion" plays a pivotal role in the dissemination of moral and political ideas within these

digital communities without a physical prerequisite¹. Moral contagion refers to the process by which moral-emotional content facilitates the spread of ideas, driven by users' motivations rooted in group identity and affiliations.

Online platforms and internet interaction as well as how communication is conducted over the internet has become an increasingly important phenomenon to understand and study. The tool utilized to realize the implications of online interactions is the theory of emotional and moral conformity. To first understand and summarize the importance of acknowledging such contagions, one must know the applications for such theories and how we as a society are adapting quickly to an online community. Acknowledging emotional and moral contagion can lead to implications for mitigating negative emotions communication². Examples given are as a damage control for events such as COVID-19, for work in terms of response to internet trolls and criticism, especially including political offices and digitally inept, older individuals^{3,4}, and even cyber bullying. Furthermore, the phenomenon of the internet and social media platforms introduces a factor of uncertainty that can be examined through the study of moral contagion and the study of patterns in online platforms. As examinations on moral-emotional language and its efficacy of social transmission of ideas are conducted, ideas and content imbued with moral contagion found itself with a higher interaction rate that spread easily within social networks of corresponding political/moral views⁵. With the rate at which interaction occurs over the internet on pressing matters of public opinion, society, politics, global events, economy and more increasing, the more applications for understanding why we respond in certain ways to certain things means that the dynamics of online harassment situations and their aftermath, need to be considered in prevention and intervention programs. No matter how harmless one may believe the propagation of spreading information with countless others is, virality is not measured by the potential but the model itself⁶.

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' moral frameworks, as it encompasses shared values, beliefs, and practices within a specific social group. This research proposal aims to conduct a literature review to explore the culture and background of online moral conformity and discuss the importance of the topic, further delving into the topic by analyzing the research articles provided. This study seeks to examine the relationship between cultural factors and moral conformity and even online trends and common social media practices, in order to identify cross-cultural variations in moral conformity behaviors, and gain insights into the mechanisms underlying these influences which perpetuate social media and online behaviors of "netizens" and public opinion on social media posts and pop culture and also examining how social media trends unfold through the dispersion of emotions on an online setting in various online communities. Furthermore, this also extends the claim into the introduction of online hate, herd mentality,

problems that the internet facilitates, and emotional response, including the significance of such in an online oriented community platform. Hence, all to examine the question on whether studies on moral and emotional contagion facilitates understanding on how various cultures online experience content differently.

To address these cases in an efficient and practical way, the introduction of key concepts are to be introduced such as Negative Emotional Communication, Emotional Contagion Theory, and Moral Contagion Theory².

Negative Emotion Communication

Evaluating how emotional contagion's sympathetic response and the transmission of emotions go hand in hand with moral contagion theory, social contagion is often associated with societal norms and the influence of such norms which exert their influence on the human psyche both unconsciously and consciously⁷. However, it's important to differentiate this from emotional contagion – that of a sympathetic response. In the context of negative emotions, understanding how they are conveyed and communicated follows a similar pattern. Through capturing data on users' discussions on Twitter, it was discovered as intensity rose throughout arguments, sentiment scores or scores measuring the frequency of positive/negative language used by users, became increasingly negative. As such, the authors proposed that emotional contagion exists in social media and emotional tendencies predict turns between positive or negative emotional communication behavior^{2,8}. In other words, more intense emotions were reflected in a general flow of emotions that would lead to increasingly negative sentiment scores, an example which would give pretense for emotional contagion in that emotion can be spread as a general human sympathetic reaction over the internet, reflecting a general state of emotions in arguments, posts, or situations presented.

Emotional Contagion Theory

Emotional contagion theory encapsulates the emotions people subconsciously imitate and feel from messages, thus experiencing similar feelings. This introduces factors such as interactivity, directionality, and similarity. Emotional contagion has to have a transmitter and a receiver, emotional contagion occurs interpersonally, and similarity is essential as the receiver of the emotion sympathetically experiences emotional experiences and expressions just as the transmitter has and which eventually converge^{2,9}.

Moral Contagion Theory

As communications expedite morality and politics on social networks and are conducted through the advancements of computer technology¹⁰ moral contagion describes how individuals can take on the moral essence or are imbued with moral value¹¹.

This can be assigned to objects or people, but the introduction of morality being imbued to internet comments and even arguments over the internet in the diffusion of mass data is a relatively new phenomenon that ought to be studied further.

Discussion

Emotion shapes how information on the internet is processed and deals with a new wave of algorithms and content inherently has an emotional quality to it whether we realize it or not. As 86% of Americans receive their news online¹², this sets the context for the sheer scale of social impact that social media will inflict on online communities. As news outlets, whether intentionally or not, serve to widen divisions across political ideals and contentious topics, the scale at which emotional and moral content traveling over the internet will greatly increase. This raises the importance of examining emotional and moral contagion as a new and current generations of online communities emerge on the online scene with little attention on how to approach the internet and its ever evolving effects it has on the landscape of politics and debates on the forums and in real contexts¹³.

The influence of moral-emotional language on diffusion is similarly stated by the research by Brady et al.⁵ highlighting the significance of moral-emotional language in the dissemination of moral and political ideas within online social networks. By analyzing a large sample of social media communications, the study reveals that the presence of moral-emotional words substantially increases the diffusion of messages as emotional content resonates deeply with users, motivating them to share and spread such content within their online communities. The role of group membership in shaping moral contagion is also identified that moral contagion is bound by group membership within social networks. The diffusion of moral-emotional language is more pronounced within ideologically aligned networks, indicating the influence of cultural and ideological affiliations on the propagation of moral ideas. Consequently, online communities can become echo chambers, reinforcing and amplifying shared moral beliefs within like-minded groups

Moreover, building upon this discovery, there's a crucial aspect to consider: the anonymity bestowed by the internet, the access facilitated by technology, and the prevalence of herd mentality and group behavior. This poses a significant concern, urging us to employ these findings for understanding the conduct currently displayed within online communities and the potential harm it would stand for upcoming online generations as technology continues to evolve. Commonly, the internet is seen as a safe space for anonymity, facilitating this interaction of picking sides and expressing your opinion in extremes. This means that not only do you not have to be in a physical space to actually interact with anyone to get your point across, but you don't have to suffer the physical consequences. While some experts argue

that internet users understand the emotional consequences and have a pattern of behavior that serves the understanding of guilt and "the golden rule" over the internet, some studies also point towards the fact that toxicity and negativity run rampant over the internet¹³. The study describes thinking and decision making over the internet in various ways. The most frequent way of thinking about online life was consequence thinking. Consequence thinking is individualistic as it focuses on potential consequences to the self and involves little or no consideration of others. At least two instances of consequence thinking were found among every participant. Different groups/ especially younger people, can be aware of the effects of their emotional and moral contagion. In person-centered moral thinking, participants acknowledge that their actions may affect others. Physical or digital, morality is still shown to be present. Another factor that is noted is the background, age group, and characteristics of the type of person using the internet as also having a possible effect on how this effect is spread³. As nearly 98% of even the strongest moral thinkers exhibited at least one instance of amoral or unethical thinking, while forty-seven percent of instances suggested a total lack of awareness of ethical or moral features over an online setting, and yet another 53% involve awareness of such features but dismissing their importance¹³, it is worrying to see the permeability of emotional and sympathetic distance the internet serves to put between its users.

"The Role of Group Membership in Shaping Moral Contagion," also touches upon the nature of the internet and online community, presenting another problem: finding an audience through the internet's popularity to spread among kids and teens, making it easier for hate groups to target them. Facilitating this interaction of picking sides and expressing opinions in extremes makes it easier for a "virtual culture" of hate to emerge and gather as the internet's popularity grows and grows¹⁴. Hate groups use the tools of the internet and even the spread of emotional and moral content to craft their online messages to attract youth, using various tactics and as such children are not just victims, but they are also becoming involved in spreading hate online. This shift in behavior has been documented in news articles and studies. This leads to a very dangerous observation as well. People have traditionally been denied meeting spaces to congregate and form opinions that may pose danger, but the phenomenon of the internet has only perpetuated hate in a different form¹⁵. It is also understood that introverts use the internet intensively¹⁶, while extroverts engage more on Facebook due to its social aspect¹⁷ meaning that different sets of individuals seek out various objectives over the internet, also possibly suggesting the demographic has a factor in perpetuation of hate over the internet.

Furthermore, internet addiction, an extreme form of harmful internet overuse, is a concern. Studies suggest a negative connection between conscientiousness and internet usage¹⁶. Furthermore, there is a domino effect with online platforms and

algorithms which drives interaction, driving contagion whether cultural or moral. This effect is usually negative, usually accompanied by hate more than rational thinking¹⁴. The anonymous aspect of the internet allows people who may not be associated with hate groups to direct anger towards others online, a phenomenon stated as “flaming”. The anonymity itself doesn’t cause hate, but the power of being able to express their views freely without repercussions to themselves in real life, though users tend to not really keep their identity hidden very well. Hate also contributes itself towards collective group behavior as observed in riots¹⁸ as the idea of group herd behavior is about extending the person as an entity of permissibility, leading to perpetual limit breaking which would then devolve into actions of violence, vandalism, and social unrest. This very effect can be seen on the forums and online settings without a physical manifestation of emotional instability. Instead, the role of deindividuation or strong influences by group ideology results in a lack of self-control^{2,19} suggesting that the relationship of online group identity rests on the emotional values they place on projecting perceptions, feelings, and values about the group they identify with. This emotional and moral contagion perpetuates a moral high ground in which the choice in participating in the sharing of established group opinion, makes people intentionally or unintentionally motivated towards practicing group behavior as most people assign themselves to a group/group of beliefs and staging an elicited emotional response to online content and interactions.

Conclusion

This study calls for further attention and studies to be conducted on the emotional, transmission psychology conducted over the new social sphere of the internet as it emerges as one of the most important communication devices in human history. In conclusion, this research paper has delved into the intricate interplay between emotion, moral conformity, and online interactions within social media networks. The phenomenon of moral contagion, driven by the infusion of moral-emotional language, plays a pivotal role in the spread of ideas, opinions, and ideologies in the digital age. Through this lens, we’ve dissected the ways in which motivations tied to group identity, the power of attention to moral-emotional content, and the impact of platform design collectively contribute to the diffusion of moral and political ideas. Additionally, the paper highlighted the influence of cultural factors on moral conformity behaviors, emphasizing the role of anonymity, emotional and moral contagion, and the emergence of virtual cultures. The online environment has shown its capacity to amplify both positive and negative emotions, and this emotional influence is magnified by the power of anonymity, facilitating extreme opinions and hate-driven behavior. Understanding the underlying psychological processes that guide individuals in their interactions

online is crucial for fostering a healthy digital ecosystem. In the future, further studies should be conducted to delve deeper into several aspects. First, examining the role of emotion and morality in the context of algorithm-driven content distribution, the reinforcement of echo chambers, and the amplification of polarization should be explored. Investigating the psychological mechanisms that drive individuals to share and engage with emotionally charged content can provide insights into strategies for mitigating the negative effects of moral contagion. Furthermore, delving into the implications of moral and emotional contagion on vulnerable groups, such as youth, and the development of countermeasures to prevent the spread of hate and extremist ideologies should be a focus. Addressing the challenges posed by digital communities that exploit the emotional and moral vulnerabilities of individuals requires interdisciplinary research involving psychology, sociology, technology, and ethics. Our findings emphasize the impact of group identity, attention to moral-emotional content, and platform design on the diffusion of moral and political ideas. To apply these insights, policymakers can develop targeted regulations addressing morally charged content during sensitive events, educators can enhance digital literacy programs, and technology companies can design platforms that counteract echo chambers and polarization. Finally, as the digital landscape continues to evolve, ongoing research should examine the long-term effects of moral contagion on both individuals and society as a whole. Assessing how this phenomenon shapes collective behavior, shapes cultural norms, influences political discourse, and impacts real-world events will provide crucial insights into the nature of digital interactions and their broader consequences. In the pursuit of a responsible and compassionate digital society, the comprehension of emotional and moral contagion remains a significant avenue of research. Advancements in technology may introduce new modes of expression and communication, altering the nature of emotional and moral contagion. Changes in online community norms could influence the acceptability of certain behaviors, impacting the spread of moral and emotional content. As online platforms continue to be central to communication, understanding the intricate dynamics of emotion-driven content dissemination becomes essential to fostering a more empathetic, informed, and harmonious online world.

References

- 1 J. Y. Huang, J. M. Ackerman and G. E. Newman, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, **2**, 430–43.
- 2 D. Lu and D. Hong, *Frontiers in Psychology*, **13**, 931835.
- 3 M. Celuch, N. Savela, R. Oksa, R. Latikka and A. Oksanen, *Computers in Human Behavior*, **127**, 107022.
- 4 S.-H. Oh, S. Y. Lee and C. Han, *Health Communication*, **36**, 972–81.
- 5 W. J. Brady, J. A. Wills, J. T. Jost, J. A. Tucker and J. J. Bavel, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* **114**, 7313–18.

-
- 6 R. E. Guadagno, D. M. Rempala, S. Murphy and B. M. Okdie, *Computers in Human Behavior*, **29**, 2312–19.
 - 7 P. Ellsworth and K. R., *Appraisal Processes in Emotion*.
 - 8 C. Crocamo, M. Viviani, L. Famiglini, F. Bartoli, G. Pasi and G. Carrà, *European Psychiatry*, **64**, 17.
 - 9 C. Herrando and E. Constantinides, *Frontiers in Psychology*, **12**, 712606.
 - 10 G. Zúñiga, N. J. Homero and S. Valenzuela, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, **17**, 319–36.
 - 11 J. Liu, C. Liao, J. Lu, Y. Luo and F. Cui, *Human Brain Mapping*, **40**, 2076–88.
 - 12 P. R. Center, *Pew Research Center*.
 - 13 A. Flores and C. James, *New Media Society*, **15**, 834–52.
 - 14 J. Hawdon, A. Oksanen and P. Räsänen, *Deviant Behavior*, **38**, 254–66.
 - 15 G. Alley-Young, *Journalism Mass Communication Quarterly*, **95**, 855–57.
 - 16 R. N. Landers and J. W. Lounsbury, *Computers in Human Behavior*, **22**, 283–93.
 - 17 T. Correa, A. W. Hinsley and H. G. Zúñiga, *Computers in Human Behavior*, **26**, 247–53.
 - 18 Costa, D. P. Silvia, M. Martí-González, V. Díaz and P. Bouchat, *Frontiers in Psychology*, **14**, 1096877.
 - 19 C. Perfumi, F. B. Serena, C. Caudek and A. Guazzini, *Computers in Human Behavior*, **92**, 230–37.