Moralization: How Do People Imbue Neutral Things with Moral Meaning?

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Abstract

Moralization refers to the process of endowing originally value-neutral matters with moral connotations. The elicitation of moralization is influenced by multilevel factors including cognition, emotion, and society. Existing theoretical models of moralization mainly include the Moral Amplification Model and the Moral Push-Pull Model, yet both neglect the role of macro-social factors. The newly constructed integrated "Cognition-Emotion-Society" model of moralization aims to remedy this deficiency. The after-effects of moralization possess a "double-edged sword" function: on the one hand, moralization plays a positive role in regulating social behavior and individual goal pursuit; on the other hand, it leads to negative consequences such as cognitive bias, unwarranted discrimination, hostile attitudes, group polarization, and collective violence. Future research should focus on exploring the psychological mechanisms and intervention methods of "demoralization," the impact of new social media technologies on online moralization psychology and behavior, moralization research in the era of artificial intelligence, and moralization psychological phenomena based on Chinese indigenous culture.

Full Text

Preamble

Moralization: How Do People Ascribe Moral Meaning to Morally Neutral Things?

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Abstract: Moralization refers to the psychological process by which morally neutral objects, behaviors, or issues are imbued with moral meaning. The emergence of moralization is shaped by a range of cognitive, emotional, and social

factors operating across multiple levels. Existing theoretical models of moralization, namely the moral amplification model and the push-pull model, offer valuable insights, yet they all overlook the influence of macro-sociocultural factors. The newly developed "cognitive-affective-social" integrative model of moralization aims to address this gap. The consequences of moralization are double-edged: on the one hand, it can promote prosocial behavior and help individuals pursue meaningful goals; on the other hand, it can also foster cognitive biases, unjustified discrimination, antagonism, group polarization, and even collective violence. Future research should focus on elucidating the psychological mechanisms and potential interventions for demoralization, investigating the role of emerging social media technologies in shaping moral-related attitudes and online behaviors, delving into moralization in the era of AI, and exploring moralization phenomena grounded in Chinese cultural contexts.

Keywords: moralization, demoralization, amplification model, push-and-pull model, Chinese culture

Morality is not merely an abstract philosophical concept but is deeply embedded in everyday decision-making and practices. Consider a simple dinner with friends: the choice between ordering a steak or a vegetarian salad may appear to be a straightforward personal preference, yet it can spark complex discussions about environmental protection, animal rights, and even social responsibility (Feinberg et al., 2019). Such controversies permeate daily life, from environmental campaigns criticizing plastic use to debates about the ethical implications of dietary habits (e.g., vegetarianism or meat consumption) and lifestyle choices (e.g., smoking) (Rozin et al., 1997; Rozin & Singh, 1999). This transformation from personal preference to moral issue reflects the public' s tendency to ascribe moral significance to otherwise value-neutral behaviors, beliefs, or objects—precisely the phenomenon this paper examines as "moralization."Moralization seeks to explain how moral beliefs emerge, intensify, and become consolidated (Rozin, 1997, 1999). This common psychological phenomenon shapes individuals' value judgments, belief systems, and behavioral tendencies, while at the societal level, it profoundly influences intergroup relations, cultural norms, and social change (Skitka et al., 2021). However, compared to other prominent topics in moral psychology—such as moral reasoning, moral emotions, moral personality, moral development, and moral dilemmas—moralization has received relatively limited attention in psychological research (Rhee et al., 2019).

In recent years, scholars have examined the formation mechanisms of moralization from various theoretical perspectives, constructing relevant models and discussing its behavioral consequences (e.g., Decety, 2024; Feinberg et al., 2019; Rhee et al., 2019; Rozin, 1999). These studies have not only deepened our understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying moralization but also revealed its positive and negative effects on individual behavior and social development. Despite these advances, existing literature lacks systematic synthesis of moralization' s definition, antecedents, and consequences. Related theoretical models require further refinement, and numerous promising avenues for

future research remain unexplored. This paper aims to systematically review psychological literature on moralization, clarify its definition and distinctions from related concepts, analyze the cognitive, emotional, and social mechanisms that trigger moralization, summarize and evaluate existing theoretical models, propose a new integrative model to address current limitations, and discuss the "double-edged sword" consequences of moralization at both individual and group levels. Future research should prioritize investigating the psychological mechanisms and interventions for "demoralization," the impact of new social media technologies on online moralization, moralization in the age of artificial intelligence, and moralization phenomena rooted in Chinese cultural contexts.

2.1 The Conceptual Definition of Moralization

Unlike general moral judgments, moralization emphasizes the formation process of moral beliefs. Researchers generally adopt psychologist Paul Rozin' s definition, which conceptualizes moralization as the process of imbuing morally neutral objects with moral significance (Rozin, 1997, 1999; Rozin et al., 1997). "Moral neutrality" here refers to entities that lack obvious moral connotations and remain morally ambiguous or subtle. People typically do not view such entities as moral issues, yet under certain situational triggers, they may become moralized. For instance, smoking is generally considered a morally irrelevant everyday behavior, and people do not typically deem it immoral. However, when prompted by certain social contexts (e.g., harming others), norms (e.g., health risks), and emotions (e.g., disgust), people may begin to view smoking as immoral—this represents the process of moralization (Fitouchi & Nettle, 2025; Rozin & Singh, 1999).

2.2 Connections and Distinctions Between Moralization and Related Concepts

The essence of moralization lies in ascribing moral meaning to originally value-neutral objects, thereby bringing them into the normative moral domain. As a broad concept, moralization connects with numerous morality-related constructs, such as moral judgment, moral attitudes, and moral beliefs. In empirical research, investigators often operationalize moralization by measuring individuals' moral judgments or attitudes toward specific issues, thereby quantifying moralization tendencies and intensity (Rhee et al., 2019; Skitka et al., 2021). Despite these connections, moralization' s uniqueness lies in its status not as a subcategory of specific moral concepts (e.g., moral judgment, moral reasoning) but as a "superordinate process mechanism" that describes how individuals or groups imbue neutral entities with moral meaning, subsequently influencing moral judgments, attitudes, and behaviors. Moreover, moralization differs fundamentally from related concepts.

First, moralization is not equivalent to moral judgment. Issues subject to moralization typically do not belong to the canonical problems discussed within the

moral domain (Rozin, 1997, 1999), and moralization represents a dynamic process that emphasizes the transformation of behaviors, objects, or beliefs from the non-moral to the moral realm. As illustrated above, smoking was once considered a matter of personal choice but has gradually become moralized as "irresponsible" behavior through discussions about health and social impact. Moral judgment, by contrast, involves evaluating whether a behavior or situation conforms to moral standards and typically serves as a consequential assessment after something has already been moralized. For example, once smoking has been moralized, people may make moral judgments about whether someone is smoking in public (Rhee et al., 2019; Rozin, 1997).

Second, moralization differs from moral attitudes or moral beliefs. The latter generally refer to individuals' or groups' fundamental views about right and wrong, good and evil, which tend to be relatively stable and vary across cultures and personal traits. For instance, "honesty is a virtue"represents a widely shared moral attitude or belief. Moralization, however, is a process that links behaviors or phenomena to these beliefs, representing a dynamic socio-psychological phenomenon that can ascribe moral meaning to previously neutral behaviors (Rhee et al., 2019). Although researchers often use moral judgments or attitudes toward certain behaviors as indicators of moralization, the theoretical distinction lies in moralization' s greater focus on morally neutral entities and the dynamic processes of moral identification, amplification, and attenuation (Rhee et al., 2019).

2.3 Measurement Approaches to Moralization

Empirical studies have employed two broad categories of measurement: direct and indirect approaches. Direct measurement most commonly involves self-report questionnaires assessing whether individuals consider certain behaviors or objects moral issues or judge them as morally wrong. For example, Lovett et al. (2012) developed the "Moralization of Everyday Life Scale," a 30-item measure spanning six dimensions designed to assess individuals' tendencies to moralize various everyday behaviors, including both clear violations (e.g., deception, harm) and morally neutral behaviors (e.g., laziness, tattoos). Another common approach measures moral attitudes toward specific issues (e.g., abortion, capital punishment, gun control, same-sex marriage) by asking participants whether their positions are based on core moral beliefs (Skitka et al., 2021). Researchers have also used the Moral Expansiveness Scale to measure the boundaries of individuals' moral concern—whether they extend moral consideration to entities such as humans, animals, nature, and objects, thereby incorporating them into their "moral circle" (Crimston et al., 2016, 2018). However, cross-sectional self-report studies struggle to capture the emergence and evolution of moralization, so researchers often employ longitudinal designs to compare moralization tendencies across time points, thereby reflecting the processes of emergence, amplification, consolidation, and attenuation (e.g., D' Amore et al., 2024; Feinberg et al., 2019; Leal et al., 2024; Luttrell & Togans, 2021). Beyond self-report measures, ad-

vances in big data and natural language processing have enabled researchers to quantify the degree and trends of moralization in social media through text analysis methods such as Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count or moral foundations dictionary-based analyses (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2023; Kirkland et al., 2024; Mooijman, Hoover, et al., 2018; Solovev & Pröllochs, 2023).

Indirect measurement of moralization typically involves inferring moralization levels through attitude universality and non-negotiability, as moralized positions tend to be rigid and uncompromising (Decety, 2024). Additionally, because moralization often accompanies strong emotional reactions, researchers use morally relevant emotions (e.g., shame, disgust, anger, guilt) as auxiliary indicators (Feinberg et al., 2019; Leach et al., 2025). Furthermore, investigators infer moralization levels from activation in brain regions associated with moral cognition and emotion (e.g., amygdala, anterior cingulate cortex) and physiological indicators such as skin conductance and heart rate variability (Decety, 2024).

3.1.1 Cognitive Factors

Key cognitive factors triggering moralization include perceived harm, cognitive reflection, moral foundations, moral identity, and political ideology. First, perceived harm represents a core criterion for moral judgment (Gray & Pratt, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). Highlighting harm to certain entities can increase moralization tendencies toward morally neutral issues. Research shows that presenting graphic footage of animal slaughter and emphasizing animal suffering significantly increases blame toward meat consumption (Feinberg et al., 2019); showing images or information about smoking' s health hazards significantly increases blame toward smoking behavior (Rozin & Singh, 1999); guiding people to feel the harm caused by water scarcity to local residents significantly predicts moralized attitudes toward government policies (Wisneski et al., 2020); and prompting people to perceive harm from racial discrimination and conflict significantly predicts moralized beliefs about those events (D' Amore et al., 2022, 2024).

Regarding individual cognitive traits, those inclined toward rational thinking tend to make moral judgments more cautiously, as most moral judgments or attitudes are often intuition- or emotion-based (Haidt, 2001). Researchers have found that individuals high in cognitive reflection trait—the capacity or willingness to invest time and effort in examining and solving problems—tend to distinguish between moral violations and conventional violations (e.g., wearing pajamas to work), showing low moralization tendencies; those low in cognitive reflection are more likely to deem conventional behaviors immoral, exhibiting high moralization tendencies (Royzman et al., 2014). Second, individuals who more strongly endorse binding moral foundations (loyalty, authority, purity) show higher moralization tendencies. Mooijman et al. (2018) found that priming binding moral foundations increases moralization of self-control behaviors. Additionally, moral identity represents an important cognitive trait influencing

moralization. Individuals with higher moral identity view morality as more central to their self-concept (Aquino & Reed II, 2002) and thus pay greater attention to the moral implications of value-neutral behaviors or issues. Research indicates that individuals with higher moral identity show greater moralization of meat consumption (Feinberg et al., 2019). Finally, political conservatives are more likely to view morally neutral behaviors as moral issues, possibly because they uphold traditional values, adopt cautious attitudes toward social change, and emphasize collective responsibility and respect for authority and tradition (Everett et al., 2021; Horberg et al., 2009).

3.1.2 Affective Factors

Numerous studies have confirmed the critical role of emotion in moralization. Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model posits that moral judgments are typically based on emotionally driven moral intuitions, with rationalization occurring post hoc. The primary emotions influencing moralization are disgust and anger (or outrage). Disgust functions primarily to avoid pathogens and threatening stimuli. Researchers have induced physiological disgust by having participants smell foul odors, finding that such disgust intensifies blame for moral transgressions (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005) and increases moralization of purity behaviors without obvious harm (Horberg et al., 2009; Rottman et al., 2017). However, studies inducing physiological disgust have faced reproducibility concerns, with recent research failing to find that physiological disgust increases moralization (Ghelfi et al., 2020; Inbar & Pizarro, 2022). In contrast, event-specific disgust (e.g., regarding abortion; Wisneski & Skitka, 2017) and trait disgust sensitivity (Donner et al., 2023; Landy & Piazza, 2019) more reliably predict moralization tendencies.

Second, anger also serves as an important emotion triggering moralization. As a primary emotional response to deception or injustice, anger leads to moral condemnation and punitive attitudes and behaviors (Ginther et al., 2022; Plaks et al., 2022). Research shows that anger elicited by negative social events significantly predicts moralized attitudes, with experimental effects persisting two weeks later (Clifford, 2019). Social media evokes stronger moral outrage than traditional media or real life (Crockett, 2017), further leading to negative consequences such as group polarization (Effron & Brady, 2025; Mooijman, Hoover, et al., 2018).

3.1.3 Social-Level Factors

Existing theoretical models have focused primarily on cognitive and emotional factors while relatively neglecting macro-level social influences. First, social inequality increases moralization tendencies, leading to harsher moral condemnation of general transgressions (Cervone et al., 2024; Kirkland et al., 2024). Cervone et al. (2024) demonstrated that social inequality increases moral outrage, thereby increasing support for collective action. Kirkland et al. (2024) con-

ducted big data analyses of tweets from the social media platform "X"across countries, finding that nations with higher inequality exhibited more moral language on social media. A large-scale study across 41 countries revealed that higher inequality correlates with greater perceived social disorder, leading to stricter moral condemnation of violations (Kirkland et al., 2024). Additionally, people from different cultures exhibit varying moralization beliefs. Research shows that "tight cultures," compared to "loose cultures," emphasize stricter adherence to social norms and lower tolerance for deviant behavior, with stronger social norms reinforcing moralization tendencies (Gelfand et al., 2011). Other studies find that people from collectivist cultures view "uncivilized" behaviors (e.g., spitting, littering) as immoral, whereas Westerners only deem clearly harmful behaviors (e.g., cheating on a partner) immoral (Berniūnas et al., 2022; Buchtel et al., 2015).

Finally, major social crises also enhance moralization tendencies. Terrorist attacks increase moral condemnation of behaviors that disrupt social order (Janoff-Bulman & Sheikh, 2006); climate change increases moralization of energy conservation policies (Salomon et al., 2017). Recent COVID-19 research shows that moralized attitudes and beliefs about social distancing, mask-wearing, and vaccination increased significantly during the pandemic (Francis & McNabb, 2022; Graso et al., 2021; Kunnari et al., 2024; Malik et al., 2021; Prosser et al., 2020). These findings suggest that the core psychological mechanism through which macro-social factors trigger moralization is a sense of threat, as threats tend to make people more conservative (Nail et al., 2009), and conservative motivations significantly increase moralization tendencies (Klebl et al., 2024; Versteegt et al., 2024).

3.2.1 The Moral Amplification Model

Rhee et al. (2019) synthesized prior research to propose the moral amplification model (see Figure 1

), which distinguishes three manifestations of moralization—judgments, attitudes, and entities—and conceptualizes moralization as a two-stage process involving moral recognition and moral amplification.

Regarding manifestations, the most common method for understanding individuals' moral views involves measuring moral judgments of specific behaviors. Studies typically present participants with hypothetical or actual moral transgression scenarios and ask them to rate the wrongness of the behavior. The second manifestation is moral attitudes, which assess people' s attitudes toward social issues (e.g., gun control) or behaviors (e.g., smoking) (Skitka et al., 2018). While moral attitudes may appear similar to moral judgments, they differ in important ways. Moral judgments typically refer to evaluations of specific behaviors in particular contexts, whereas moral attitudes reflect more abstract values (Rhee et al., 2019) and core moral identity (Ekstrom & Lai, 2022). For example, measuring moral judgment might ask participants how morally wrong

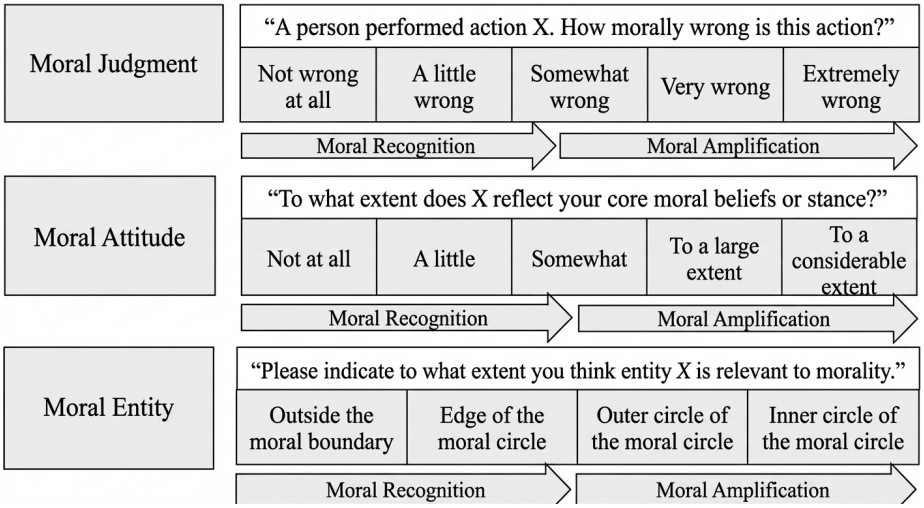

Figure 1: Figure 1

they consider "someone smoking in public," while measuring moral attitude would ask how morally wrong they consider "smoking as a common behavior" (Rozin & Singh, 1999). In other words, moral judgments are susceptible to situational (Malle, 2021) and emotional factors (Haidt, 2001; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005), making it difficult to predict future judgments or behaviors from a single contextual assessment. Moral attitudes, by contrast, reflect more abstract, core, and stable moral convictions (Luttrell & Togans, 2021; Skitka et al., 2005, 2018, 2021). Consequently, moral attitudes often predict individual or group responses to major social events, such as protests (Mooijman, Hoover, et al., 2018; Steinert-Threlkeld, 2018) and political elections (Brandt et al., 2015). The final manifestation concerns the scope of entities subject to moral consideration—whether people exhibit moral expansiveness by extending moral concern beyond the self to encompass all of humanity or even non-human entities (e.g., animals, plants, nature) (Crimston et al., 2016, 2018). The breadth of this scope requires specific cognitive or emotional triggers; once individuals recognize that animals suffer and categorize them as vulnerable moral patients, they may begin viewing previously non-moral issues as moral concerns and incorporate them into their moral circle (Singer, 1981), such as meat consumption, animal testing, and animal performances (Rozin et al., 1997; Schein & Gray, 2018).

Regarding the process, individuals first determine whether something constitutes a moral issue—this is moral recognition. Subsequently, they indicate the intensity of their moral judgment, or the degree to which they consider something moral or immoral—this is moral amplification (see Figure 1).

3.2.2 The Push-Pull Model of Moralization

Feinberg et al. (2019) integrated various perspectives on moralization' s nature and antecedents to propose the "push-pull model of moralization" (see Figure 2

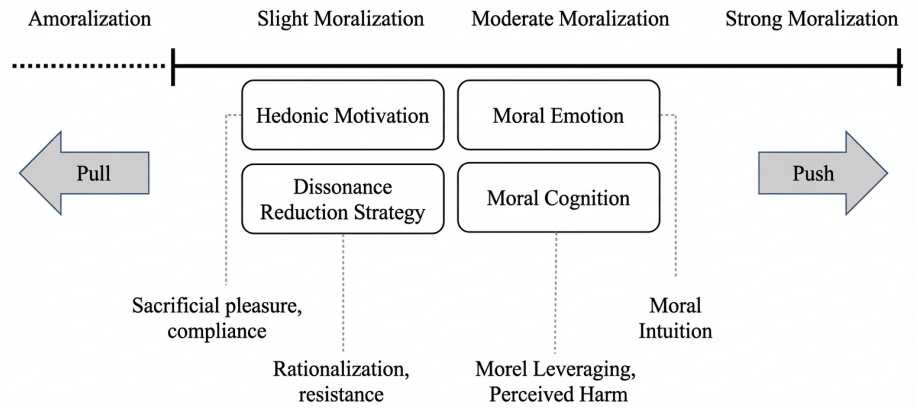

Figure 2: Figure 2

), which explains both moralization (the "push") and demoralization (the "pull"). The model posits that moralization and demoralization are not opposing dimensions but rather dynamic processes along a continuum. Before moralization occurs, individuals hold morally neutral views of an object or phenomenon, representing an initial equilibrium state. Under certain conditions, external stimuli —such as news reports, political speeches, or personal conversations—evoke moral emotions and cognitions that push the moralization process toward a new equilibrium, reflecting the degree to which individuals moralize certain neutral issues. Over time or due to certain pulling factors, individuals' views may lose their strong moral conviction, resulting in demoralization.

The push-pull model summarizes antecedents of moralization primarily in terms of moral cognition and emotion. Affective factors such as disgust, anger, and other negative emotions, as well as positive emotions like compassion and admiration, increase the likelihood of condemning immoral behavior (Horberg et al., 2009; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). The cognitive process of moralization occurs mainly through "moral piggybacking" (Rozin, 1999), which connects observed harm to fundamental moral principles. Moral piggybacking is primarily driven by perceived harm. For example, when people witness the suffering of slaughtered animals or harm to fetuses during abortion, they connect these harmful phenomena to the general principle that "killing is wrong" (Wisneski & Skitka, 2017), thereby making moral judgments about these issues.

Unlike the moral amplification model, Feinberg et al. (2019) also discuss demoralization—the process by which people reduce moral beliefs to rationalize behaviors that conflict with general moral principles. This process can also

be explained through cognitive and emotional pathways. The emotional process is driven by hedonistic motivation, as human nature seeks to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (Bentham, 1988). Using meat consumption as an example, people enjoying the pleasure of eating meat may overlook animal suffering, thereby preventing acceptance of animal protection moral principles. At the cognitive level, when experiencing conflict between personal preferences and moral principles, individuals typically employ strategies to reduce cognitive dissonance and rationalize their immoral behaviors, such as convincing themselves that victims did not suffer extensively or attributing moral responsibility to food processing plants or governments (Bastian & Loughnan, 2017; Buttlar & Walther, 2019).

3.3 Review and New Model Construction

The moral amplification model describes how moralization emerges and intensifies, distinguishing three manifestations—judgments, attitudes, and entities. However, this model remains relatively coarse, discussing only moral recognition and amplification without summarizing specific influencing factors, and it fails to consider factors that might prevent moralization—that is, the demoralization process. The push-pull model addresses many of these limitations (Feinberg et al., 2019) by examining both the "push" (moralization) and "pull" (demoralization) processes and analyzing their cognitive and emotional antecedents.

Although scholars have continuously refined theoretical models regarding moralization' s types and causes, existing models concentrate on micro-level cognitive and emotional processes while neglecting macro-level social factors. To address this limitation, this paper proposes the "cognitive-affective-social" (CAS) integrative model of moralization (see Figure 3

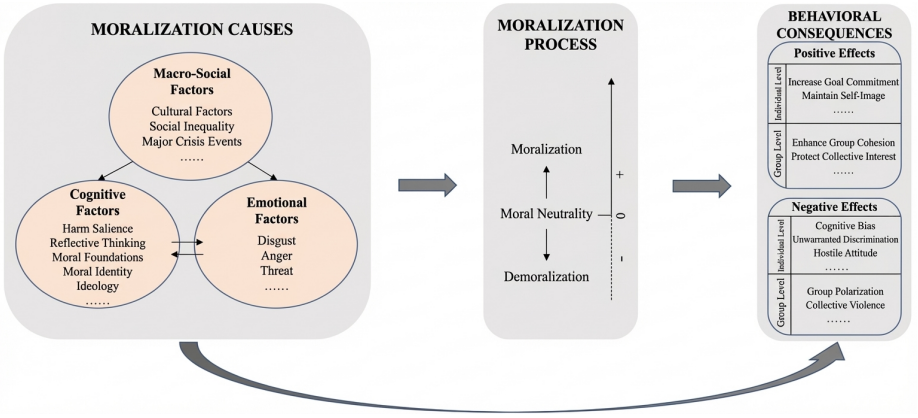

Figure 3: Figure 3

), incorporating macro-social factors alongside cognitive and emotional factors to jointly determine the push-pull processes of moralization and their result-

ing positive or negative behavioral outcomes. Specifically, cognitive, affective, and macro-social factors represent three independent antecedents of moralization that dynamically interact to shape the moralization process. First, macro-social factors such as cultural differences, social inequality, and major social crises trigger complex cognitive and emotional processes, such as perceptions of harm and threat, leading to stricter moral judgments and attitudes as a means of restoring order and control (Stanley et al., 2020). Second, cognitive and affective factors can independently influence moralization (Feinberg et al., 2019; Rhee et al., 2019) while also reciprocally influencing each other (Rozin, 1999; Rozin & Singh, 1999). In summary, the CAS integrative model represents the first attempt to combine individual-level cognitive and affective factors with macro-social factors to more comprehensively summarize moralization' s formation process and psychological mechanisms. Future research should explore how macro-social factors influence individual or group moralization tendencies, examining aspects such as social structural mobility, temporal dimensions of social change, and social media virtual environments. Methodologically, such inquiries must transcend traditional laboratory limitations by employing natural experiments, historical comparative analyses, and big data text analysis to more comprehensively reveal macro-social influences on moralization.

4.1 Positive Effects of Moralization on Regulating Social Behavior

As a process that imbues specific behaviors, beliefs, or values with moral meaning, moralization plays a crucial role in regulating social behavior. From an evolutionary perspective, humans must form tribal groups to resist external threats, making us a highly social species dependent on within-group cooperation and trust (Tomasello, 2017). Establishing shared moral standards enhances social cohesion, promotes value convergence, and strengthens group identity and belonging (Haidt, 2012). Research shows that moralized behaviors (e.g., helping or sharing) motivate individuals to sacrifice short-term personal interests for long-term group survival (Curry et al., 2019; Haidt, 2012), with loyal, cohesive groups showing higher survival rates than disloyal, loose groups (Clark et al., 2019). Additionally, moral values constrain selfish behavior by punishing immoral actions (e.g., deception or exploitation) to protect collective interests (Vollaard & van Soest, 2024). Moralization also provides impetus for social change; movements such as abolitionism and feminism emerged from framing inequality as a moral issue, thereby catalyzing beneficial social progress (Purzycki et al., 2023).

As previously discussed, major social crises are accompanied by stricter moralized beliefs. During COVID-19, crisis-response behaviors such as social distancing, mask-wearing, and vaccination became highly moralized social issues, with violators facing harsh moral condemnation (Francis & McNabb, 2022; Graso et al., 2021; Kunnari et al., 2024; Malik et al., 2021; Prosser et al., 2020). Moreover, regions with stricter moral norms exhibited lower infection and mortality rates

(Gelfand et al., 2021). Governments also frequently employ moralization as a social propaganda strategy for issues such as environmental protection (Klebl et al., 2024; Skitka et al., 2021), public health campaigns (Arhiri et al., 2022b; Fitouchi & Nettle, 2025), and reducing sex trafficking (Silver et al., 2022). Thus, moralization serves as an essential tool for regulating social behavior, playing an indispensable positive role in enhancing social cohesion, maintaining social order, and promoting collective responsibility.

4.2 Positive Effects of Moralization on Individual Goal Pursuit

Being a moral person is crucial for maintaining positive self-identity (Aquino & Reed II, 2002). In daily life, people typically strive to demonstrate noble moral qualities through words and actions to obtain social approval (Anderson et al., 2020). Research shows that moralizing personal goals increases goal commitment; for example, viewing a healthy lifestyle as a virtue makes individuals more willing to commit to and act on that goal (Hosey, 2014; Mooijman et al., 2020; Mooijman, Meindl, et al., 2018). Other health-related moralization research indicates that viewing unhealthy behaviors (e.g., overeating, smoking) as vices leads individuals to recognize their moral deficiencies, assume greater personal responsibility for their health, and engage in compensatory behaviors to pursue a positive moral self-image (Fitouchi & Nettle, 2025; Jackson et al., 2023; Sheikh et al., 2013), such as being willing to pay more for their own healthcare (Ringel, 2020). Additionally, viewing work devotion as a moral duty can motivate people to pursue meaningful, satisfying careers (Kwon et al., 2023; Kwon & Sonday, in press), treat work more carefully and conscientiously (Amos et al., 2019), and earn higher moral evaluations from others (Celniker et al., 2023; Gai & Bhattacharjee, 2022; Roth et al., 2025).

Moreover, moralized beliefs confer psychological standing, enabling more autonomous action (Effron & Miller, 2012). Psychological standing refers to individuals' subjective sense that it is appropriate for them to engage in particular behaviors. When people possess psychological standing, they feel more entitled to speak out, express attitudes, and take action, especially regarding socially controversial issues like environmental protection and abortion (Effron & Miller, 2012).

4.3 The "Dark Side" of Moralization

Despite its positive effects on regulating social behavior and individual goal pursuit, moralization also has negative consequences. At the individual level, moralized beliefs can cause cognitive biases. Kraaijeveld and Jamrozik (2022) analyzed moralized beliefs related to various social phenomena, finding they often correlate with stigmatization of others and fundamental attribution error—blaming social phenomena on individuals' immoral behavior or character (e.g., moralization of infectious diseases like AIDS and COVID-19) while ne-

glecting situational and social factors (Bagcchi, 2020; Frank & Nagel, 2017). Additionally, individuals with more radical moral beliefs tend to exhibit more anti-scientific beliefs (e.g., opposing evolution; Kovacheff et al., 2018) and oppose scientifically beneficial technological advances (e.g., vaccination; Philipp-Muller et al., 2022). Research also finds that fake news and misinformation catering to audiences' moral values are more likely to be shared (Abdurahman et al., 2025). Neuroscientific evidence indicates that extreme moral conviction about an issue activates brain regions associated with impulse control and emotional arousal, such as the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), ventral striatum, and amygdala (Workman et al., 2020; Yoder & Decety, 2022). This suggests that individuals with more radical moral beliefs make more factually erroneous judgments, display overconfidence in their intuitive judgments, and refuse to correct their false beliefs (Decety, 2024).

At the group level, extensive research reveals that the root cause of intergroup conflict lies in opposition between moral values (Haidt, 2012), as people often weaponize morality to legitimize group conflicts (Arhiri et al., 2022a). Studies show that moralization of social issues, especially extreme moral conviction, leads to outgroup dehumanization and triggers higher levels of antagonism and unjustified discrimination (Ballone et al., 2023; Rösler et al., 2025), while reducing tolerance and marginalizing minority groups (e.g., obese individuals, LGBTQ+ communities; Adelman et al., 2021; Monroe & Plant, 2019; Ringel & Ditto, 2019). These moralized beliefs often entail strong exclusivity, leading to intergroup antagonism (Garrett, 2019) and reduced willingness to compromise (Delton et al., 2020), thereby causing group polarization (D' Amore et al., 2024; Finkel et al., 2020; Garrett & Bankert, 2020; Marie et al., 2023; Zaal et al., 2017). These polarization phenomena are particularly pronounced on social media, frequently triggering uncivil arguments and online violence (Brady et al., 2020; Rathje et al., 2021; Van Bavel et al., 2024). Analyses of language on North American hate group websites reveal that these extremist groups use more moral language when expressing hatred (Pretus et al., 2023). Extreme group opposition and polarization resulting from moralization can ultimately escalate into collective action and group violence (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021; Skitka et al., 2021). Related research shows that higher moralization of social focal issues increases support for violent rather than peaceful protest (Cervone et al., 2024; Mooijman, Hoover, et al., 2018) and leads people to view related violence as legitimate (Workman et al., 2020).

5 Summary and Future Directions

Moralization, as a process that imbues morally neutral entities with moral significance, is important for regulating social behavior and individual goal pursuit, yet it also triggers a series of harmful consequences for individuals and society, particularly polarized moral conviction. This paper has detailed moralization' s definition, its distinctions from related concepts, and its cognitive, affective, and social antecedents, along with relevant theoretical models. However, current re-

search has relatively neglected macro-social factors' influence on moralization. This paper' s proposed "cognitive-affective-social" integrative model seeks to address this gap. As an important topic in moral psychology, moralization offers numerous avenues for future exploration. We suggest four key directions for future research.

5.1 Exploring Psychological Mechanisms and Interventions for Demoralization

Moralization' s essence lies in ascribing "good/bad" or "right/wrong" value orientations to entities, which can positively regulate social behavior and individual goal pursuit. However, moralized thinking, especially extreme moral conviction, often leads to cognitive biases, unjustified discrimination, antagonism, group polarization, and collective violence. Therefore, demoralization interventions are crucial in appropriate contexts, as moderate demoralization can represent "moral progress" (Buchanan & Powell, 2017; Sauer et al., 2021). However, demoralization does not imply "moral nihilism" or "moral abolitionism" (Wright & Pölzler, 2022); it does not deny morality' s value but rather seeks to reduce negative consequences of extreme moral conviction for others or society. Current research on demoralization mechanisms and interventions remains limited, and future studies could address several aspects.

First, guiding people to recognize differences in moral values is essential. Research shows that when people view moral issues as objective or universal, they show less tolerance for differing viewpoints, but when they see moral issues as subjective or culturally relative, they exhibit greater tolerance (Wright & Pölzler, 2022). Second, despite large differences in moral values across groups, some universally endorsed moral foundations exist, such as condemnation of harm and pursuit of fairness and justice (Zhang et al., 2023). Recent research shows that prompting people to consider shared moral values across groups can reduce intergroup hatred (Voelkel et al., 2024). Therefore, guiding people to reflect on shared moral values could serve as an intervention to reduce extreme moralized beliefs. Finally, cultivating intellectual humility is crucial for reducing polarized moral attitudes (Decety, 2024). Research finds that more intellectually humble individuals are more tolerant of views that differ from their own values (Wright & Pölzler, 2022) and show less egocentric bias (Bowes et al., 2022). Future research could test interventions that train intellectual humility regarding moral issues to mitigate negative consequences of moralized thinking.

5.2 Impact of Social Media Technology Development on Moralization

Throughout history, human social interaction occurred primarily through face-to-face and written communication. However, the development of social media and other new technologies over recent decades has fundamentally transformed the forms and environments of social interaction, with people increasingly re-

lying on online networks. This shift has importantly impacted moral attitudes and behaviors. Research finds that social media often exhibits "moral amplification" and "moral contagion": people express stronger moral values and moral outrage online than in real life (Brady et al., 2020; Marie et al., 2023; Van Bavel et al., 2024), and tweets containing moral language and emotional terms receive more retweets (Brady et al., 2017; Brady & Van Bavel, 2025; Leach et al., 2025). Additionally, to maximize profits, social media platforms push information that caters to users' values, which—combined with users' confirmation bias—creates homogeneous information environments that reinforce their moral beliefs, forming "moral echo chambers" that further intensify group polarization (Mooijman, Hoover, et al., 2018). The causes of these online moralization behaviors are complex, including platforms' profit-driven catering to users, lack of nonverbal cues in virtual interaction, and anonymity-induced responsibility deficits that trigger aggressive or inflammatory speech (Crockett, 2017; Van Bavel et al., 2024). Existing research primarily describes these phenomena in fragmented ways, lacking systematic examination of underlying psychological mechanisms, comprehensive theoretical models, and analyses of adverse real-world consequences and countermeasures. These important questions warrant future investigation.

5.3 Moralization Research in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) technology has sparked scholarly attention to its moral status, with researchers examining whether AI has become a new moral agent or patient. As AI' s intelligence and social functions advance, it is increasingly endowed with agency, becoming a moral agent capable of moral decision-making, while also exhibiting vulnerability as a moral patient requiring protection and care (Ladak et al., 2024). Moral agents are entities that can be held responsible for their actions and bear moral obligations, whereas moral patients are entities that should be protected, cared for, or spared from harm. Whether humans view AI as moral agents or patients is primarily influenced by "mind perception" (Teng et al., 2024). Anthropomorphism plays a key role: individuals tend to project human mental attributes onto AI, and when people believe AI possesses human-like agency and experience, they are more likely to attribute moral responsibility and rights to AI (Ladak et al., 2024; Sullivan & Fosso Wamba, 2022). As AI intelligence develops, a third form of AI moralization has emerged: viewing AI as moral proxies that make decisions on behalf of humans (Bonnefon et al., 2024). This changes human moral decision-making patterns and responsibility attribution in human-AI interaction. Recent research shows that mind perception of AI significantly increases blame attribution toward AI while reducing responsibility attribution to relevant human actors (e.g., programmers, companies; Joo, 2024). When AI participates in decision-making, people are more prone to moral disengagement and reduced responsibility for negative outcomes (Salatino et al., 2025). Overall, although whether AI can become a moral agent remains controversial (Gamez

et al., 2020), as AI' s autonomy and agency advance, people already view AI as moral proxies that assume moral responsibility on their behalf (Bonnefon et al., 2024). Therefore, the moral responsibility attribution and distribution issues arising from AI moralization trends, along with their potential social consequences, urgently require further investigation.

On the other hand, various moralization issues arising from AI usage warrant attention. AI was designed to simulate human mental capacities to expand and enhance human intelligence. Although AI has surpassed human experts in domains such as medical diagnosis and stock prediction, people still distrust AI decision-making, exhibiting "algorithm aversion" (Dietvorst et al., 2015). Recent research suggests algorithm aversion' s essence is not rational deliberation weighing benefits and risks but rather irrational rejection at the moral level (de Mello et al., 2025). de Mello et al. (2025) found that over 60% of respondents who resisted AI cited moral reasons for their resistance, and this moralized attitude toward AI use manifested across multiple domains, including art, law, and companionship. Meanwhile, people not only moralize AI use but also moralize AI users. Research shows that people distrust and devalue those who use AI to assist their work (Bonnefon et al., 2024; Reif et al., 2025), especially when AI use is attributed to laziness, leading them to view AI-using colleagues as less moral and reducing helping behavior toward them (Zhou et al., 2025). However, researchers note that the psychological mechanisms underlying moralization of AI use and users remain unclear, with significant individual differences (e.g., social class, naturalness preference, pre-existing moral beliefs; Dietvorst & Bartels, 2021; Schenk et al., 2024; Zhang & Yu, 2023) and cultural factors (e.g., Folk et al., 2025) requiring further investigation.

5.4 Moralization Research Based on Chinese Cultural Contexts

Although moralization research has made important progress in recent years, most studies have sampled "WEIRD" populations (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic), limiting cultural diversity in moralization research (Fitouchi et al., 2023). Future research should explore the feasibility and necessity of studying moralization across cultural contexts, particularly analyzing moralization phenomena within Chinese cultural contexts.

Traditional Chinese culture has an extremely rich ethical tradition, with some scholars asserting that Chinese culture treats morality as life' s ultimate concern, exhibiting a tendency toward "pan-moralism" (e.g., Liang, 2021; Jin, 2015; Yin, 2024). This pan-moralism functions to combat moral nihilism and restrain atomistic individualism (Cheng, 2024) but can also trigger uncontrolled public opinion, leading to group polarization and fragmentation (Chen & Wan, 2023). However, current Chinese scholarship on moralization remains primarily theoretical speculation in philosophy and ethics, with limited empirical psychological research analyzing unique Chinese moralization psychology and behavior. Only a few empirical studies have found that Chinese individuals are more likely than

Westerners to moralize conventional behaviors (Berniūnas et al., 2022; Buchtel et al., 2015).

Furthermore, traditional Chinese culture promotes "benevolence, filial piety, propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame," with diverse moral norms permeating daily life, manifesting unique moralization psychology and behaviors regarding natural phenomena, animals, and even sports. For example, landscapes are endowed with moral attributes: the wise observe water to understand reason, the benevolent observe mountains to appreciate magnanimity—"the wise delight in water, the benevolent delight in mountains" —demonstrating moralization of the natural environment. Jade symbolizes the five virtues of "benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, courage, and purity," emphasizing that one should possess jade-like character and cultivation, or "the noble person compares his virtue to jade" (from the *Analects*). Chickens similarly symbolize five virtues (from Han Ying' s *Han Shi Wai Zhuan*). Moreover, ancient people believed sports like archery could reveal inner character and cultivation, as "archery reveals virtue" (from the *Book of Rites*), because archery competitions involved strict etiquette requiring calm minds and upright posture, aligning with Confucian ideals of "inner sage, outer king" and making archery a means of observing character. Such examples abound, vividly revealing the omnipresent moral lens in Chinese life. In conclusion, future research should focus on investigating unique Chinese moralization phenomena from indigenous cultural perspectives and analyzing their underlying psychological mechanisms, thereby contributing Chinese perspectives and insights to moralization research.

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