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The role of moral foundations in regulating emotional responses using different moral framings in online political communication: a quasi-experimental pilot study

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Social networks are meant to be neutral environments, but the automatic presentation of content consistent with user choices fosters polarization and echo chambers, particularly on ethical issues (Brugnoli et al., 2019). What appear to be overlooked are the moral motivational systems that can moderate emotional responses prompted by the communicative content. On the basis of individual moral foundations, namely Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity (Haidt, 2001; Graham et al., 2011), this quasi-experimental pilot study aims to understand how certain online political messages structured through different moral framings affect distinct moral emotions. Based on a sample of adult subjects (N=305, F=58.4%) we explored the different moral-emotional activations after the presentation of the topic of immigrants' reception in Italy by means of three different moral framings: a safety framing, a benevolence framing, and a neutral message. The results confirm that a benevolence framing significantly elicits empathy, compassion, sadness, and outrage only in those who report a higher activation in the Care domain; conversely, the same message deactivates empathy for those with a strong Authority domain. In contrast, the safety framing mainly elicits sadness and disgust in those with an active Fairness domain. Even the neutral framing elicits completely different emotions according to the specific relevant individual domain: empathy for Fairness, distress for Loyalty, and indignation for Purity. Mapping moral emotions and domains in online public interactions can be a way through which interdisciplinary teams can possibly develop ethical virtual environments, taking into account personal differences in moral activation.