

Meaningful Connections in Crisis: Exploring Motivational and Emotional Predictors of Online Prosocial Behavior Among Indonesian Youth

Zelynda Zeinab Malizal¹, Putri Umrotur Rizqi²

¹International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

²Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

Correspondent: zelyndazm28@gmail.com¹

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ABSTRACT: The global COVID 19 crisis catalyzed a surge in online prosocial behaviors among youth, particularly in collectivist cultures such as Indonesia. This study investigates the motivational and psychosocial determinants that drive Indonesian youths to engage in public versus anonymous digital altruism. Drawing on survey data from 500 respondents aged 15–25, we employed structural equation modeling to examine how eudaimonic, extrinsic, and hedonic motivations influence online prosocial behavior, with empathy and trust in social platforms as mediating factors. Findings indicate that eudaimonic motivation strongly predicts anonymous prosocial actions, while extrinsic motivation drives public behaviors. Hedonic motivation shows only limited influence. Empathy and trust act as key mediators, enabling motivations to translate into action. Public acts tend to reflect reputational goals, whereas anonymous behaviors emerge from intrinsic meaning-making and emotional resonance. Our results support the implementation of culturally tailored digital interventions, such as gamification and peer mentoring systems, which promote eudaimonic engagement while addressing trust and empathy building in virtual environments. Methodological considerations include the limitations of self report bias and the need for mixed method validation. Future research should examine platform specific influences and cross cultural comparisons to deepen the theoretical understanding of youth digital altruism. Overall, this research advances understanding of digital prosociality and provides practical guidance for educators, policymakers, and platform designers seeking to foster meaningful online civic participation.

Keywords: Online Prosocial Behavior, Youth Altruism, Eudaimonic Motivation, Social Media Trust, Digital Empathy, Indonesia.



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID 19 pandemic has highlighted significant global trends in online prosocial behavior. Research indicates that individuals demonstrated heightened prosocial behaviors amidst the crisis,

such as volunteering and charitable donations, both online and offline. For instance, Yu et al. found a significant positive association between prosociality and the intention to receive a COVID 19 vaccination among university students in China (Yu et al., 2021). Furthermore, Varma et al. provide causal evidence that engaging in prosocial behavior promotes positive emotions and serves as a mental health strategy during challenging times (Varma et al., 2023). These findings underscore a broad trend where individuals utilized their online platforms to express altruism and community support amid uncertainty and fear.

Youth's use of social media has notably evolved in expressing and performing prosocial behaviors. Shillington et al. note that Canadian adults reported high levels of prosocial behavior during the early stages of the COVID 19 pandemic, reflecting a trend among younger demographics to leverage digital tools for community engagement (Shillington et al., 2022). Additionally, Buckley et al. discuss how features inherent in social media, such as likes, shares, and the ability to communicate through private and public messages, serve to motivate users, particularly youths, to engage in prosocial acts (Buckley et al., 2022). The nature of social media allows young individuals to reframe their social obligations and create supportive communities, thus nurturing a culture of kindness and aid.

Several theoretical models elucidate the mechanics behind prosocial behavior within digital environments. Social norms theory suggests that online interactions often see individuals mimic the prosocial actions of peers, fostering an environment conducive to altruism (Mortensen et al., 2017). Additionally, Wertag et al. explore the interplay of personality traits with prosocial tendencies, suggesting that inherent dispositions may moderate how individuals engage in online helping behaviors (Wertag et al., 2018). Moreover, moral elevation a psychological state that motivates individuals to act altruistically following exposure to virtuous behavior has been highlighted as influential in both online and offline environments, reinforcing altruistic norms in digital interactions (Sakai et al., 2016).

In collectivist contexts like Indonesia, prosociality often reflects communal values. Eudaimonic motivations encourage anonymous acts for group cohesion (Yuliawati, 2024), while community orientation strengthens emotional and compliance-based helping (Gülseven et al., 2024). These findings show how personal and collective goals intersect to drive online support.

The global crisis context of COVID 19 has influenced moral identity and civic engagement among youth. Recent studies indicate shifts in how young individuals define their roles within their communities and engage with societal issues. For example, Cheng et al. observed that the pandemic has pressured young adults to reconsider their moral responsibilities and often results in increased civic involvement, such as advocacy for public health initiatives (Fritz et al., 2022). The prolonged nature of uncertainty during the pandemic has reinforced youth engagement with local and global communities, fostering a strong sense of identity tied to collective well being (He et al., 2023).

In terms of the public versus anonymous nature of prosocial acts, distinctions emerge that shape individual motivations and the impact of such actions. Research by Kim et al. highlights how social

observability can significantly alter individual behavior, suggesting that the desire for public recognition may motivate more visible prosocial actions compared to those performed anonymously, which are often driven by intrinsic motivations (Kim et al., 2023). This nuance is further explored by Dinić and Bodroža, who reveal that anonymity can affect the willingness to engage in prosocial behavior, pointing to complex motivations that vary across contexts and presentation styles (Dinić & Bodroža, 2021).

Furthermore, prosocial tendencies manifest differently across various platforms, with specific demographic factors influencing these behaviors. For example, McGinley et al. discovered that adolescents influenced by their peers are more likely to engage in prosocial activities when such behaviors are perceived as normative within their social circles (McGinley et al., 2020). This reinforces the notion that demographic and social factors significantly shape how prosociality is expressed online, offering fertile ground for future research into the transformative power of online spaces in fostering community engagement.

Importantly, the facilitating elements of digital environments ranging from anonymity to the dynamics of peer influence play pivotal roles in shaping the expression of prosocial behavior. Research indicates that anonymity can encourage individuals to engage in more altruistic acts without the pressures of social judgment, potentially increasing overall goodwill within communities (Fritz et al., 2022). The balance between public acknowledgment and the desire for personal gratification necessitates further investigation to discern their impacts on sustaining prosocial engagements.

In summary, online prosocial behavior during crises reflects interactions between culture, theory, and youth engagement. Recognizing these dynamics clarifies individual motivations and highlights the role of digital platforms in shaping civic responsibility. Integrating traditional theories with evolving digital practices can enrich both research and application.

METHOD

This research adopted a cross sectional online survey design specifically targeting Indonesian youth between the ages of 15 and 25. A total of 500 participants were successfully recruited using a variety of digital platforms, including prominent social media channels (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, TikTok), educational discussion forums, and youth outreach organizations. Eligibility criteria required participants to be currently residing in Indonesia and to have actively used social media during the COVID 19 pandemic period. The sampling aimed to ensure a diverse representation of socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical regions (urban and rural). Participation was entirely voluntary, and all respondents were assured of anonymity and data confidentiality throughout the study. The survey was pilot tested with 20 youth respondents to refine question clarity, optimize age appropriate language, and validate the average completion time, which was found to be approximately 10–12 minutes.

A structured online questionnaire was constructed utilizing multiple validated psychometric instruments to measure key constructs relevant to the study:

- **Motivation Scales:** To assess hedonic and eudaimonic motivations, the survey incorporated the Hedonic and Eudaimonic Motives for Activities Revised (HEMA R) developed by Huta and Ryan. Additionally, the Spanish Orientations to Happiness Scale (SOHS) was used to capture a more nuanced understanding of participants' pursuit of pleasure and meaning in life (Lorente et al., 2019).
- **Well being Measurement:** Ryff and Keyes' psychological well being framework was adopted to measure aspects such as autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, self acceptance, and purpose in life, which align with both hedonic and eudaimonic domains (Powell et al., 2023).
- **Empathy and Moral Identity:** An adapted empathy scale was included to assess emotional responsiveness, while moral identity was measured using the internalization and symbolization subscales of the Moral Identity Questionnaire.
- **Social Media Trust:** This scale consisted of items evaluating users' trust in the credibility, reliability, and social influence of various online platforms commonly accessed by the target demographic.
- **Prosocial Behavior Scale:** To differentiate between types of prosocial acts, items were categorized into public behavior (e.g., visible donations, supportive posts) and anonymous behavior (e.g., private messaging, unacknowledged contributions).
- **Demographics and COVID 19 Stress Indicators:** The survey captured comprehensive demographic data, including educational status, family income level, and region. It also included items gauging perceived stress, anxiety, and emotional resilience during the COVID 19 crisis.

Recruitment was conducted through digital outreach on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and email lists. Materials were available in Bahasa Indonesia and underwent linguistic validation. Participants received information on study aims and ethics before completing the survey, which included Likert scales, situational examples, and attention checks.

Data were cleaned (removal of incomplete responses/outliers) and analyzed with SPSS 25 and AMOS. Descriptive statistics summarized sample characteristics. Reliability was assessed with Cronbach's alpha. Regression and SEM tested relationships among motivations, mediators (empathy, trust), and prosocial behaviors.

SEM was selected for its robustness in modeling complex, multidimensional relationships while addressing potential measurement errors (Algharaibeh, 2021). This technique enabled the simultaneous estimation of direct, indirect, and mediated effects among constructs such as motivation, empathy, trust, and behavioral outcomes. The model fit was assessed using standard indices (e.g., RMSEA, CFI, TLI). Furthermore, multigroup SEM was employed to examine the moderating roles of demographic variables like urban versus rural residence and gender, providing greater granularity in understanding behavioral patterns (Jenkins et al., 2022).

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the university's institutional research ethics board. Electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. They were informed of their rights to withdraw at any point without penalty. All collected data were encrypted, anonymized, and stored in a secure cloud based repository accessible only to the core research team. Measures were taken to ensure transparency, accountability, and adherence to ethical research standards throughout the project lifecycle.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Prosocial Behavior Distribution

Of the 500 participants, 62% reported more frequent engagement in public prosocial acts (e.g., visible donations, public sharing of support messages, fundraising, advocacy). Meanwhile, 38% preferred anonymous prosocial behaviors (e.g., private donations, silent volunteering, anonymous supportive messages).

Table 1: Frequency of Public vs Anonymous Prosocial Acts

Prosocial Type	Frequency	Percentage
Public	310	62%
Anonymous	190	38%

Motivation Profiles and Behavioral Correlates

Motivational assessment across the sample demonstrated varied orientation. Figure 1 presents the distribution of motivation types: 45% reported primarily eudaimonic motives driven by the pursuit of purpose, self growth, and meaning making. Another 35% aligned with extrinsic motives, reflecting desires for social approval, reputation, or external rewards. The remaining 20% were predominantly guided by hedonic motivations engaging in prosocial acts for emotional satisfaction or pleasure. These distributions not only illustrate psychological diversity but also reflect the complex motivational spectrum influencing online helping behavior.

Regression Analysis: Predictors of Prosociality

Regression analysis indicated that eudaimonic motivation was a significant predictor of anonymous prosocial acts ($\beta = .49, p < .01$). Extrinsic motivation significantly predicted public prosocial behavior ($\beta = .42, p < .05$). Hedonic motivation showed no significant relationship with either behavior type ($\beta = .07, ns$).

Table 2: Regression Coefficients for Motivation Predictors on Prosocial Types

Predictor	Behavior Type	β	SE	p value	R ²
Eudaimonic	Anonymous	.49	0.06	<.01	.38
Extrinsic	Public	.42	0.07	<.05	.32
Hedonic	Both	.07	0.05	ns	.06

SEM Path Model and Mediating Variables

To understand the complex interactions among variables, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed. The SEM model incorporated motivational factors as independent variables, trust in social platforms and empathy as mediating variables, and public/anonymous behavior types as outcomes. Key pathways identified include a strong link between eudaimonic motivation and anonymous prosociality (.52**), and between extrinsic motivation and public prosociality (.40*). Trust in platforms emerged as a significant mediator affecting public behavior (.38**), while empathy was particularly linked with anonymous behavior (.35*). Additionally, engagement in both types of prosocial actions positively influenced subjective well being (.44*).

Figure 1: SEM Path Model

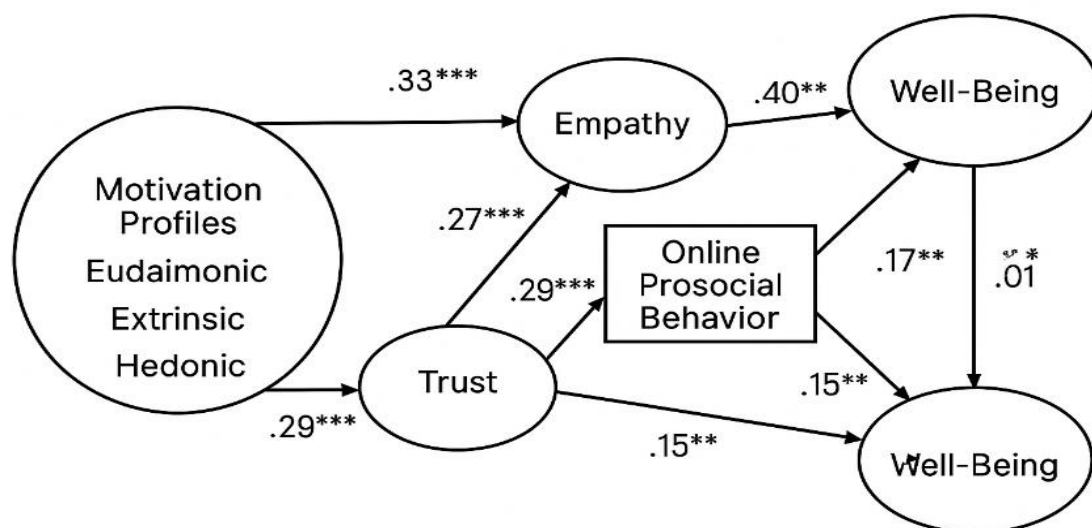


Figure 2: SEM Path Model

Model fit indices indicated an excellent fit to the data (RMSEA = 0.041; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.95), supporting the validity of the proposed relationships.

Moderating and Group Comparison Analysis

Multigroup SEM analysis was conducted to explore whether demographic factors moderated the observed relationships. Results indicated that urban participants displayed stronger associations between extrinsic motivation and public prosocial behavior, possibly reflecting greater exposure to social networks and public performance culture. Rural participants exhibited higher trust in digital platforms and demonstrated more engagement in anonymous prosocial behavior, possibly due to tighter knit community values or heightened privacy concerns. Interestingly, no significant gender differences were found in either motivational profiles or prosocial behavior types, suggesting that these patterns are relatively stable across male and female participants within this age group.

Thematic Interpretation from Literature Integration

The observed patterns correspond with previous research findings. Studies by Irshad et al. (2020) underscore how audience visibility shapes altruistic actions, with anonymous prosociality preferred in contexts of low observability or potential judgment. Lin (2024) further highlight how collectivist cultural values encourage public altruism for reinforcing social ties. The role of empathy and trust in shaping behavioral outcomes echoes research emphasizing their mediating function in online communities. Hedonic motivations appeared inconsistent often overshadowed by deeper intrinsic and social motivators thus confirming the context dependent nature of emotional gratification in driving prosociality.

Summary of Key Findings

- Eudaimonic motivation is the strongest predictor of anonymous helping.
- Extrinsic motivation significantly influences public prosocial behavior.
- Trust in platforms and empathy mediate the motivation behavior link.
- Urban vs. rural differences highlight cultural and contextual moderators.
- Hedonic motives are unreliable predictors of digital altruism.

Cultural Context and Motivational Divergence

This study explored the psychological, cultural, and contextual underpinnings of online prosocial behavior among Indonesian youth during global crises. It uncovered meaningful distinctions in the motivational dynamics that underpin public versus anonymous digital altruism. The findings emphasized how individual drives, shaped by deeper cultural constructs and psychosocial environments, determine the form and frequency of online helping behaviors.

Quantitative data and structural modeling reinforced a growing body of literature that connects eudaimonic motivation emphasizing meaning making, personal growth, and psychological

flourishing to anonymous prosociality. Participants who reported higher eudaimonic tendencies were significantly more likely to engage in unrecognized yet impactful actions such as anonymous donations or indirect emotional support through social media. This trend reflects the value placed on moral coherence and internal fulfillment among certain youth cohorts, aligning with psychological models that prioritize intrinsic orientation over public validation (Knight et al., 2018).

The link between extrinsic motivation and public behavior demonstrates how impression management operates in digital spaces. Beyond reputational incentives, this also points to challenges: visibility-driven prosociality may decline when recognition is absent, raising questions about sustainability. This aligns with impression management theories but also calls for platform designs that balance recognition with deeper value-based engagement (Carlo et al., 2022).

Cultural values embedded within Indonesia's collectivist framework likely amplify these patterns. In such cultures, maintaining group harmony, demonstrating social responsibility, and reinforcing communal identity are paramount. Youths growing up in these contexts are often conditioned to see themselves as relationally embedded individuals, leading to heightened awareness of both communal needs and social visibility. Thus, both anonymous and public altruistic actions are culturally sanctioned but manifest through different motivational channels depending on situational cues and internalized values.

Mediating Effects of Empathy and Trust

The application of SEM revealed compelling mediational effects through two key psychosocial variables: empathy and trust in digital platforms. Empathy particularly affective empathy, or the capacity to emotionally resonate with others' suffering was found to bridge eudaimonic motivation with anonymous helping. This pathway highlights how emotional attunement fosters a sense of shared humanity, particularly in high stress contexts such as a pandemic, where direct interaction is limited.

Trust in digital platforms, meanwhile, served as a primary enabler for public prosociality. Youths who felt confident in the reliability and safety of the social media spaces they occupied were more inclined to perform altruistic acts in a visible manner. Trust reduced the perceived risks of judgment or data misuse, thus enhancing engagement. The mediating role of empathy and trust reflects broader sociotechnical dynamics: empathy sustains affective bonds even in virtual crises, while trust reduces perceived risks of digital exposure. For platform design, this implies that features enhancing credibility, transparency, and emotional resonance could foster more sustainable prosocial ecosystems.

Digital Interventions and Practical Applications

Given the interplay of motivation, empathy, and trust, these findings suggest several practical applications. Digital interventions that emphasize purpose driven engagement such as gamification with moral rewards, youth led storytelling campaigns, and peer mentorship platforms have shown

promise in encouraging deeper prosocial behavior. These mechanisms not only appeal to intrinsic values but also provide safe and affirming spaces for youth to test and express their moral identities.

In Indonesia, where internet penetration among youth is high but trust in platforms may be uneven, culturally tailored digital programs can amplify eudaimonic motivation while respecting local norms. Storytelling apps that narrate community service success stories, or digital badges that celebrate anonymous contributions, can strengthen internal validation mechanisms while bypassing the need for social approval. Furthermore, institutions both governmental and nonprofit can leverage this research to create targeted interventions that align with youth's digital habits and psychosocial profiles.

Methodological Considerations and Biases

Nonetheless, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The study relied heavily on self report instruments, which are inherently susceptible to bias. Social desirability, selective memory, and personal misperceptions can distort self assessments of altruistic behavior. Participants may inflate their contributions due to a desire to appear morally upright or conform to perceived societal expectations. These distortions are particularly potent in collectivist settings where group reputation holds considerable weight.

To mitigate this, future studies could triangulate data sources, incorporating behavioral observation (e.g., content analysis of social media posts) or digital trace data that objectively record acts of digital prosociality. Additionally, incorporating longitudinal designs could better capture motivational stability over time and determine whether digital interventions have lasting impacts. Validating self report metrics through peer or platform feedback mechanisms might also improve reliability.

Directions for Future Research

Expanding this research cross culturally would enrich our understanding of how societal frameworks shape prosocial motivations. Comparing Indonesian youth with peers from more individualistic societies could reveal fundamental divergences in the prioritization of visibility versus anonymity, or the differential weighting of moral emotions. Additionally, studies should explore gender diversity, economic background, and digital literacy as potential moderators of online helping behavior.

Future research should examine how evolving features such as anonymity tools, algorithmic visibility, or AI-driven prompts reshape prosocial engagement. These technological dynamics may introduce new ethical challenges while offering opportunities for intentional design of digital environments that encourage sustained altruism.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how Indonesian youths' online prosocial behavior during crises is shaped by distinct motivational pathways: eudaimonic motives foster anonymous altruism, while extrinsic motives drive public expressions of support. By situating these dynamics within a collectivist cultural framework, the research contributes to a more nuanced theoretical understanding of digital prosociality, highlighting the interplay between intrinsic fulfillment, social recognition, and cultural norms in shaping altruistic action.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study underscores empathy and trust as key mediators that convert motivation into behavior, offering practical guidance for platform designers, educators, and policymakers. Culturally responsive digital interventions such as gamified volunteering, narrative-based campaigns, and peer mentorship systems can strengthen both trust and intrinsic engagement. Future research should integrate behavioral and longitudinal data, examine cross-cultural differences, and explore emerging technological features to better harness the potential of digital environments in fostering sustainable and meaningful prosocial engagement.

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