"Too good to be you": social comparison and social identity in moral elevation
responses to pro-environmental moral models.

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How to raise society's pro-environmental standards is far from understood. Living up to pro-environmental standards might be considered a moral duty and people who show outstanding

pro-environmental behavior could be viewed as moral exemplars that may serve as a source of inspiration for people. Indeed, many findings suggest that people can experience feelings of moral elevation (Haidt, 2013) when witnessing acts of uncommon moral virtue that in turn elicit imitation response and the desire to become a "better person" (Schnall, & Roper, 2011; Aquino et al., 2011; Rullo et al., 2021). However, other studies also reveal that people can potentially perceive outstanding moral exemplars as a threat both to their self-concept and their social identity due to negative social comparison (Monin et al., 2008; see also Cramwinckel et al., 2013). This study aims to explore the psycho-social mechanisms guiding people towards more sustainable and environmentally respectful behaviors. Through three online experiments, our aim is to explore the potential of inspiration provided by pro-environmental moral exemplars. Specifically, we examined how negative social comparison may impact the experience of moral elevation and, consequently, its role in inspiring pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, we explored the role of social identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) with moral exemplars in mitigating the negative effects of social comparison (Mussweiler et al., 2000; Schmitt et al., 2006). In Experiment 1 (246 UK participants) and Experiment 2 (258 UK participants), we manipulated only social comparison (control, negative comparison, and positive comparison), while in Experiment 3 (529 UK participants), we also manipulated social identification with the moral exemplars (ingroup vs outgroup). All participants were recruited through Prolific.Ac and paid for their participation. Social comparison manipulation was conducted using a bogus feedback procedure (Lalot et al., 2019), while social identification was manipulated through the moral exemplars's nationality. From the data analysis, some significant results emerged that only partially confirm our main hypotheses. Particularly, negative social comparison appears to reduce moral elevation and related behavioral intentions. Regarding social identification, the analysis reveals that social identity can play a role in moderating the harmful effects of social comparison. This study not only contributes to understanding the social dynamics influencing pro-environmental behavior but also provides important implications for the development of interventions aimed at promoting greater awareness and effective commitment to environmental sustainability. Some emerging results pave the way for a more effective design of awareness-raising and behavioral change strategies in the environmental context.

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