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When the "other side" follows your lead: How dissociative imitation of prosocial goals fosters goal persistence and goal cooperation

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Abstract

Despite the rising prominence of prosocial goals, sustaining long-term engagement remains hindered by the moral licensing effect. Grounded in social influence theory, this research investigates how goal imitation by dissociative groups affects an individual's subsequent prosocial goal pursuit. Across five studies using varied prosocial goal contexts and dissociative group stimuli, we find that imitation of prosocial goal by dissociative group will increase imitated individual's perceived responsibility, which in turn promotes their goal persistence and cooperation intentions. However, this positive effect is moderated by incentive form: symbolic (identity-relevant) incentives activate identity concerns and attenuate the beneficial impact of goal imitation. This research advances the literature on dissociative groups by identifying a cooperative mechanism, extends the goal incentive literature by revealing incentive form as a critical boundary condition, and offers practical insights for charitable organizations seeking to sustain long-term prosocial engagement.

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1. Introduction

Prosocial behavior has become regular parts of modern life. Digital platforms, including the "Social Walk" app, Alipay's "Ant Forest", and Tencent's "Monthly Donation Plan", have democratized participation in prosocial activities by lowering traditional obstacles. Consequently, these tools have transformed charitable acts into structured, goal-oriented behaviors.

The Ant Forest initiative serves as a prime example. As of 2021, it had engaged over 600 million users. Participants actively accumulate "green energy" through daily low-carbon activities to eventually achieve the goal of donating a physical tree to arid and semi-arid regions. To date, this program has facilitated the planting of 326 million trees—a feat that earned it the United Nations' "Champions of the Earth" award. Such examples illustrate a fundamental trend: charitable giving is moving away from episodic acts toward sustained, goal-oriented personal commitment.

But keeping people committed to good causes is a real challenge. Research on "moral licensing" shows that doing one good deed often makes people feel they have already "done their part". This sense of satisfaction can actually lower their drive to do more, or even give them an excuse to act less ethically later on (Meijers, Verlegh, Noordewier, & Smit, 2015; Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). This raises a key question for organizations and policymakers: how can they keep consumers motivated to stick with their prosocial goals over the long term?

Goal pursuit often unfolds in social settings in which individuals receive information—whether intentionally or not—about others' progress and participation (Huang, 2018; Huang, Broniarczyk, Zhang, & Beruchashvili, 2015). This is particularly evident in the age of social media, where goal sharing and goal imitation have become common forms of social information. For instance, consumers share their goals online

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and subsequently discover that others have adopted the same goal. Prior research has examined how imitation affects consumers in product adoption contexts (White & Argo, 2011) but its role in the context of ongoing goal pursuit—especially prosocial goals—remains unexamined.

The present research investigates what we term the *prosocial goal imitation effect*: the facilitating influence of prosocial goal imitation by a dissociative group on the imitated consumer's goal persistence and goal cooperation. Dissociative groups are those whom individuals prefer not to associate with (White & Dahl, 2006, 2007). Prior research has overwhelmingly documented the negative consequences of dissociative group influence—product abandonment, reduced self-brand connection, and diminished purchase intentions (White & Argo, 2011). Based on these findings, individuals' goal pursuit is undermined when their goals are imitated by dissociative groups. We propose, however, that this negative dynamic may be reversed when the focal goal is prosocial in nature. Drawing on social influence theory and construal level theory, we argue that prosocial goals activate consumers' moral identity and altruistic orientation. This activation buffers the threat posed by dissociative group imitation and, instead, engenders heightened perceived responsibility, which in turn improves imitated individuals' goal persistence and cooperation intentions.

This research makes the following contributions. First, we broaden the scope of imitation research by delineating goal imitation. We argue that this phenomenon is divergent from incidental behavioral mimicry and possession imitation, especially considering that personal goals are inherently identity-laden and unfold over time. Second, our research extends the literature on the positive effect of dissociative groups by identifying a novel cooperative mechanism. This extends the current understanding beyond avoidance-driven effects, demonstrating how dissociative groups can, under specific conditions, yield positive influence. Finally, we enrich the goal incentive literature by identifying incentive form (symbolic vs. non-symbolic) as a critical moderator that determines how social information influences prosocial goal pursuit.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Goal Pursuit and Reference Groups

Consumers' beliefs and behaviors are profoundly shaped by their social environment (Appiah, Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2019). Goal pursuit is no exception, it frequently unfolds in social contexts in which individuals actively or passively receive goal-relevant information from others (Huang, 2018; Huang et al., 2015). Reference groups, accordingly, play an important role in shaping goal-pursuit motivation and behavior. Shah (2003) demonstrated that significant others can facilitate goal-directed effort. Huang (2018) found that in the middle stages of goal pursuit, the awareness that others pursuit the same goal can enhance an individual's motivation to continue. The present research extends this line of inquiry by exploring how dissociative groups shape goal pursuit—a consequential yet underexplored facet of social influence.

Dissociative groups are groups with which consumers prefer not to be associated (White & Dahl, 2006). Driven by the need to maintain a positive and distinct social identity, individuals actively distance themselves from dissociative groups. White and Dahl (2006) found that when a product was associated with a dissociative group, consumers evaluated it less favorably and expressed lower purchase intentions. Similarly, White and Dahl (2007) showed that consumers form weaker self-brand connections and exhibit more negative attitudes toward brands linked to dissociative groups.

We propose that goal imitation by dissociative groups may serve as a powerful cue that influences goal pursuit. Building upon social influence theory (Appiah et al., 2019) imitation—as a fundamental form of social interaction (Hamilton, 2008)—profoundly impacts the imitated individual. Consequently, goal imitation might serve as an social signal that shapes the imitated people's subsequent goal pursuit. Drawing on the dissociative group effect (White & Dahl, 2006, 2007) such imitation can be perceived as an identity threat, thereby disrupting one's self-concept. Following this logic, the goal imitation by a dissociative group may evoke psychological reactance, ultimately undermining the individual's motivation to persist in their goal.

However, this negative effect may be shaped by goal type. Many scholars have examined how different types of goals shape goal pursuit (Ramirez, Jiménez, & Gau, 2015; Xiao, 2017; Yang, Stamatogiannakis, & Chattopadhyay, 2015; Zhang & Huang, 2010). Because people's motivation and behavior vary across goal types, the effect of imitation by dissociative groups likely depends on what kind of goal is being imitated. The present research focuses on a specific goal type—prosocial goals—and explores how imitation of such goals by dissociative groups affects the imitated individuals.

2.2. The Prosocial Goal

The present research identifies a specific goal type—prosocial goals (i.e., altruistic goals)—and contrast prosocial goals with self-interested (or pro-self) goals, which differ fundamentally in their underlying psychological construals. Self-interested goals, or pro-self-goals, are oriented toward personal benefits and reflect individuals' concerns with self-enhancement and self-development (Berrios, Totterdell, & Kellett, 2015; Latham, Hu, & Brcic, 2020; Peetz & Wilson, 2008). Given their localized focus on personal advancement and individual outcomes, self-interested goals are represented at a narrower, lower level of construal. By contrast, prosocial goals are oriented toward the welfare of the broader collective, such as society and the environment—and are defined by altruistic and ethical objectives (Latham et al., 2020). These goals transcend

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the immediate self to address the interests of a larger social entity, they are thus represented as high-level construals (Stillman, Fujita, Sheldon, & Trope, 2018).

An abstract, high-level construal mindset leads consumers to focus on the similarities between themselves and dissociative groups, thereby buffering the negative impact exerted by these groups (McGowan, Hassan, & Shiu, 2020). Construal level theory also predicts that high-level construal fosters greater moral awareness, stronger altruistic tendencies, and greater willingness to cooperate(Giacomantonio, De Dreu, Shalvi, Sligte, & Leder, 2010; Körner & Volk, 2014). Furthermore, moral elevation has been shown to reduce intergroup conflict (Reed & Aquino, 2003) suppress negative reactions to dissociative groups (Choi & Winterich, 2013) and promote cooperative behavior (Aquino, Freeman, Reed II, Lim, & Felps, 2009).

When the focal goal is self-interested, individuals tend to adopt a low-level construal mindset, prioritizing self-distinctiveness and differentiation. In this mindset, we expect the "dissociative group effect" to manifest through threats to imitated people, consistent with findings in product-imitation research (White & Argo, 2011). In such cases, mimicry triggers dissociative responses, leading individuals to distance themselves from the imitated goal to restore their positive identity.

By contrast, prosocial goals evoke a high-level construal, shifting the orientation toward communal values and collective outcomes. This abstract perspective redirects attention from identity-related threats to the broader societal value of the dissociative group's engagement. Under these conditions, the imitation acts not as a threat but as a driver for collective efficacy—bolstering the individual's sense of social impact and fostering a deeper commitment to the shared prosocial endeavor.

H_1: When consumers' prosocial goals (vs. self-interested goals) are imitated by dissociative group, consumers will exhibit greater goal persistence intentions and increased willingness to cooperate with the dissociative group in goal-related activities.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Perceived Responsibility

Why does prosocial goal imitation by a dissociative group produce these positive effects? We propose that perceived responsibility serves as the proximate psychological mechanism. Previous studies have documented a wide array of responsibility perceptions associated with prosocial behavior, such as responsibility for environmental damage (Wu & Yang, 2018) environmental protection (Paço & Gouveia Rodrigues, 2016; Punzo, Panarello, Pagliuca, Castellano, & Aprile, 2019) aiding those in need (Erlandsson, Björklund, & Bäckström, 2015; Winterich & Zhang, 2014) and stewardship toward future generations (Syropoulos & Markowitz, 2021).

Prosocial actions—such as green consumption and charitable giving—serve as manifestations of consumers' fulfillment of their social and moral responsibilities (Van der Linden, 2011). The formulation and pursuit of prosocial goals represent a proactive assumption of such responsibility. When these goals are imitated by a dissociative group, individuals become more acutely aware of their role within these initiatives—positioning themselves as leaders or pioneers—and recognize the societal impact of their contributions. This heightened role salience and perceived impact, in turn, intensify their sense of responsibility and obligation toward helping others and environmental stewardship (Paço & Gouveia Rodrigues, 2016; Punzo et al., 2019).

Perceived responsibility, once activated, is a powerful motivator of prosocial behavior. Winterich and Zhang (2014) found that perceived responsibility facilitates charitable giving. Erlandsson et al. (2015) demonstrated that perceived responsibility increases individuals' willingness to help others. Perceived responsibility was also found to promote pro-environmental behavior (Syropoulos & Markowitz, 2021; Wu & Yang, 2018). Crucially, Van der Linden (2011) characterized responsibility-related cognitions as a form of moral activation that suppressed negative intergroup biases (Choi & Winterich, 2013; Reed & Aquino, 2003) and bolstered cooperative motivation (Aquino et al., 2009).

We further note that prosocial goal imitation by a dissociative group may also activate a sense of shared identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2014). Common Ingroup Identity Model proposes that establishing a common identity during intergroup contact will improve intergroup relations and enhances attitudes toward the out-group. Prosocial goal imitation by a dissociative group fostered a sense of shared membership within a broader social category (e.g., "volunteers"). This re-categorization led the imitated individual to recognize the dissociative group as co-contributors to a shared mission, thereby augmenting both perceived responsibility and cooperative intentions.

H_2: Perceived responsibility mediates the positive effect of prosocial goal imitation by dissociative group on imitated consumers' goal persistence and goal cooperation intentions.

2.4. The Moderating Role of Prosocial Goal Incentives

Organizations often use incentives to encourage long-term prosocial behavior. Research shows that reward type—especially symbolic ones—significantly impact people's intrinsic motivation and behavioral intention (Mehrotra & Roy, 2025; Pallak, Costomiris, Sroka, & Pittman, 1982). Symbolic rewards are those that signify social recognition and status (Mehrotra & Roy, 2025; Pallak et al., 1982). We propose that in prosocial goal contexts, symbolic incentives (e.g., honorific titles or branded gifts) strengthen a unique social identity, thereby transforming the social influence of dissociative group imitation.

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Prior research has shown that when an imitated product is central to an individual's self-identity, mimicry poses a significant psychological threat, triggering defensive responses and increased product abandonment (White & Argo, 2011). We extend the logic to the context of goal incentives, arguing that the form of the incentive determines the underlying psychological mechanism. When symbolic incentives are provided, imitation by a dissociative group triggers a need for identity distinctiveness, as individuals strive to protect their unique prosocial status. Conversely, when non-symbolic incentives are utilized, the same imitation fosters a perception of a common identity, as individuals recognize the dissociative group as partners in a shared cause. As a result, the positive effects of prosocial goal imitation will be attenuated by symbolic incentives but amplified by non-symbolic incentives.

H_3: The form of prosocial goal incentives moderates the positive effects of prosocial goal imitation by dissociative group.

H_{3a}: When a prosocial goal offers non-symbolic incentives, goal imitation by dissociative group will enhance consumers' goal persistence intentions and cooperation willingness.

H_{3b}: When a prosocial goal offers symbolic incentives, the positive effects of goal imitation by dissociative group will be attenuated or reversed.

The conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 1.

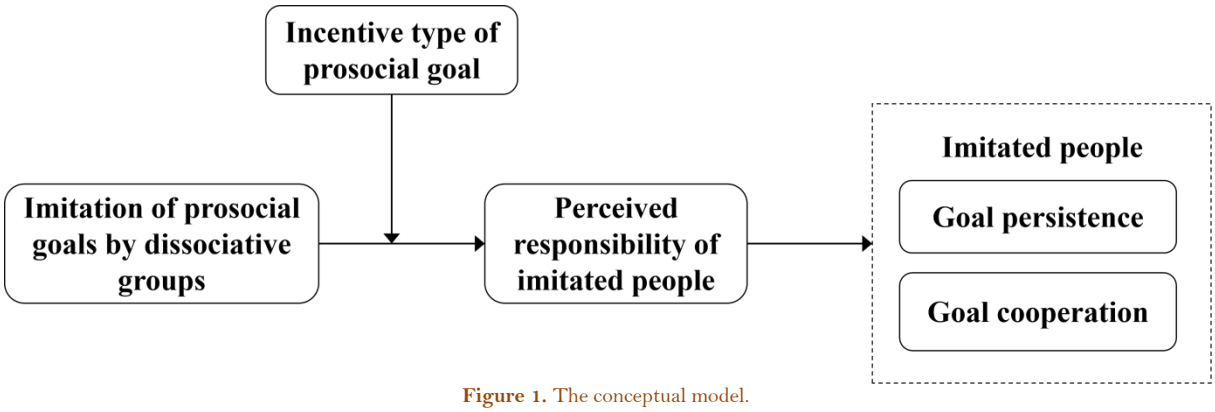

Figure 1. The conceptual model.

3. Studies 1A: The Main Effect

Study 1A provides the initial test of H1 by examining whether prosocial (vs. self-interested) goal imitation by a dissociative group influences the imitated consumer's goal persistence. The study was situated within the context of a real-world charity campaign, "Roche Children's Walk", with "extreme fans" serving as the dissociative reference group.

3.1. Method

Participants and design: A total of 170 participants were recruited online and randomly assigned to one of a 2 (goal type: self-interested vs. prosocial) × 2 (goal imitation by dissociative group: imitation vs. non-imitation) between-subjects conditions. The dependent variables were goal persistence intention. After excluding 13 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample comprised 157 participants (M_{age} = 27.96, SD = 5.04; 96 females).

Selection of Dissociative Groups: To identify suitable stimuli for the main studies, we conducted a pretest in which participants nominated several candidate groups. These groups were then evaluated across two key dimensions: avoidance intention and sense of belonging. Consistent with the definition of dissociative reference groups, "extreme fans" and "internet trolls"—both of which received high avoidance ratings and low belongingness scores—were selected for the subsequent studies.

Procedure: Participants were informed they would take part in a study on goal setting and were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. Participants in the self-interested goal condition were informed that Roche Pharmaceuticals had launched a public health initiative entitled "Roche Walk for health", which encouraged the public to engage in daily brisk walking to improve their personal health. Participants could redeem every 1,000 steps for 1 RMB in their individual health account, which could then be used to purchase health products on the Roche online mall. In the *prosocial goal* condition, participants read about "Roche Children's Walk", under which participants could redeem every 1,000 steps for a 1 RMB donation to the Child's Dream Foundation. All participants were invited to join the project and to set a specific daily step goal. To increase engagement, participants formed implementation intentions by specifying their planned walking frequency (days per week) and daily step targets.

Participants then imagined posting their goal on social media and receiving feedback from User A. In the non-imitation condition, User A merely mentioned pursuing independent goals. In the imitation condition, User A stated intention to mimic the participant's goal and join the same campaign, specifically requesting

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advice. Subsequently, all participants viewed User A's profile, which disclosed that User A was an "extreme fan" of a K-pop band, thereby priming User A's identity as a member of a dissociative group.

Measures: Goal persistence was measured with two items adapted from Etkin and Ratner (2012). "How committed are you to your fitness goal?", "How much effort are you willing to devote toward achieving your fitness goal?" on 7-point scales (1 = not at all committed, not a lot of effort, 7 = very committed, a lot of effort). Manipulation checks for goal imitation ("To what extent do you think A's goal was influenced by you?" and "To what extent do you think A set goal based on your goal?") were also included, followed by demographic questions.

3.2. Results

Manipulation check: A two-way ANOVA with goal type and goal imitation as factors confirmed that the manipulation of goal imitation was successful. Participants in the imitation condition reported a stronger sense of being mimicked by the dissociative group than those in the no-imitation condition ($M_{\text{non-imitation}} = 4.11$, $SD = 1.63$; $M_{\text{imitation}} = 5.05$, $SD = 1.25$; $F(1, 153) = 16.20$, $p < 0.001$).

Goal persistence: A 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed that neither the main effect of goal type ($F(1, 153) = 1.42$, $p > 0.10$) nor the main effect of goal imitation ($F(1, 153) = 2.62$, $p > 0.10$) was significant. However, the two-way interaction was significant ($F(1, 153) = 5.32$, $p < 0.05$). Simple effects analyses Figure 2 showed that for self-interested goals, goal imitation by the dissociative group had no significant effect on goal persistence ($M_{\text{non-imitation}} = 6.24$, $SD = 0.79$; $M_{\text{imitation}} = 6.15$, $SD = 0.66$; $p > 0.10$). In contrast, for prosocial goals, goal imitation by the dissociative group significantly increased goal persistence intention ($M_{\text{non-imitation}} = 5.81$, $SD = 0.96$; $M_{\text{imitation}} = 6.29$, $SD = 0.57$; $p < 0.01$). These results provide initial support for H1.

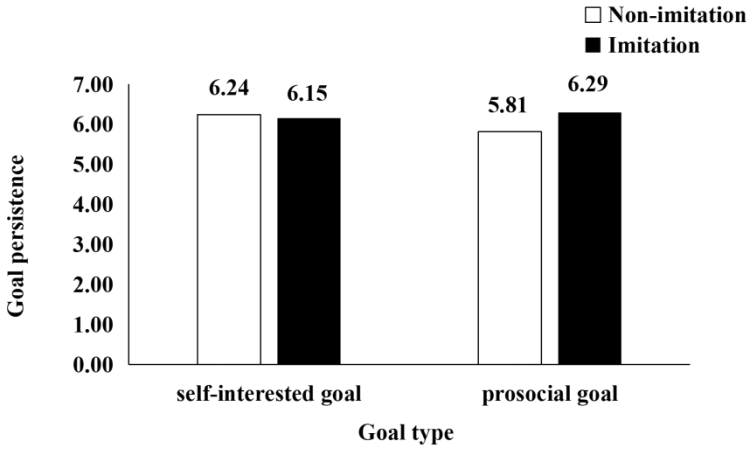

Figure 2. Effect of goal type and goal imitation in Study 1A.

3.3. Discussion

Study 1A demonstrates that the positive effect of dissociative group imitation on goal persistence is specific to the prosocial goal context. When the goal was self-interested, goal imitation did not trigger the anticipated defensive reactions. This context-specificity suggests that the phenomenon we identify is not a general imitation effect, but is instead unique to goals with a prosocial orientation. Subsequent studies focus exclusively on prosocial goal contexts.

4. Study 1B: The Main Effect

Study 1B replicated the findings of Study 1A in a different context, utilizing the 'Silver Angel' Project, a charitable initiative dedicated to supporting elderly individuals living alone. This study focused exclusively on prosocial goal context, while retaining "extreme fans" as the dissociative group.

4.1. Method

Participants and design: Study 1B employed a single-factor (prosocial goal imitation: imitation vs. non-imitation) between-subjects design. A total of 80 participants were recruited. After excluding 4 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample comprised 76 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 29.53$, $SD = 5.32$; 38 females).

Procedure: Participants were introduced to the "Silver Angel Plan"—a charitable initiative encouraging monthly donations to support elderly individuals living alone—and imagined themselves as donors. Participants specified a monthly donation amount, their intended duration of support, and the specific facet of the project they wished to prioritize, thereby formalizing a concrete prosocial goal.

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Participants next imagined sharing their goals on WeChat Moments and receiving feedback from User A. While User A only shared the post in the *non-imitation* condition, in the *imitation* condition, A declared an intention to adopt the same donation plan and participate together. Consistent with Study 1A, User A's profile was subsequently revealed, identifying the user as an "extreme fan" of a K-pop band.

Measures: Goal persistence and the manipulation check were identical to those used in Study 1A, followed by a final collection of demographic data.

4.2. Results

Manipulation check. A one-way ANOVA confirmed that participants in the imitation condition reported a stronger sense of being mimicked by the dissociative group than those in the non-imitation condition ($M_{non\text{-}imitation}$ = 4.25, SD = 1.58; $M_{imitation}$ = 5.67, SD = 0.80; $F(1, 74) = 23.55$, $p < 0.001$).

Goal persistence. A one-way ANOVA showed that prosocial goal imitation by the dissociative group significantly increased goal persistence intention ($M_{non\text{-}imitation}$ = 5.90, SD = 0.90; $M_{imitation}$ = 6.28, SD = 0.63; $F(1, 74) = 4.42$, $p < 0.05$), replicating the effect observed in Study 1A.

4.3. Discussion

Study 1B conceptually replicated the main effect, confirming its robustness across different prosocial scenarios. Study 1C extends these findings by exploring a new behavioral outcome—goal cooperation intentions—and testing the effect with a different dissociative group.

5. Study 1C: The Main Effect

Study 1C tests whether prosocial goal imitation by a dissociative group also increases imitated consumers' willingness to cooperate with the imitating group in goal-related activities. Study 1C utilized a distinct prosocial context—a book donation initiative for rural children entitled "Little Library"—and employed "internet trolls" as the dissociative group. Following March (2019) internet trolls are defined as individuals who deliberately incite conflict and distress through inflammatory, provocative, or menacing commentary and are widely recognized as antisocial online actors.

5.1. Method

Participants and design: Study 1C employed the same single-factor between-subjects design as Study 1B, with goal persistence and willingness to cooperate in goal pursuit as dependent variables. A total of 80 participants were recruited. After excluding 5 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample comprised 75 participants (M_{age} = 27.96, SD = 5.04; 43 females).

Procedure: Participants were introduced to the "Little Library" initiative—a project dedicated to donating and building libraries for children in rural areas, requiring participants to continuously donate children's books. Participants imagined themselves as donors, curated a list of books they deemed most essential for reading, and set a donation goal, specifying the number of books and the frequency for the year.

Participants then imagined sharing their goals on social media and receiving a comment from user K. In the *non-imitation* condition, K mentioned having recently set their own personal goals. In the *imitation* condition, K stated a desire to join the "Little Library" initiative, adopt the same donation goal, and asked for advice on how to participate. Participants were then presented with K's profile, which included a self-introduction revealing that K was an "internet trolls" who frequently incite and escalate online conflicts.

Measures: Goal persistence was measured with the same items as in Study 1B. Willingness to cooperate in goal pursuit was measured with two items: "I am willing to work with K to help promote the Little Library initiative" and "I am willing to participate with K in other charitable projects" (Janković & Čehajić-Clancy, 2021). The goal imitation manipulation check followed the same procedure as in Study 1A, and demographic information was collected at the end.

5.2. Results

Manipulation check: A one-way ANOVA confirmed that participants in the goal imitation condition reported a stronger sense of being mimicked by the dissociative group than those in the no-imitation condition ($M_{non\text{-}imitation}$ = 4.08, SD = 1.68; $M_{imitation}$ = 5.24, SD = 1.38; $F(1, 73) = 10.61$, $p < 0.01$).

Willingness to cooperate in goal pursuit: A one-way ANOVA revealed that participants in the goal imitation condition expressed significantly greater willingness to engage in goal cooperation with the dissociative group compared with those in the no-imitation condition ($M_{non\text{-}imitation}$ = 4.49, SD = 1.41; $M_{imitation}$ = 5.17, SD = 1.18; $F(1, 73) = 5.10$, $p < 0.05$).

5.3. Discussion

Study 1C demonstrates that prosocial goal imitation by a dissociative group not only enhances the imitated people's goal persistence (as shown in Studies 1A and 1B) but also increases their willingness to cooperate with the dissociative group in goal-related activities. Having established the main effect, Study 2 shifts the focus to investigating the underlying psychological mechanism.

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6. Study 2: The Mediating Role of Perceived Responsibility

Study 2 tested the mediating role of perceived responsibility (H2). We retain the prosocial goal scenario from Study 1B and use "extreme fans" as the dissociative group.

6.1. Method

Participants and design: Study 2 employed a single-factor (prosocial goal imitation: imitation vs. non-imitation) between-subjects design, with goal cooperation willingness as dependent variables. After excluding 12 participants who failed the attention check, the final sample comprised 78 participants (M_{age} = 26.82, SD = 5.41; 35 females).

Procedure: The procedures for goal activation, imitation manipulation, and dissociative group priming mirrored the procedures used in Study 1B.

Measures: Willingness to cooperate in goal pursuit were measured using the same items as in Study 1C. Perceived responsibility was assessed with three items adapted from Erlandsson et al. (2015). "I have a moral obligation to help to the best of my ability", "I have a personal responsibility to help as much as I can", "I have a duty to try to help". The goal imitation manipulation check and demographic questions followed.

6.2. Results

Manipulation check: A one-way ANOVA confirmed that participants in the goal imitation condition reported significantly higher perceived imitation ($M_{non\text{-}imitation}$ = 3.14, SD = 1.51; $M_{imitation}$ = 4.93, SD = 1.34; $F(1, 76) = 30.62$, $p < 0.001$).

Goal cooperation: A one-way ANOVA showed that prosocial goal imitation by the dissociative group significantly increased participants' willingness to cooperate with dissociative group ($M_{non\text{-}imitation}$ = 4.36, SD = 1.00; $M_{imitation}$ = 4.90, SD = 1.00; $F(1, 76) = 5.74$, $p < 0.05$).

Mediation analysis: We tested the mediating role of perceived responsibility using bootstrapped mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes (2012)), with prosocial goal imitation as the independent variable, perceived responsibility as the mediator, and willingness to cooperate as the dependent variable (n = 5,000 bootstrap samples). The indirect effect of goal imitation through perceived responsibility was significant (β = 0.18, 95% CI [0.0165, 0.4109]), providing support for H2. Specifically, prosocial goal imitation by the dissociative group boosted participants' sense of perceived responsibility, which in turn increased their willingness to cooperate with dissociative group.

6.3. Discussion

Study 2 identifies perceived responsibility as the mechanism underlying the prosocial goal imitation effect. When a dissociative group imitates a prosocial goal, it amplifies the individual's perceived impact and moral responsibility. This heightened sense of duty drives cooperation in goal pursuit, as individuals prioritize the shared cause over group-based prejudice.

7. Study 3: The Moderating Role of Prosocial Goal Incentives

Study 3 tests whether the type of prosocial goal incentive (symbolic versus non-symbolic) moderates the effect identified in Study 1 and 2 (H3). The procedures for goal activation, imitation manipulation, and dissociative group priming mirrored the procedures used in Study 1B and Study 2.

7.1. Method

Participants and design: Study 3 employed a 2 (incentive type: symbolic vs. non-symbolic) × 2 (goal imitation: imitation vs. non-imitation) between-subjects design, with goal persistence, willingness to cooperate in goal pursuit as dependent variables. After excluding 19 participants who failed the attention check or manipulation check, the final sample comprised 161 participants (M_{age} = 29.91, SD = 6.30; 112 females).

Procedure: Following the procedure in Study 1C and 2, participants were introduced to the "Little Library" initiative organized by One Foundation. They assumed the role of donors, curated a list of essential books, and established a one-year donation goal specifying both quantity and frequency.

The incentive manipulation followed, where participants were informed that One Foundation would reward donors for their sustained support. Specifically, after accumulating a requisite number of points, participants could redeem them for a face mask through the foundation's online reward mall. In the symbolic incentive condition, participants were presented with a customized face mask featuring the One Foundation's logo. To emphasize its symbolic value, participants were informed that the mask was exclusive to the program and unavailable for retail purchase. Conversely, in the non-symbolic incentive condition, participants saw a standard medical mask, devoid of any organizational branding or distinctive attributes.

The goal imitation manipulation followed the same procedure as in Study 2. Participants subsequently completed measures of goal persistence and willingness to cooperate in goal pursuit, followed by manipulation checks for incentive type (photo recognition task) and goal imitation (identical to Study 1A), and demographic questions.

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7.2. Results

Manipulation checks: For goal imitation, a 2 × 2 ANOVA confirmed that only the main effect of goal imitation was significant. Participants in the imitation condition reported significantly higher perceived imitation ($M_{\text{non-imitation}} = 4.70$, $SD = 1.57$; $M_{\text{imitation}} = 5.32$, $SD = 1.06$; $F(1, 157) = 8.58$, $p < 0.01$). The incentive type manipulation check (photo recognition) confirmed that participants accurately identified the incentive product.

Goal persistence: A 2 × 2 ANOVA revealed that neither the main effect of incentive type ($F(1, 157) = 0.56$, $p > 0.10$) nor the main effect of goal imitation ($F(1, 157) = 0.03$, $p > 0.10$) was significant. However, the two-way interaction was significant ($F(1, 157) = 7.12$, $p < 0.01$). Simple effects analyses (Figure 4) showed that for projects offering *non-symbolic* incentives, goal imitation by the dissociative group significantly enhanced goal persistence intention ($M_{\text{non-imitation}} = 5.88$, $SD = 0.94$; $M_{\text{imitation}} = 6.21$, $SD = 0.58$; $p < 0.05$). In contrast, for projects offering *symbolic* incentives, the positive effect was no longer significant ($M_{\text{non-imitation}} = 6.28$, $SD = 0.49$; $M_{\text{imitation}} = 5.99$, $SD = 0.80$; $p > 0.05$), providing support for H3a and H3b.

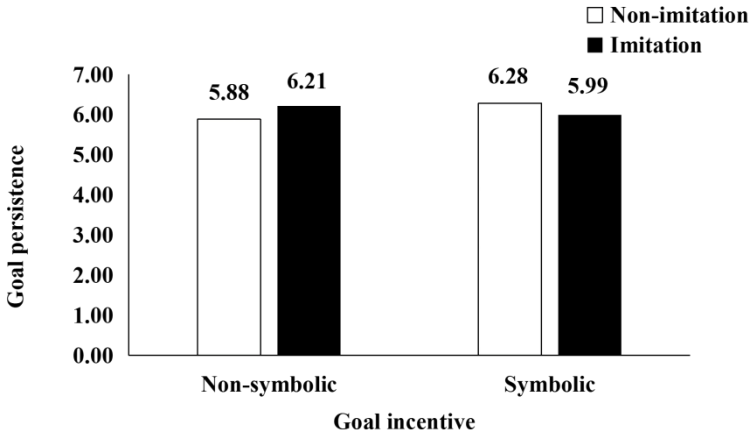

Figure 3. Effect of incentive type and goal imitation on goal persistence.

Goal cooperation: A 2 × 2 ANOVA showed that the main effects were not significant, while the interaction effect was marginally significant ($F(1, 157) = 3.45$, $p = 0.065$), consistent with the pattern observed for goal persistence.

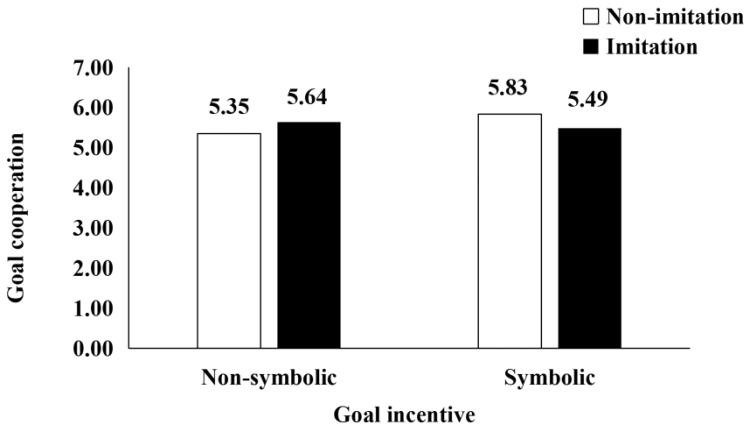

Figure 4. Effect of incentive type and goal imitation on goal cooperation.

Moderated mediation analysis: We tested the moderated mediation model using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes, 2012) with prosocial goal imitation as the independent variable, perceived responsibility as the mediator, incentive type as the moderator, and goal persistence intention as the dependent variable ($n = 5{,}000$ bootstrap samples). The index of moderated mediation was significant ($\beta = -0.27$, 95% CI [−0.5100, −0.0719]), indicating that the mediating role of perceived responsibility was moderated by incentive type. When non-symbolic incentives were offered, the indirect effect of goal imitation on persistence through perceived responsibility was significant ($\beta = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.0242, 0.3445]). Specifically, imitation by the dissociative group improved perceived responsibility, which in turn increased persistence in prosocial

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commitment. When symbolic incentives were offered, however, the indirect effect disappeared (β = -0.10, 95% CI [−0.2439, 0.0204]).

A moderated mediation analysis with willingness to cooperate as the dependent variable yielded a consistent pattern: the index of moderated mediation was significant (β = −0.22, 95% CI [−0.5253, −0.0235]). When non-symbolic incentives were offered, the indirect effect was significant (β = 0.14, 95% CI [0.0080, 0.3614]). When prosocial goals were imitated by a dissociative group, imitated individuals experienced heightened perceived responsibility, which in turn increased their willingness to cooperate in the shared prosocial endeavor. When symbolic incentives were offered, the indirect effect disappeared (β = −0.08, 95% CI [−0.2294, 0.0187]).

7.3. Discussion

Our findings in Study 3 revealed that the benefits of goal imitation depend on the type of incentive. When the reward is non-symbolic, imitation by a dissociative group creates a sense of shared identity, which boosts perceived responsibility and encourages people to stay committed and cooperative. However, symbolic incentives shift attention from a shared identity to personal distinctiveness. This focus on individual concerns inhibits the cooperative mechanism, thereby nullifying the positive effects found in our earlier studies.

8. General Discussion

The present research investigates the facilitating effects, underlying mechanisms, and boundary conditions of prosocial goal imitation by dissociative groups. Across five studies using multiple prosocial goal scenarios and two distinct dissociative groups, we consistently find that when a dissociative group imitates one's prosocial goal, the imitated individual exhibits greater goal persistence and increased willingness to cooperate with the dissociative group—a phenomenon we term the *prosocial goal imitation effect*. Study 1A established that this positive effect is specific to the prosocial goal context: when the imitated goal was self-interested, the effect did not emerge. Using different scenarios and groups, Studies 1B and 1C provided additional support for the observed effect, extending the findings from goal persistence to cooperation intentions. Study 2 identified perceived responsibility as the underlying mediator, showing that imitation by a dissociative group increases perceived responsibility and thereby fosters greater goal cooperation. Study 3 demonstrated the moderating role of goal incentive. Specifically, symbolic incentives activate identity-related concerns, which in turn attenuate the positive effect of prosocial goal imitation.

8.1. Theoretical Contributions

The present research makes several contributions to relevant literature. First, it extends the literature on imitation behavior. Prior work has largely focused on positive effect of imitation, showing that the incidental mimicry of verbal cues, postures, expressions, and movements can facilitate interpersonal interaction (Bailenson & Yee, 2005; Drimalla, Landwehr, Hess, & Dziobek, 2019; Kulesza, Szypowska, Jarman, & Dolinski, 2014). Conversely, White and Argo (2011) identified the negative impact of possession imitation on the imitated consumer in the context of product adoption. The present research positions prosocial goal imitation as a distinct phenomenon, involving behaviors that unfold over time and are central to an individual's self-concept. Whereas consumers may readily switch to an alternative when a product is imitated, goal abandonment is psychologically much harder, as giving up a goal is often seen as a personal failure. By demonstrating that prosocial goal imitation by a dissociative group can foster motivation rather than trigger threat, the present research uncovers a previously overlooked positive facet of social influence in goal-pursuit contexts.

Second, prior research has largely emphasized the negative consequences of dissociative groups, including social identity threat and reduced brand purchase intentions (White & Dahl, 2006, 2007). In contrast, while some work has examined positive influence through competition (Winterich & Zhang, 2014) the present research adopts a cooperative lens. We find that when a dissociative group imitates prosocial goals, it elicits imitated people's positive responses—specifically, an increased willingness to help and cooperate with dissociative group. These findings reveal that mimicry from a dissociative source can drive intergroup cooperation, leading individuals to temporarily override prejudice and hostility in favor of shared altruistic goals and mutual benefit.

Finally, the present research extends the literature on goal incentives. Prior research has examined how incentive types influence individual goal pursuit behavior (Anderson, Dekker, & Sedatole, 2010). We contribute by showing that incentive type also determines how consumers respond to social information about goal pursuit. Specifically, symbolic incentives heighten individuals' sensitivity to social cues, such as imitation. These findings provide a more sophisticated perspective on how the interplay between incentive type and social context determines goal-directed behavior.

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8.2. Managerial Implications

The present findings offer actionable insights for charitable organizations, social enterprises, and corporations managing prosocial initiatives.

First, prosocial goal imitation by dissociative groups can be strategically leveraged to counteract moral licensing effects. When donors experience a motivational dip—often following an initial surge of prosocial activity—mimicry from a dissociative source can serve as a rejuvenating stimulus. To capitalize on this, organizations may consider two approaches: (a) strategic disclosure—encouraging dissociative groups to participate in identical projects and communicating this involvement to the primary donor base; and (b) narrative-based advertising—embedding storylines in which dissociative groups adopt target goals, thereby triggering a sense of responsibility and sustained engagement among the audience.

Second, these findings highlight the potential for prosocial initiatives to facilitate intergroup reconciliation. By fostering a shared mission, organizations can transform adversarial dynamics into collaborative ones.

Disseminating information about shared goal pursuit enables organizations to bridge group divides, encouraging conflicting parties to prioritize collective welfare over longstanding biases.

Third, managers must exercise judicious design of incentive structures. Our research establishes that reward form serves as a critical boundary condition. For broad-based campaigns targeting diverse or conflicting audiences, organizations should prioritize non-symbolic, functional rewards.

Symbolic or identity-marked incentives should be avoided in these contexts, as they may inadvertently re-activate identity threats and neutralize the benefits of mimicry.

8.3. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this study suggest productive avenues for future research. First, the proposed mechanism of shared identity requires direct empirical verification. Future work should test whether cognitive re-categorization into a superordinate group mediates the relationship between goal imitation and responsibility. Second, our findings are limited to human-centered prosocial goals.

Since vulnerable human beneficiaries may uniquely attenuate bias through empathy, future research should explore whether these effects hold for nature-oriented or environmental causes. Finally, we measured intentions rather than actual behaviors. To address the "intention-action gap", subsequent studies should utilize objective metrics, such as field data or actual donation records, to confirm that prosocial goal imitation leads to observable behavioral changes.

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