

Moral Disengagement and The Effect on Cyberbullying Among Adolescents and Young Adults

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Abstract. Cyberbullying is a complex occurrence in which its damages are widely studied upon. However, few have analyzed the complex intrinsic correlations between cyberbullying and the concept of moral disengagement that originated from developmental psychology, especially upon influences of moral disengagement on cyberbullying. Hence, this paper aims to do so through summarizing the influences of relationship factors on moral disengagement, and analyzing the internal and external mechanisms of cyberbullying impacted by moral disengagement. Specifically, peer norms deeply affect adolescents and young adults' perspectives on society and morality through pressuring and responsibility-shifting, hence supporting the action of cyberbullying. Furthermore, moral disengagement could support cyberbullying through forming in-groups and out-groups, changing the way of internalization of cyberbullying perpetration, providing justification for cyberbullying, and etc. Through examining this topic, the reduction and prevention of cyberbullying could be supported. In addition, the analysis could help understand the level of impact that societal relationships have on adolescents and young adults' view of moral behaviors and decisions.

Keywords: Moral disengagement; Cyberbullying; Mechanism analysis; Intergroup bias.

1. Introduction

As technology and the internet advance with time, many downsides are born alongside the benefits, with cyberbullying being one of these downsides. Elizabeth Hutson provided a few defining attributes for cyberbullying — the intention to harm, repetition of aggressive acts, perceived harm, power differences, anonymity, and the ubiquitous nature of internet [1]. The behavior brings malicious effects to both victims and society in general. A possible explanation for the occurrence of cyberbullying is moral disengagement — a concept that was first introduced and specifically defined by Albert Bandura. The theory contains several mechanisms, which some of them will be elaborated upon future paragraphs; those mechanisms in question can be used to provide perpetrators with both internal and external reasonings behind their actions, in order to alleviate emotions such as guilt and remorse for the victims [2]. Despite having definitions on what moral disengagement consists of, the topic of self-agency when it comes to moral disengagement is yet to be discussed thoroughly and specifically. Thus, this paper aims to examine how moral disengagement is influenced by external relationships and how it is utilized in cyberbullying amongst adolescents and young adults. Peer influences on moral disengagement of adolescents and young adults will be examined initially, then moving on to the ways that moral disengagement enacts in cyberbullying both intrinsically and extrinsically for adolescents and young adults, and finally a discussion of how cyberbullying could potentially be reduced with more in-depth scrutiny of moral disengagement and modern policies. In this essay, several sources regarding the topic shall be discussed and analyzed. In the recent decade, many researches emerged and focused on the causes and effects of cyberbullying, especially among adolescents and young adults. Peer pressure has been identified by researchers as a significant influence of cyberbullying, as peer pressure could easily and effectively affect individuals with lower moral competence, which is also inversely related to bullying behavior, as discovered by Doehne et al [3]. In addition, moral disengagement played a mediating role within the process according to Yang [4], as cyberbullying and the proneness of moral disengagement are positively correlated even if the morality behind cyberbullying was understood by the perpetrators, as Bussey et al has concluded [5]. Due to the moral disengagement, adolescents and young adults could easily internalize the act of

cyberbullying, through many mechanisms of moral disengagement. Including ways of forming in-groups, out-groups, and bystander groups as discovered by Sarmiento et al [6], adolescents and young adults could avoid the guilt and responsibilities brought by cyberbullying perpetration, which will be elaborated in future paragraphs. Thus, with the support of the aforementioned references, the correlation of moral disengagement and cyberbullying shall be analyzed. Although cyberbullying is an inevitable feature of the internet, through analyzing how moral disengagement takes place in the act, the reasoning behind it could be understood, in hope for solutions of cyberbully prevention. Meanwhile, the psychology of adolescents and young adults' minds could be analyzed and identify the level of influence that peer relationships have on them, especially in terms of their decisions and behaviors.

2. Peer Pressure Influence Factors of Moral Disengagement

Peers are one of the most important influential relationships on adolescents and young adults, as peer pressure is an important factor in leading them to do things they may or may not want to do. As analyzed by Yang et al., when adolescents first develop their moral disengagement skills, they usually do so by interacting with the social environments around them, in which the interactions would be influenced by adolescents' perception of "the outside world" [4]. Therefore, in such state, peer context would be useful for adolescents to develop said perceptions. Through Yang et al.'s following research, they have discovered that peer pressure acted as a predictor of the contingency of cyberbullying with moral disengagement acting as subsidy, due to peer pressure turning perpetrating behaviors into normative ones and stressing adolescents into acting upon them as a basis of moral standards [4]. This becomes a part of moral disengagement and corresponds to its mechanisms. As defined by Bandura, blame attribution is a significantly influential device within his moral disengagement theory. It occurs when an individual shifts the blame on to others for forcing them to do harmful acts, rather than their own will, and that they believe they are innocent [2]. In this case, when a person is peer pressured into cyberbullying, they could attribute the blame on to their peers in order to justify their actions. Additionally, as concluded by Squicciarini's study, when a young adult on the internet sends a cyberbullying post with no past history of cyberbullying would be the result of a shift in behavior [7]. Though specific reasoning behind such shift is unknown, it would be reasonable to infer that peer pressure could potentially play a role in it, due to the sudden aspect of it. Therefore, through examining the way that peers could cause adolescents (along with young adults) to cyberbully, the significant role that moral disengagement plays in the process is shown.

3. The Mechanism of Moral Evasion Affecting Cyberbullying

3.1. Internal Mechanisms

Several mechanisms of the moral disengagement theory could be taking place when the internalization of cyberbullying occurs. Typically, after cyberbullying takes place, the perpetrator must internally justify the reasoning behind their actions due to their morality shifting toward the victim's side, hence distortion of consequences would be used as a resolution. Through minimizing or being inattentive to the actual damage being done to the victim, the perpetrator would become self-justified, hence negative emotions such as guilt would not appear as they believed they have done nothing wrong [8]. As this self-righteousness has been enhanced, the perpetrator would rely more on cyberbullying because the severity of the problem has been twisted into a sense of self-regulated correctness. Meanwhile, another mechanism that perpetrators could use would be moral justification. As the mechanism's label implies, perpetrators could use it to perceive their actions as "personally and socially acceptable", due to how these actions would supposed bring out utilitarian purposes in terms of morals [9]. This mechanism, too, allows perpetrators to internalize their actions as pure justice, although it does not involve disregarding said actions' repercussions. In Bussey's study, the researchers studied the connections formed between cyberbullying and moral disengagement

amongst adolescent students with self-efficacy as a contributing factor [5]; within the study, they discovered that higher self-efficacy beliefs and higher utilizations of concepts within moral disengagement were related to elevated rates of the students' cyberbullying [4]. Though self-efficacy is not completely related to moral disengagement, however, through using moral justification, perpetrators would believe that their actions (in which they're solely responsible for) are completely justified, leading to the same goals of self-efficacy. In the study, most of the participants disagreed with cyberbullying, and believed that the act was immoral and unacceptable [5]. While the opinion itself is morally justifiable, however, when provided with the basis of moral disengagement, people would be less aware of the severity of their actions. Thus, when they start to justify their actions using moral justification after the act has already been carried out, the previously mentioned distortion of consequences would also be utilized to reduce guilt. Therefore, when discussing the internalization of the perpetrators' mindset, many mechanisms belonging to moral disengagement should be taken into account, hence showing the importance of the connection between moral disengagement and cyberbullying.

3.2. External Mechanisms

After examining the moral disengagement's impact on internalization process of cyberbullying, the externalization must be examined as well. According to the moral disengagement theory as described by Bandura, one of its important components is the dehumanization process. Dehumanization involves removing people of their humanity, hence becoming objects that are inferior to "normal" human beings — this would morally justify any perpetrations toward them, because their humanity is lost [2]. This process could be made easier in the cyberbullying context, as no face-to-face connections are made, and it's easier to ignore the other person behind the screen because of the feature of anonymity on the internet. Due to such dehumanization, people would start categorizing others into different groups, such as those that agree with their opinions and those who do not, allowing the grouping effect to take place. As people are likely to use group norms as standards of their opinions on given subjects and objects, this phenomenon helps create in-groups and out-groups in terms of opinions [6]. Thus, the out-groups are more likely to become the targets of dehumanization, especially when active, hostile contradictions occur. Without morality's constraints, there is an elevated chance for people to act upon their feelings (including more extreme ones) [7], hence supporting the growth of internet hostility and cyberbullying.

When an internet conflict occurs, other than the in-groups and out-groups, the bystander group also exists. Research done by Sarmiento et al. showed that several different types of bystander groups existed, but types in which the bystanders choosing to defend the victim group were rare. This could be resorted to the diffusion of responsibilities — also a key component of moral disengagement — where the bystanders could diffuse responsibilities amongst all groups [6], hence enabling the perpetrating group to continue the cyberbullying while the bystanders themselves were not actively hostile toward the victim group [10]. Combined altogether, the externalization of responsibilities and morality through different moral disengagement techniques would support cyberbullying, especially through the formation of different invisible groups

4. Limitations and Future Outlooks

Some limitations exist for the findings of this paper. Peers, while being an important social relationship for adolescents and young adults and a significantly influential factor in affecting moral disengagement, there are other relationships that could have similar effects. As an example, family members of adolescents and young adults could also have an impact on their moral disengagement. For the scope of this essay, these relationships are not elaborated upon. However, it is still notable to mention these relationships, as they also serve importance. In addition, other individualized factors exist that may influence the level of impact that moral disengagement has on the occurrence of cyberbullying, such as age, gender, and personality of the individual that would affect the possibility

of them committing the perpetration. However, as these characteristics could vary from individual to individual, this would be another topic of discussion beyond this paper.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, there are many factors that may influence moral disengagement's presence, with peer pressure being one of such factors, where peer norms could lead to individuals committing cyberbullying while being aware of the morality behind the act. These factors also affect the mutually impacting relationship between cyberbullying and moral disengagement. In order to comprehensively analyze the reasoning behind cyberbullying's occurrence, moral disengagement cannot be dismissed as a contributing factor. Much of its mechanics are applicable towards cyberbullying, such as moral justification, attribution of blame, dehumanization, and etc., providing various forms of moral reasoning and emotional relief for the perpetration. Therefore, through analyzing how moral disengagement could lead to cyberbullying, the minds of adolescents and young adults could be better understood and contribute to the overall cause of intervention of cyberbullying perpetration. Some proposals of such reduction methods are elaborated upon at the end of the paper, aligning with the previous mechanics, should be considered when further examining the issue of cyberbullying.

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