

Mediating role of moral disengagement in the perpetration of cyberbullying by victims and bystanders

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Abstract

Introduction: Proliferation of internet use in adolescence has resulted in an increase in cyberbullying. Previous experiences of cyber victimization and cyber bystanding are commonly linked with cyberbullying perpetration, allowing the bullying cycle to persist. Moral disengagement is one factor that may facilitate victims and bystanders to later perpetrate cyberbullying. The process occurs through enlistment of justificatory strategies to enable individuals to perpetrate without feeling remorse. The present study investigates the potential role of moral disengagement in the perpetration of cyberbullying by victims and bystanders.

Methods: Young people ($N = 563$, $M_{age} = 13.52$, $SD = 1.04$) recruited from Australian schools completed a cross-sectional self-report survey comprising of validated measures of moral disengagement, and involvement in cyberbullying across different roles (perpetration, victimization, and bystanding).

Results: Findings indicated that moral disengagement significantly mediated the link between victimization and perpetration, and between bystanding and perpetration. Specifically, victims and bystanders engage in cyber perpetration through enlisting moral disengagement strategies.

Conclusions: Moral disengagement may, therefore, be one factor that mediates the association between cyber victimization and cyber bystanding, and cyber perpetration. Understanding mechanisms by which victims and bystanders engage in perpetration have implications for supporting victims and bystanders in antibullying strategies to minimize the occurrence of cyber perpetration.

KEYWORDS

bystanding, cyberbullying, mediation, moral disengagement, victimization

1 | INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying is a problematic behavior that affects a significant proportion of adolescents. It is often associated with physical and psychological distress experienced by victims (Camerini et al., 2020; Marciano et al., 2020). Given the deleterious effects of cyberbullying on adolescent wellbeing, it is crucial to investigate factors that enable cyberbullying perpetration to minimize its frequency and its recurrence. One factor associated with cyberbullying and is increasingly being examined in this context is moral disengagement. This phenomenon allows perpetrators of cyberbullying to aggress without feeling remorse by detaching moral standards from immoral behavior (Bandura, 2002, 2016). The process occurs through the enlistment of a selection of eight moral disengagement mechanisms that fall within four loci: moral justification of the behavior, euphemistic labeling, or advantageous comparison with more harmful conduct (*behavior locus*); displacing or diffusing responsibility amongst a group of people (*agency locus*); distorting consequences (*outcome locus*); and blame attribution and

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dehumanization (*victim* locus) (Bandura, 2001). By employing these mechanisms, perpetrators can engage in increasingly harmful behaviors with little censure, therefore increasing recurrence of cyberbullying.

Moral disengagement is not only used by perpetrators of cyberbullying, but also by others involved in the bullying dynamic (Killer et al., 2019). Considering the strong, positive correlation between cyber perpetration and other forms of cyberbullying involvement such as victimization and bystanding (e.g., Allison & Bussey, 2017), it is possible that moral disengagement is associated with these participants in the cyberbullying episode. Specifically, positive relationships between victimization and moral disengagement may explain why some victims become perpetrators. Similarly, bystanders may observe bullying episodes without intervening, thus implicitly condoning the behavior through employing moral disengagement mechanisms. Moral disengagement may therefore provide a bridge between both victimization and bystanding and cyberbullying perpetration. The aim of the present study is thus to investigate the mediating role of moral disengagement in the association between victims and bystanders with perpetration in cyber space.

1.2 | Moral disengagement in the perpetration of cyberbullying

Moral disengagement is part of the agentic social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), which posits bidirectional relationships between personal, societal, and behavioral factors within a triadic model. It occurs through the detachment of moral standards from personal sanctions, allowing bullies to aggress without feelings of remorse. Substantial research investigating the link between moral disengagement and bullying perpetration has shown that bullies report high levels of moral disengagement in offline and cyber contexts (Gini et al., 2014; Killer et al., 2019). Although the influence of moral disengagement in traditional and cyberbullying is comparable, the processes through which it influences bullying may differ. Specifically, cyberbullying differs from traditional forms of bullying as the platform allows for rapid proliferation of harmful content associated with a lack of social censure around reprimandable conduct. This occurrence suggests that many of the social restraints associated with traditional bullying are not present for cyberbullying, enhancing the personal regulatory factors in the linkage between cyberbullying and morality. The possibility of anonymity in the cyber context also enables the behaviors to be removed from social restraints that are present in traditional bullying contexts. The cyber context therefore enhances the role of personal regulatory factors, thereby increasing the potential influence of moral disengagement mechanisms.

It is, therefore, proposed that moral disengagement is as implicated in cyber perpetration as it is in the perpetration of traditional bullying. As with traditional bullying, it is important to consider other participants in the bullying episode apart from the perpetrator. Cyber perpetration is strongly linked with other bullying roles, with longitudinal studies showing that cyber victimization and bystanding predict future perpetration (Holfeld & Mishna, 2019). A key factor that linking interconnection between these different roles may be moral disengagement mechanisms.

1.3 | Mediating role of moral disengagement

Moral disengagement is not only utilized by perpetrators of cyberbullying, but also by victims (Killer et al., 2019). The function of moral disengagement for victims, however, remains unclear. One reason may be that increased exposure to bullying through victimization results in desensitization, allowing greater justification of bullying behavior despite contrasting with personal moral standards. Indeed, studies have identified that moral disengagement mediates the association between early experiences of maltreatment and cyber perpetration (Wang et al., 2017, 2020). These findings provide preliminary evidence that victims' moral disengagement may also mediate future enactment of bullying.

It is also important to recognize the co-occurrence of bullying and victimization, where adolescents often report having perpetrated and been victims of cyberbullying (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2020). Consistent with this view, Quintana-Orts and Rey (2018) reported victimization to be a strong predictor of future bullying behavior. It is therefore plausible that moral disengagement is a key mediator in driving victims to perpetrate bullying despite having first-hand experiences of the negative consequences associated with victimization. While there is substantial research indicating that bullies and victims endorse moral disengagement mechanisms, the question as to whether moral disengagement extends to other bullying roles is less understood.

Specifically, bullying does not only occur within a perpetrator-victim dyad. The behavior often occurs in the presence of witnesses who may either intervene or remain passive during the incident. Bystanders play a significant role in enabling bullying behavior. Due to high peer acceptance of inaction in cyberbullying, bystanders receive little encouragement from their environment to defend cyber victims (DeSmet et al., 2012). Overtime, those who are continually exposed to bullying may be desensitized to the behavior (Pabian et al., 2016), which is associated with greater propensity to endorse moral disengagement mechanisms and enacting bullying behaviors. It is therefore plausible for bystanders to also endorse moral disengagement mechanisms. Indeed, studies have demonstrated that greater exposure to cyberbullying incidents as a

bystander is related to greater future perpetration of cyberbullying (Holfeld & Mishna, 2019). This occurrence is problematic especially in considering the ease with which harmful content may be shared through online spaces and the potential for a significant number of bystanders to view cyberbullying incidents, as compared with the fewer number of bystanders in offline “traditional” bullying.

Moral disengagement may therefore be a mechanism that is implicated in cyber perpetration by victims and bystanders. Establishing the mediational role of moral disengagement in cyber victimization and bystanding, and its impact on cyber perpetration is therefore crucial in understanding the factors that lead to the association of bullying-related behaviors with perpetration. In turn, clarifying these relationships will provide important information to guide future interventions aiming to minimize moral disengagement in victims and bystanders, and therefore, minimizing occurrence of cyberbullying.

1.4 | Present study

The present study aims to assess the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between cyber victimization and bystanding with cyber perpetration. It was first hypothesized that moral disengagement will mediate the link between cyber victimization and perpetration. Specifically, increased moral disengagement in victims will be associated with higher levels of cyber perpetration. It was further expected that moral disengagement would mediate the link between cyber bystanding and perpetration in a similar manner, where higher levels of cyber bystanding are associated with higher levels of moral disengagement, which in turn results in higher levels of cyber perpetration.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

A total of 563 participants in Grade 7 (138 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 12.73$ years, $SD = 0.37$) and Grade 9 (84 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 14.72$ years, $SD = 0.36$) were recruited from five independent schools across New South Wales, Australia. The sample was predominantly of Anglo/Celtic (53%) descent, followed by European (12.8%), and East/South-East Asian (7.5%), and from middle to upper class backgrounds (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016).

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Cyberbullying roles

Involvement in cyber perpetration and victimization were assessed with the Cyberbullying Questionnaire (Gómez-Guadix et al., 2014). Items from these measures were adapted to additionally assess cyber bystanding (Allison & Bussey, 2017). The measures ascertain students' frequency of cyberbullying involvement, measured with 14 items for each of the roles: perpetration (e.g., “I posted links of humiliating images for other people to see”); and bystanding (e.g., “I saw other kids sending threatening or insulting messages”), and 9-items for victimization (e.g., “other people have deliberately excluded me from an online group”). All items were measured on a 6-point Likert (1 = *it hasn't happened at all* to 6 = *many times a week*), and total scores were obtained through averaging items within each cyberbullying role. Internal consistency for the perpetration measure was 0.79. For bystanding, α was .93. For victimization, α was .75.

Participants were categorized as “pure” bullies, “pure” victims, or bystanders if they reported three or more experiences of cyberbullying in the last school term. Bully/victims reported at least three incidences of perpetration and three experiences of victimization. In this sample, 4.1% were pure bullies, 13.9% were pure victims, 7.3% were bully/victims, 23.8% were bystanders, and 51% were uninvolved.

2.2.2 | Moral disengagement

Items from the Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura et al., 1996) were reworded to reflect the cyberbullying context. The measure consisted of 16-items, which mapped onto the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement (e.g., distortion of consequences: “it is okay to cyberbully because it doesn't really do any harm”). Students rated their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A total score was obtained through summing the score for each item. In this study, internal consistency was 0.91.

2.3 | Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained by the authors' Human Research Ethics Committee. Consent from school principals and parents were obtained, and students provided active consent before survey completion. Questionnaires were completed during Term 2 of the school year under the supervision of a teacher or researcher. After reading an information and consent form, participants answered basic demographic data and read a standard definition of cyberbullying, as sourced from (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). The above measures were then administered in one of two, counterbalanced formats.

2.4 | Data management

Missing data from individual items ranged from 0% to 7.4%. Items were imputed using the expectation-maximization procedure in SPSS. This approach was selected as it is deemed the preferred method when imputing data that is not entirely missing at random in a linear model (Schafer & Graham, 2002). All forms of cyberbullying involvement were positively skewed. To account for skewness, variables were bootstrapped before analyses. The transformation aided with but did not entirely resolve non-normality. A linear mixed modeling procedure was also conducted to examine potential clustering effects of responses within schools. These analyses revealed that the random factor of school was not significant, and school was, therefore, not accounted for in the analyses.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Data analytic strategy

Results are presented in three parts. First, descriptive statistics and correlations between all variables (perpetration, victimization, bystanding, and moral disengagement) are presented. Next, two series of multiple regressions examining the relationships between cyber victimization and cyber bystanding on the outcome variable, cyber perpetration, through moral disengagement, while controlling for grade and gender are shown. Each series of regressions consist of three models. The first model involves examining the direct effect of the predictor variable on cyber perpetration. The second model assesses the effect of the predictor variable on the mediator, moral disengagement. The third model includes all three variables and investigates the indirect effect of the predictor on cyber perpetration, while moral disengagement is taken into account. Finally, these results are presented in a graphical format depicting the mediational relationship between the variables of interest.

3.2 | Descriptive statistics

Estimated marginal means and standard errors for all variables are presented in Table 1. Partial Pearson's correlations controlling for grade and gender are shown in Table 2. Correlational analyses revealed that the cyberbullying roles (perpetration, victimization, and bystanding) were significantly and positively correlated. Furthermore, all roles were positively linked with moral disengagement.

3.3 | Mediating effect of moral disengagement

To examine if moral disengagement mediated the relationship between cyber victimization and cyber perpetration, and between cyber bystanding and cyber perpetration, two separate mediational analyses were conducted in line with

TABLE 1 Estimated marginal means and standard errors

Variables	Grade 7	Grade 9	<i>F</i>	Male	Female	<i>F</i>	Total <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Perpetration	14.72 (0.14)	15.30 (0.17)	6.78**	15.15 (0.14)	14.86 (0.17)	1.73	14.98 (2.54)
Victimization	10.48 (0.15)	10.55 (0.19)	0.08	10.42 (0.15)	10.61 (0.19)	0.60	10.49 (2.79)
Bystanding	17.99 (0.48)	20.70 (0.59)	12.73**	19.02 (0.47)	19.68 (0.60)	0.76	19.00 (8.72)
MD	21.66 (0.45)	22.61 (0.56)	1.79	23.25 (0.44)	21.02 (0.56)	9.77**	22.27 (8.15)

** $p \leq .01$.

TABLE 2 Partial correlations between cyberbullying roles and moral disengagement

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Cyber perpetration	–	0.39**	0.35**	0.32**
2. Cyber victimization		–	0.51**	0.17**
3. Cyber bystanding			–	0.18**
4. Moral disengagement				–

** $p \leq .01$.**TABLE 3** Effect of cyber victimization and moral disengagement on cyber perpetration

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>
Grade	0.62	3.11**	1.23	1.79	0.52	2.71**
Gender	–0.30	–1.48	–2.02	–2.92**	–0.13	–0.68
Cyber victimization	0.36	10.13**	0.45	3.72**	0.32	9.34**
Moral disengagement	–	–	–	–	0.08	6.90**
R^2	0.18		0.04		0.24	
<i>F</i>	38.41**		8.46**		43.11**	

Note: The dependent variable of Model 2 is moral disengagement. Grade was coded 0 = Grade 7, 1 = Grade 9. Gender was coded 0 = males, 1 = females.

** $p \leq .01$.

Hayes (2018). All analyses were conducted using the Preacher and Hayes (2004) bootstrap method through the PROCESS macros in SPSS. Each analysis involved three regressions: Model 1 examined the total effect of the independent variable (cyber victimization or cyber bystanding) on the outcome variable (cyber perpetration); Model 2 assessed the indirect effects of the independent variable on the mediator (moral disengagement); and Model 3 examined the direct effect of the independent variable on the outcome variable when accounting for the mediator.

3.3.1 | Moral disengagement in victimization and perpetration

The first series of multiple regressions assessed the mediational link of moral disengagement in the relationship between cyber victimization and perpetration. All regressions controlled for grade and gender. Each model is shown in Table 3. In Model 1, cyber victimization was significantly associated with cyber perpetration, where higher reported victimization was associated with a higher frequency of cyberbullying. Grade was also a significant variable in this model, where Grade 9 students reported higher levels of perpetration than Grade 7 students. In Model 2, cyber victimization was significantly linked with moral disengagement, where greater victimization was linked with a higher tendency to morally disengage. Significant effects of gender were identified, where males tended to report higher moral disengagement than did females. In Model 3, cyber victimization and moral disengagement were significantly and positively linked with cyber perpetration. As with Model 1, Grade 9 reported greater cyber perpetration than did Grade 7 students. A small indirect effect of victimization on perpetration was observed ($b = 0.04$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.01, 0.08]), which mediated 11% of the total effect. Moral disengagement therefore partially mediated the link between cyber victimization and cyber perpetration (see Figure 1).

3.3.2 | Moral disengagement in bystanding and perpetration

The second series of multiple regressions assessed the mediational link of moral disengagement in the relationship between cyber bystanding and perpetration. All regressions controlled for grade and gender. Each of the three models are shown in Table 4.

In Model 1, cyber bystanding was positively associated with cyber perpetration. In Model 2, cyber bystanding was significantly linked with moral disengagement. Grade and gender effects were also observed, where participants who were in Grade 9 and male reported a higher tendency to morally disengage than did those in Grade 7 and female. In Model 3, cyber bystanding and moral disengagement were significantly linked with cyber perpetration. The indirect effect of cyber

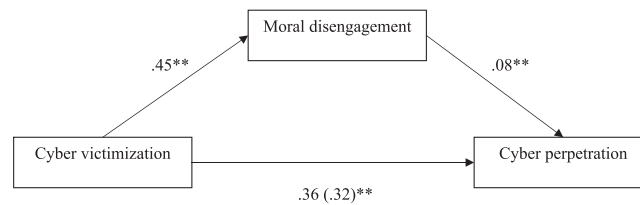


FIGURE 1 Mediating role of moral disengagement in cyber victimization and cyber perpetration. ** $p \leq .01$

TABLE 4 Effect of cyber bystanding and moral disengagement on cyber perpetration

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>
Grade	0.37	1.80	0.79	1.14*	0.31	1.55
Gender	-0.29	-1.43	-2.05	-2.98**	-0.13	-0.64
Cyber bystanding	0.10	8.78**	0.17	4.36**	0.09	7.75**
Moral disengagement					0.08	6.73**
R^2	0.14		0.05		0.20	
<i>F</i>	29.76**		10.20**		35.42**	

Note: The dependent variable of Model 2 is moral disengagement. Grade was coded 0 = Grade 7, 1 = Grade 9. Gender was coded 0 = males, 1 = females. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$.

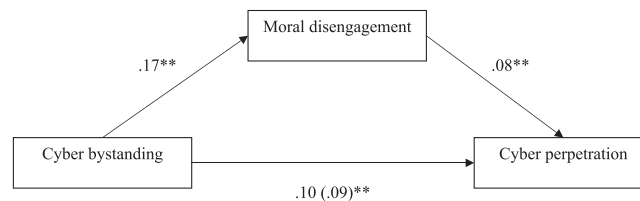


FIGURE 2 Mediating role of moral disengagement in cyber bystanding and cyber perpetration. ** $p \leq .01$

bystanding to cyber perpetration was small ($b = 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.005, 0.03]), mediating 10% of the total effect. Moral disengagement therefore partially mediated the link between cyber bystanding and cyber perpetration (see Figure 2).

4 | DISCUSSION

Findings from the current study contribute to the growing body of research linking moral disengagement with cyberbullying roles such as bystanding and victimization. While previous studies have predominantly focused on moral disengagement associated with perpetrators of cyberbullying, increasing evidence suggests that moral disengagement is also associated with victims and bystanders (Killer et al., 2019). The present study extends the existing literature, demonstrating the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between cyberbullying participant roles (victimization, bystanding) and perpetration.

In the victimization model tested in this study, the predicted association between cyber victimization and cyber perpetration was confirmed. This finding is consistent with previous studies reporting high co-occurrence of victimization and perpetration (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2020; Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018). Further, moral disengagement was shown to mediate the relationship between victimization and perpetration. Specifically, experiences of victimization were associated with a greater tendency to morally disengage, which was also associated with increased bullying behavior. This finding demonstrates that victims who also perpetrate bullying can do so through enlisting justificatory strategies to reconstrue their conduct as morally acceptable. Moral disengagement is therefore one mechanism that facilitates victims to engage in bullying despite having been previously victimized themselves.

Similarly, the hypothesized relationship between cyber bystanding and perpetration was confirmed, consistent with previous findings (Holfeld & Mishna, 2019). As in the victimization model, moral disengagement was also observed to

mediate the association between bystanding and perpetration. Specifically, witnesses to cyberbullying tended to report higher levels of moral disengagement, which was also linked with greater levels of perpetration. This finding adds to the conceptualization that bystanders are desensitized to bullying overtime. Indeed, Pabian et al. (2016) found that increased bystanding was associated with a decrease in empathy in cyberbullying situations. However, bystanders' moral standards associated with cyberbullying remain unchanged. In this way, moral disengagement allows bystanders to perpetrate bullying without transgressing personal moral standards.

Results of the present study highlight that victims and bystanders of cyberbullying who endorse greater enlistment of moral disengagement mechanisms also report greater cyberbullying perpetration. Through detaching moral standards from immoral conduct, victims and bystanders can bully others despite having observed the adverse psychological and emotional outcomes that follow cyberbullying. The function of moral disengagement in this dynamic, however, remains unclear. Victims of cyberbullying often report psychological distress resulting from their adverse experiences. However, bully/victims (individuals who both victimize and are victimized by bullying), report the highest levels of psychological problems compared with bullies or victims alone (Runions et al., 2019). It may be that one way for victims to deal with their distress is to retaliate against the bully. By invoking moral disengagement mechanisms, they are able to engage in such behavior free of guilt. Future research may investigate the function of moral disengagement in ameliorating adverse psychological outcomes of victimization.

4.1 | Strengths and limitations

This study was the first to identify the mediating effect of moral disengagement in the association between cyber victimization and bystanding, and increases in cyberbullying perpetration. Although indirect effects of moral disengagement are small, findings nonetheless exemplify one factor that may contribute to the propensity of victims and bystanders to also perpetrate cyberbullying. It is therefore important to reduce the use of moral disengagement as a proxy to minimizing cyberbullying perpetration. Emergent research has shown the benefits of targeting moral disengagement in antibullying interventions. Specifically, class discussions and scenarios challenging moral disengagement justifications reduced moral disengagement levels and victimization (Wang & Goldberg, 2017). These findings have been extended to a randomized control trial by Tolmatcheff et al. (2022) where it was found that moral disengagement decreased along with bullying and outsider behavior and defending increased. Encouraging similar adaptive coping strategies may therefore provide schools with constructive methods for minimizing adverse outcomes to bullying and intervene in the bullying cycle.

It is important to consider findings from the present study in the context of several limitations. Mediation analyses require analysis of data from multiple time points to avoid issues with reverse mediation. For example, a recent review noted that although researchers have more commonly identified victimization as a predictor of later perpetration, studies have also noted that perpetration predicts victimization (Camerini et al., 2020). Investigating moral disengagement as a mediator for victimization, bystanding, and future perpetration through conducting a longitudinal study may strengthen the current findings. Common issues associated with self-report data are also present. Future studies may consider using additional sources of data, such as peer- or teacher-reports.

5 | CONCLUSION

In summary, this study builds on the existing literature examining the role of moral disengagement in the perpetration of cyberbullying. Present results demonstrate that moral disengagement is one mechanism that may explain the association between victimization and bystanding in cyberbullying perpetration. These findings have implications for intervention strategies to minimize bullying in schools. It is crucial to reinforce the unacceptability of cyberbullying in school-wide antibullying programs and to support victims and bystanders who have been exposed to cyberbullying incidents. Specifically, encouraging victims and bystanders to use adaptive coping strategies may minimize their tendency to enlist moral disengagement as a way of coping with cyberbullying, and therefore reduce future perpetration and its co-occurrence with victimization.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon reasonable request from the authors. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (5201910477189).

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