

Comparing Stage and Domain Theories of Moral Development in Explaining Cyberbullying

Zihan Feng

*College of Humanities and Sciences, National University of Singapore, Singapore
E1249411@u.nus.edu*

Abstract. Cyberbullying is becoming a growing concern among teenagers. The negative impact of cyberbullying on teenagers includes deteriorating mental health, broken friendships, and decreased academic success. As more social interaction occurs online, it becomes significant to understand how young people make moral judgments in digital environments. Most studies so far focus on behavioral and emotional factors of cyberbullying. Only a few studies examine how moral development theories explain these behaviors. This review fills this gap by comparing major moral development theories, including Piaget's stages, Kohlberg's six-stage model, and social domain theory. It also examines how each framework explains cyberbullying. Stage theories describe the development of moral reasoning over time. In contrast, social domain theory offers a more detailed understanding of how adolescents navigate moral dilemmas online. Both theories together help explain how complex moral behavior can be in online spaces. Future research should combine the strengths of both theories and include cross-cultural perspectives.

Keywords: cyberbullying, Kohlberg, moral development, Piaget, social domain theory.

1. Introduction

Cyberbullying is defined as deliberate and aggressive actions repeatedly performed by an individual or group targeting a victim who struggles to defend themselves on electronic platforms [1]. Cyberspace and social media have played vital roles in adolescents' social lives. They have numerous positive impacts, including expanding social horizons, fostering inclusion in diverse groups, and establishing new connections [2]. However, in recent decades, the rapid rise of social media has made the problem of cyberbullying even worse. Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying has unique features, such as anonymity, widespread reach, and long-lasting effects due to the digital footprint. It also manifests in various forms, including flaming, trolling, denigration, masquerading, cyberstalking, and outing privacy [1]. Many previous studies showed that cyberbullying is linked to serious psychological problems in teenagers. Victims of cyberbullying experience higher levels of pain, depression, and anxiety and show increased suicidal intentions and attempts [3]. Victims of cyberbullying tend to feel less happy with their appearance and less satisfied with their school life [4]. They also find it harder to make friends, primarily because of lower self-esteem and social confidence. But much of the current research still focuses on how common cyberbullying is and what factors predict it [3, 5]. There has been little effort to apply

moral development theories to explain cyberbullying issues systematically. Based on this, this paper raises the research question of how different moral development theories explain adolescents' moral judgments and behaviors in the context of cyberbullying, and it discusses which theory better explains the moral dilemmas of today's complex online environment. Additionally, this paper examines how developmental theories can provide practical guidance for reducing cyberbullying.

2. Literature review

2.1. Moral development theory

2.1.1. Piaget's moral development theory

In the field of moral development, various theories offer different frameworks to explain how teenagers understand and respond to cyberbullying issues. Although Piaget's theory of children's moral development primarily focuses on early childhood, it still offers valuable insights into the transition into adolescence. Piaget's moral development theory can be principally divided into two stages: heteronomous morality and autonomous morality. The first stage lasts from ages 2 to 8. At this age, children see rules as external, fixed, and unchangeable, imposed by parents, teachers, or other authorities. Their moral judgments are primarily based on objective outcomes rather than subjective intentions. They also often think that evil actions will naturally lead to punishment, a belief known as immanent justice.

The autonomous morality stage typically begins around the age of 8. At this stage, children gradually recognize that rules are the product of social agreement to improve cooperation and can be modified through communication and negotiation. They begin to weigh people's subjective intentions heavily than simply consequences. Similarly, they stop believing in immanent justice. They shift their thoughts to think that punishments should be directly connected to the bad behavior, aiming to correct mistakes. Children at this age develop an understanding of reciprocity, cooperation, and respect between people [6].

2.1.2. Kohlberg's moral development theory

Kohlberg's six-stage theory further systematizes the development of moral reasoning and is particularly applicable to explaining the differences in adolescents. Kohlberg asked children to make judgments about "Heinz's Dilemma" and state their reasons to define which stage of moral development these children are at. Stage 1 and Stage 2 are pre-conventional levels. Stage 1 is characterized by an obedience and punishment orientation, where children follow rules to avoid punishment. Children obey regulations aimed at avoiding punishment. Stage 2 is self-interest-oriented. Children follow the rules to get rewarded. The next level is the conventional level, which includes Stage 3 and Stage 4. In Stage 3, children tend to be both boy-oriented and girl-oriented. Children do good things for other people to get approved. An authority and social-order maintaining orientation characterizes stage 4. This stage prioritizes maintaining the social order. Stages 5 and 6 are post-conventional levels. In this level, people strive to offer their own interpretations of legitimate and appropriate moral values and principles, regardless of the authorities' attitude. Stage 5 is social contract orientation, which means people realize that laws and rules are not absolute and can be modified or improved. Stage 6, representing universal ethical principles, is the highest. At this point, people rely on abstract concepts such as justice and equality [7, 8].

2.1.3. Social domain theory

Unlike stage theories, social domain theory explains adolescents' moral judgments in terms of moral, conventional, and personal concepts [9]. Social domain theory believes that people do not use a single way of thinking but are capable of distinguishing different types of social domains. The moral domain focuses on fairness, the well-being, and the rights of others. The conventional domain encompasses situational social rules and consensus, including etiquette and address. Personal domain involves personal choices and privacy. This theory effectively revealed how people balance among different domains when facing moral issues [9, 10].

2.2. Cyberbullying and moral development theory

2.2.1. Characteristics of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has distinct characteristics that make it an increasingly serious problem. The first characteristic is anonymity. This means that the internet enables perpetrators to use fake names or identities, making it difficult for individuals to reveal their true identities and hide behind screens [11]. The second trait is long psychological distance. The separation between perpetrators and victims in the online environment weakens the perpetrators' awareness of the harm caused by their actions, increasing cyberbullying behaviors [12]. The third thing is peer pressure. Adolescents who encounter higher peer pressure are more likely to experience increasing moral disengagement and subsequently promote the occurrence of cyberbullying behaviors [13]. The last factor is diffusion of responsibility. The perpetrators often attribute their behaviors to the group or the platform, which decreases individual responsibility [14].

2.2.2. Stage theories applied to cyberbullying

Moral development theory can help explain cases of cyberbullying. According to Piaget's stage theory, children still in the heteronomous morality stage rely heavily on external rules and authorities [6]. In online spaces, authority figures are often absent. Without direct supervision or clear punishment, children can feel uncertain and lost. Many follow what their peers do or stay silent when they see cyberbullying. As children develop autonomous morality, they realize that rules can be applied in a more flexible way. At this stage, their judgments about cyberbullying rely more on an inner sense of fairness and concern for harm. Even without adults or authority watching, they can recognize on their own that cyberbullying is wrong.

In Kohlberg's six-stage theory, people who are still at the pre-conventional level tend to see cyberbullying as a way to meet their own needs or gain attention. Their actions are driven by avoiding punishment or earning rewards. By cyberbullying others, they can gain attention or followers online, vent frustration, or seek thrills through attacking others. Additionally, anonymity and diffuse responsibility lower their awareness of consequences, leading them to believe that as long as they are not caught or punished, they are not doing anything wrong. For victims at this level, they often struggle to understand why they are being treated this way, which makes them tend to blame themselves or wrongly assign responsibility. They may think the cyberbullying happened because they are not good enough, causing feelings of fear and shame. At the conventional level, perpetrators' judgments are based on group norms and expectations. They tend to justify their actions by referencing their group's culture or rules. They sometimes target outsiders to build unity within the group or to gain approval from others. Their actions are driven by the desire to gain group

approval. When cyberbullying becomes a social or group norm, victims may gradually believe they deserve it. Due to the fear of challenging the group, they are hesitant to resist or seek help. At the post-conventional level, people can fully recognize the harm caused by cyberbullying. They are less likely to participate in cyberbullying others, even if the group encourages them to do so. If they have cyberbullied others, they may reflect on their actions and apologize to the victims. For victims at this level, they can clearly distinguish cyberbullying from their self-worth and reduce self-blame. They will also actively seek external help [12].

2.2.3. Social domain theory applied to cyberbullying

Social domain theory can be used to explain problems associated with cyberbullying. Cyberbullying directly leads to psychological harm, including anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem. These symptoms can be considered moral transgressions [3]. However, adolescents with a lower level of moral reasoning may blur the boundary between the moral domain and the conventional domain, thinking that if everyone is doing something, I can also do it. In the conventional domain, perpetrators tend to regard cyberbullying as maintaining their group norms and justify their behavior by labeling victims as outsiders or rule-breakers. In contrast, adolescents with a high level of reasoning emphasize that cyberbullying others is immoral even if the group or social norms tolerate this kind of behavior. In the personal domain, perpetrators might classify their cyberbullying behaviors as personal rights or private affairs. They believe their behaviors are merely expressions of individual thoughts, denying any harm to the victims and the social consequences. For youths with a higher level of morals, they will recognize the boundaries of freedom and resist the influence of their online behaviors. They will be less likely to cyberbully others as they realize that freedom should not involve sacrificing others' welfare.

3. Discussion

3.1. Comparative analysis

Adolescents of different ages have significant differences in both behavioral patterns and cognitive stages when facing cyberbullying issues [15]. Young children, especially those still at early moral stages, are more likely to fail to distinguish between the moral domain and the conventional domain, leading them to rationalize their cyberbullying behavior as a common behavior within the group or something that everyone does, rather than regard it as a moral transgression. They will not realize their behaviors are unethical until their parents or teachers punish them. Furthermore, when facing peer pressure, they struggle to make independent decisions and are more inclined to go along with the group to gain acceptance or avoid rejection.

However, Kohlberg's six-stage theory still has many limitations. First, the six-stage theory views children's moral development as a universal and linear process, which means this theory does not fully consider how different cultures, social norms, and age groups shape children's behavior. Secondly, the six-stage theory has difficulty explaining adolescents' diverse moral behaviors in various settings. Adolescents may demonstrate higher levels of moral reasoning in traditional bullying, but lower levels of moral reasoning in cyberbullying [16]. Stage theory assumes that individuals' moral stages are consistent across all different situations, making it too rigid for understanding cyberbullying. Thirdly, stage theory offers limited guidance for real intervention. Stage theory describes how morals develop step by step, but it does not teach young children how to

advance their moral stage. In cyberbullying, improving moral growth alone is not enough to change behavior. Other factors such as peer pressure, group culture, and social rules are also important.

When comparing stage theory with Kohlberg's six-stage model, social domain theory addresses many problems. First, social domain theory demonstrates how culture and situation affect moral thinking. This theory emphasizes that adolescents' moral judgments can be diverse and changeable in different situations, helping researchers better understand the differences across multiple cultures and online platforms. Second, social domain theory uses three domains to explain adolescents' behaviors [9]. This means the same teenager may exhibit different moral reasoning in various situations, explaining why teenagers might make different moral choices online compared to real life. Such cases are often seen as domain misclassification. Finally, social domain theory gives more precise guidance for intervention practices. By identifying the teenagers' use of reasoning domains, parents and schools can develop more targeted intervention strategies.

However, social domain theory also has limitations. One problem is that the boundaries between different domains are unclear. Children with low moral reasoning skills often struggle to classify their behaviors correctly. The second issue is that social domain theory does not explain how development occurs. Stage theory describes progress step by step, but social domain theory only shows differences between domains [8, 9]. The final problem is that although intervention strategies can be designed based on various domains, in real life, teenagers' behavior classifications often change dynamically. The same event can be classified as personal in some cases and as part of a moral domain in others, which makes consistent intervention difficult.

3.2. Future direction

3.2.1. Future research

Future research should combine Kohlberg's six-stage theory with social domain theory. This combination can explain both the process of moral growth and the influence of culture, context, and personal judgment. This approach will contribute to the development of a more comprehensive view of cyberbullying. Future studies should also conduct longitudinal research and cross-cultural experiments to test how these theories apply to different groups and explain cyberbullying.

3.2.2. Implication

This review offers suggestions for building better intervention programs. The intervention programs for children between 6 and 12 years old should concentrate on enhancing self-regulation skills, creating a positive school environment, teaching online safety, and promoting teamwork. The early implemented measures will stop aggressive behavior while teaching children proper online conduct [17]. For older adolescents, intervention programs should aim to help them have a deeper understanding of fairness, harm, and rights related to cyberbullying, instead of simply emphasizing rule adherence.

4. Conclusion

Teenagers still struggle with cyberbullying, which remains a significant problem. It adversely affects their mental health, impacts their friendships, and hampers their academic performance. This review examines how the main moral development theories help to understand these behaviors. Piaget's and Kohlberg's stage theories show adolescents' moral development but do not include the influence of online environments. Social domain theory offers a more detailed understanding by dividing moral,

conventional, and personal domains. This shows how complex teenagers' moral decisions can be online. Social domain theory gives clearer ideas about cyberbullying, but stage theory also needs to be used to make a more complete model. Future research should focus on integrating these perspectives, conducting longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, and creating effective interventions. When schools plan anti-cyberbullying lessons, they should not only try to raise students' moral levels. They should also use social domain theory to help students see the difference between harmful acts, rule-breaking, and personal choices.

References

- [1] Bansal, S., Garg, N., Singh, J., and Van, F. (2024). Cyberbullying and mental health: Past, present, and future. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14(1279234). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1279234>
- [2] Ostic, D., Qalati, S. A., Barbosa, B., Shah, S. M. M., Galvan Vela, E., Herzallah, A. M., and Liu, F. (2021). Effects of social media use on psychological well-being: A mediated model. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12(12). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.678766>
- [3] Giumetti, G. W., and Kowalski, R. M. (2022). Cyberbullying via social media and well-being. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 45(45). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2352250X22000161>
- [4] Ragusa, A., Núñez-Rodríguez, S., Vaz, P., Silva, J., Caliciotti, V., González-Bernal, J. J., López-Rivero, A. J., Petrillo, E., Gatto, M., Obregón-Cuesta, A. I., and González-Santos, J. (2024). Impact of cyberbullying on academic performance and psychosocial well-being of Italian students. *Children*, 11(8), 943. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children11080943>
- [5] Vismara, M., Girone, N., Conti, D., Nicolini, G., and Dell'Osso, B. (2022). The current status of cyberbullying research: A short review of the literature. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 101152. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2022.101152>
- [6] Carpendale, J. I. M. (2009). Piaget's theory of moral development. In *The Cambridge Companion to Piaget* (pp. 270–286). <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol9780521898584.012>
- [7] Hafeez, M., Tahira, F., Kazmi, Q., Hussain, M., and Campus, K. (2020). Analysis of moral reasoning of teachers and the students with respect to Kohlberg's theory of moral development. *International Journal of Business Strategy and Social Sciences*, 3(1).
- [8] Kohlberg, L. (1981). *The philosophy of moral development: Moral stages and the idea of justice*. Harper & Row.
- [9] Smetana, J. (2013). Moral development. In *The Oxford handbook of developmental psychology*, Vol. 1 (pp. 831–864). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199958450.013.0029>
- [10] Turiel, E. (1983). *The development of social knowledge: Morality and convention*. Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Chakraborty, S., Bhattacharjee, A., and Onuchowska, A. (2021). Cyberbullying: A review of the literature. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- [12] Sun, Y.-X., Cao, C.-H., Tang, Z.-J., Huang, F.-M., Zhong, X.-B., and Chen, I.-H. (2025). Moral disengagement as mediator and guilt as moderator between cyber moral literacy and cyberbullying among late adolescents. *Scientific Reports*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-83911-5>
- [13] Yang, J., Li, S., Gao, L., and Wang, X. (2022). Longitudinal associations among peer pressure, moral disengagement and cyberbullying perpetration in adolescents. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 137, 107420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107420>
- [14] Runions, K. C., and Bak, M. (2015). Online moral disengagement, cyberbullying, and cyber-aggression. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 18(7), 400–405. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0670>
- [15] Pichel Mira, R., Foody, M., O'Higgins-Norman, J., Sanmartín Feijóo, S., Varela Mallou, J., and Rial Boubeta, A. (2021). Bullying, cyberbullying and the overlap: What does age have to do with it? *Sustainability*, 13(15). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13158527>
- [16] Li, C., Wang, P., Martin-Moratinos, M., Bella-Fernández, M., and Blasco-Fontecilla, H. (2022). Traditional Bullying and Cyberbullying in the Digital Age and Its Associated Mental Health Problems in Children and adolescents: a meta-analysis. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 33(33). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-022-02128-x>
- [17] Chicote-Beato, M., González-Víllora, S., Bodoque-Osma, A. R., and Olivas, R. N. (2024). Cyberbullying intervention and prevention programmes in primary education (6 to 12 years): A systematic review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 77, 101938.