

Assessing the Facilitating Effect of Moral Disengagement on Online Misconduct

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Abstract. Online misconduct, its forms ranging from cyberbullying and trolling to cyberaggression and hate speech, is a phenomenon becoming increasingly prevalent in modern online spaces and poses risks to internet users' well-being. This review aims to examine the role of moral disengagement mechanisms in facilitating these harmful behaviors online. Drawing on both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, a positive direct association between moral disengagement and perpetration of online misconduct is identified. Though evidence generally agrees on this association, there have not yet been conclusive results on the effects of specific moral disengagement mechanisms. The relationship is also influenced by moderators and related factors such as online disinhibition, cultural context, and personality traits, which include the dark triad/tetrad, callous-unemotional traits, the Big Five, and empathy. Moral disengagement is concluded to be a significant, although not exclusive, predictor of online moral disengagement. The study also identifies less researched areas for further study in the future.

Keywords: online misconduct, moral disengagement, online moral disengagement, online disinhibition, literature review

1. Introduction

Online misconduct (such as cyberbullying, cyberaggression, trolling and doxing) is presently growing more prevalent in digital spaces and becoming an important topic of public health and social governance. Hostile interactions on the internet were relatively rare until the Web 2.0 era, when the internet as a whole shifted from static to interactive, having user-made material and interactivity take center stage. The newfound ability to self-publish and make connections with others given by this shift created opportunities for online antagonists, ultimately resulting in cyberhate being amplified and becoming a serious issue around 209 [1]. Hostilities on the internet are no small matter, which victims can experience negative consequences, including anxiety, depression, isolation, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harming actions and addictions. As the internet continues to evolve and as its interconnectivity continues to increase, it is crucial to study how online misconduct is facilitated, as well as what factors may play into facilitating misconduct, with the ultimate goal of creating useful countermeasures and minimizing future instances.

Many studies already identify contributing factors to facilitation of such misconduct and how to form countermeasures such as remedies to psychological harm caused by cyberhate or better ways to moderate digital environments. Another take on the matter will be pursued here, with attention put to internal influencing factors, namely those concerning morality. Though differing in context and setting, online and offline misconduct are similar in the sense that they involve the delivery of deliberate harm. Moral disengagement, a set of psychological mechanisms that has previously been established to have an association with perpetrators of offline bullying, is therefore a probable facilitator to harmful and hateful behavior online. This review aims to explore the relationship between moral disengagement and online misconduct, and to identify any moderators and related factors that may influence the association.

2. Conceptual foundations

2.1. Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement, a term coined by social psychologist Albert Bandura, is a theory used to explain how people suspend their moral standards in certain situations so as to allow themselves to participate in unethical behavior without experiencing emotions such as guilt.

The primary mechanism by which moral disengagement operates is social and moral justification. This is where unethical conduct is reframed into being something admirable. As a result, people act out of a sense of duty and see themselves as upholding righteous values [2]. This can be seen in actions such as doxxing someone as a form of justice for morally reprehensible actions that the other did. Another mechanism is advantageous comparison, where one compares their actions to a more morally reprehensible one in order to lessen perceived immorality of one's own action [2].

Euphemistic language is another mechanism that helps downplay ethically dubious aspects of detrimental behaviors. This includes using sanitized language to hide the aggressive nature of actions, using the passive voice to make perpetrators seem like nameless forces rather than people, and using specialized jargon to generate respectability to illegitimate causes [2]. For example, the word "sharing" is often used euphemistically to lessen the negative consequences of spreading harmful content online.

Reassignment and diffusion of responsibility lessens individuals' sense of guilt and is especially prominent in group actions such as cyberbullying [2]. Responsibility is diffused between the members, making each one feel less responsible. This is also reflected in the process of sharing harmful content online, the rationale of which will be expanded upon later.

Disregarding or distorting injurious consequences can also weaken people's moral control, since not facing harmful effects of their actions means they will not be prompted to reflect morally or apply self-censure [2]. Online interactions not being face-to-face enables ignorance of harmful consequences, giving rise to the possibility for people to hurt others without realizing it in full; the theoretical mechanisms of this are further discussed in later sections.

Finally, dehumanization and attribution of blame on the victim(s) makes harmful actions excusable and justified [2]. This can be seen in online hate speech, when people use derogatory terms to describe members of hated groups, making it seem like they deserve hate.

Though these mechanisms are initially used to explain the enactment of harmful actions in offline contexts, more recent studies have started to verify whether they are equally applicable in online contexts. This will be discussed in more detail in later sections.

Some studies propound online moral disengagement as an independent but related concept, used to explain the unique effects of moral disengagement in online contexts [3]. This is highly similar to

traditional moral disengagement, but under the influence of anonymity and disinhibition, online moral disengagement could affect different populations and produce differentiated effects. Because not all studies done on the topic measure this specific form of moral disengagement, this review will still be drawing from those that relate the broader version of moral disengagement to various forms of online misconduct.

2.2. Online misconduct

Online misconduct refers to any unacceptable or unethical behavior that occurs in digital spaces. Often, these behaviors are harmful or disrespectful towards the target and aim to undermine their dignity or safety. This covers a broad range of behaviors; however, this review will only be discussing the forms of online misconduct that have detrimental effects on individuals and not organizations such as corporations and governments. Under this narrowed definition, cyberbullying is the most common form of online misconduct; this refers to continuous and deliberate actions performed online aimed to cause harm to the target [1]. Another type of commonly known online misconduct is doxxing, where personally identifying information of the target is published publicly and used to prompt others to hunt the target offline [1]. Though less focused on individual targets, online trolling is also an impactful form of misconduct. Trolls post deliberately offensive or provoking content as a means to annoy or upset others. All of these behaviors aim to cause harm, and are amplified due to the anonymity and ease of content dissemination of online spaces. Some behaviors, such as doxxing and cyberstalking, extend their effects to the offline world. However, this paper will not be focusing on the offline dimensions of online misconduct.

3. Linking moral disengagement and online misconduct

3.1. Theoretical rationale

Moral disengagement mechanisms mainly work to reduce self-censure in terms of moral judgement. That is to say, people apply a lesser degree of self-regulation and when it comes to judgements made about potentially immoral actions. Adherence to moral principles play a great role in reducing potential misdeeds; as such, disengagement from said moral mechanisms makes individuals more prone to engaging in harmful behavior. Since online misconduct is a form of harmful behavior, it is reasonable to postulate that moral disengagement would play a part in facilitating deliberate acts of misconduct in online contexts.

It is important to take note of the unique characteristics of the internet as a setting. Resulting from the nature of online contexts is a phenomenon dubbed the online disinhibition effect, wherein people tend to act in less restrained ways on the internet. Reference identifies six factors that create this effect: anonymity, minimization of authority, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, and dissociative imagination [4]. Of these, the first three factors relate the most to facilitation of online misconduct. Anonymity creates an avenue for people to act out with less vulnerability and restraint. Most users will only know as much about another user as the other tells them; as such, it is entirely possible for users to hide or alter their identities. The opportunity to separate one's offline and online identities creates a dissociation, where people don't completely consider their online actions as theirs. This separation allows for people to avert responsibility for deviant actions online [4]. Anonymity may facilitate moral disengagement by minimizing responsibility and facilitate online misconduct by creating a space where one is more likely to act without restraint. Minimization of authority operates in a similar field by making people lessen self-restraint when acting online. The

internet is established as a place where all are equals and is designed without centralized control. Offline authority figures are equal to everyone else in their ability to express themselves online, making their status have less impact on the internet. This lack of authority means people experience less fear of punishment or disapproval when acting out, and as such are more willing to express themselves or misbehave [4]. Invisibility refers to the inability of people to see each other in online environments. This absolves worries about how one looks or sounds during a conversation, as well as removes any inhibition resulting from seeing physical cues that indicate indifference or disapproval. Without these concerns, people can act more freely [4]. Theoretically, apart from allowing the perpetrator of misconduct to do so with less restraint, invisibility would also facilitate moral disengagement, more specifically the mechanism of disregarding consequences. Because interactions are not immediate or face-to-face, direct consequences of actions are not visible to the perpetrators of online misconduct. Since consequences are not apparent or immediately visible, they are more easily dismissed.

Additionally, the nature of online interactions presents the possibility for anything to be false. Partially due to the anonymity and invisibility factors, it is easy to lie about anything in a textual conversation. This may prompt perpetrators to dismiss the consequences of their actions as well. Even if a victim was truthfully expressing that they were hurt, the perpetrator could still choose to view it as “fake” or merely “overreacting”.

As mentioned before, in the process of content sharing on the internet, displacement and diffusion of responsibility might come into play. Individuals involved in sharing offensive or harmful content can reassign responsibility to the original creator of said content. With enough sharers, the responsibility of the individual is further lessened. These methods of minimizing responsibility would cause people involved in sharing to not think they are contributing to potentially harmful behaviors, therefore enabling or facilitating the behavior.

3.2. Empirical evidence

A number of studies have indicated a direct relationship between moral disengagement and several different types of online misconduct. Moral disengagement has been found to have positive and statistically significant associations with cyberbullying perpetration [5], online trolling [6], online incivility [7], and cyberaggression [8]. Further research differentiates between online and traditional moral disengagement; the results show that while both predicted online misconduct, online moral disengagement was more pertinent to explaining hostility and antisociality in a purely online setting, and traditional moral disengagement was more closely related to offline externalizing problems [3, 9].

There is some conflict between studies regarding which specific mechanisms predict cyberaggression. Reference identified dehumanization, advantageous comparison, distortion of consequences, and displacement of responsibility as significant and unique predictors, while another study identified all disengagement mechanisms apart from displacement/diffusion of responsibility as predictors [10, 11]. Cognitive restructuring strategies (moral justification, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic language) are identified as the strongest predictors of online bullying [11]. Dehumanization and advantageous comparison most strongly predicted cyberaggression perpetration among young adults, with the former being the strongest predictor of malice [10]. The differences in results suggest that in different contexts, the mechanisms of moral disengagement used as well as the precise effects of said mechanisms may differ as well. Further research in the universality of the effects of moral disengagement across cultures and age groups may be needed.

4. Moderators and related factors

4.1. Social and contextual influences

4.1.1. Online disinhibition

As established in theoretical rationale, online disinhibition may play a direct or indirect role in facilitating online misconduct. Online disinhibition is a positive predictor of moral disengagement [8]. The relationship between moral disengagement and online trolling is also indirectly affected by online disinhibition [6]. Moral disengagement also conversely acts on online disinhibition, with individuals showing more moral disengagement being more likely to be disinhibited online [7].

Some studies also identified the effects of specific dimensions of online disinhibition on online misconduct. In a population of Chinese school-aged children, it was found that anonymity had no direct effect on cyberbullying but was positively associated with moral disengagement [12]. Asynchronicity was directly positively associated with cyberbullying, while also influencing perpetration indirectly through moral disengagement. However, invisibility had no effect on cyberbullying whether directly or indirectly. This difference may be attributed to Chinese cultural values, since Chinese culture promotes a degree of self-control, which may deter people from acting out online even when they are invisible.

4.1.2. Cultural factors

Apart from how culture could possibly influence online disinhibition as mentioned above, several studies have investigated its influence on individuals' perception and indulgence in misconduct such as cyberbullying. In a cross-cultural study collecting data from Canada, China, and Iran, it was found that culture significantly influenced youth's perception of cyberbullying, including moral evaluations and emotion attributions [13]. Canadian and Chinese youth had a more negative evaluation of cyberbullying than Persian youth and attributed more morally responsible emotions such as shame and guilt to bystander behaviors than Persian youth. This difference could be attributed to Persian culture's characteristic of valuing forgiveness and mercy. Alternatively, it could also be because Persian youth have less access to the internet than Canadian and Chinese youth, and therefore are less aware of the severity or pervasiveness of cyberbullying [13]. If the former is true, however, it could indicate cultural traditions' potential influence on people's perception of online misconduct. How individuals view misconduct may influence perpetration; if people perceive it less negatively, it's possible that they are more likely to indulge. This may then tie into moral disengagement mechanisms, which mainly operate by making actions seem less immoral than they are. Similarly, Thai youth describe cyberbullying as an ordinary matter and not necessarily always a concern. They perceive some instances of verbal abuse, photos posted with ill intent, and hate groups as friendly teasing [14]. This is partially due to the pervasiveness of actions that could count as cyberbullying in online spaces, and partially due to characteristics of Thai culture. People tend to take things easy and not be serious about things in Thai society, which may have contributed to people's perception of cyberbullying as just something fun [14]. Not taking the severity of misconduct, such as cyberbullying seriously may involve a disregard of harmful consequences (one of the moral disengagement mechanisms). However, the connections of cultural values to moral disengagement and to perpetration of online misconduct stated here are mostly speculation. Studies that have cultural influence on online misconduct as a focus point are relatively scarce.

4.2. Personality traits

4.2.1. The dark triad/dark tetrad and other antisocial traits

The dark triad refers to the traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy; on occasion, a fourth item – sadism – is added, making the dark tetrad. It is hypothesized that these traits may influence moral disengagement or online misconduct due to the association of these traits with perpetration of harmful acts in general.

All three dimensions of the dark triad were found to have positive direct associations with cyberbullying perpetration among university students [5]. Individuals high in Machiavellianism and psychopathy are also more likely to engage moral disengagement mechanisms, making moral disengagement a mediator between dark traits and cyberbullying perpetration. In adults, it was found that all traits of the dark tetrad except for narcissism showed strong positive association with online moral disengagement [9]. Similar results were found by other research, where all traits of the dark tetrad had positive associations with cyberbullying perpetration in adults, with narcissism showing the weakest correlation. All four dimensions of the dark tetrad were correlated with moral disengagement. However, moral disengagement was found to not be significantly associated with cyberbullying perpetration, suggesting that for individuals with traits in the dark tetrad, moral disengagement might not be necessary [15]. Psychopathy was found to be positively associated with moral disengagement as well as with online trolling [6]. Moral disengagement mediated the relationship between psychopathy and online trolling and was positively associated with online trolling on its own.

Individuals with callous-unemotional traits tend to lack feelings such as remorse and therefore are less likely to activate self-censure when performing potentially immoral acts. Callous-unemotional traits were found to be able to stimulate activation of moral disengagement mechanisms, which in turn facilitates cyberbullying perpetration. Moral disengagement is concluded to be both an outcome of callous-unemotional traits and a facilitator of cyberbullying perpetration, though the latter effect is only partial. Since callous-unemotional traits have a direct positive association with cyberbullying perpetration, they may function as a direct factor as well [16].

4.2.2. The Big Five

The Big Five refers to the most common scientific model for measuring personality traits, including openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Associations between the Big Five and cyberbullying perpetration were found, with moral disengagement playing the role of mediator. Neuroticism had a significant positive relationship with moral disengagement, whereas extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were all significantly negatively correlated with moral disengagement. In particular, agreeableness was found to be negatively associated with perpetration. This relationship is totally mediated by moral disengagement [17]. Few studies have investigated the relationship between the Big Five, moral disengagement, and cyberbullying, so further research in this area, as well as extending to other forms of online misconduct, may be required to establish solid causal relations.

4.2.3. Empathy

The quality of empathy has been found to be related to moral disengagement and participation in online deviant activities. Empathy is divided into two types: affective empathy, which refers to the

ability to feel what others feel, and cognitive empathy, which refers to the ability to put oneself into the perspective of others and infer things about their emotions [18].

Research has found a negative association between total empathy and moral disengagement as well as between affective empathy and moral disengagement. However, no such association was found between cognitive empathy and moral disengagement, and empathy levels don't show any significant correlation with whether or not individuals carried out offensive actions online [19]. Another study showed that cognitive empathy, and not affective empathy, was significantly negatively correlated with online moral disengagement [20].

Studies on the relationship between empathy levels and engagement in online misconduct yielded mixed results. No significant difference in empathy (total, cognitive or affective) was found between those who carry out offensive behavior and those who do not [19]. This may suggest that instead of being directly related to online misconduct, empathy acts more as a mediator. Lower levels of empathy could moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and participation in harmful behavior online by facilitating the former's contribution to the latter. However, mediation analysis performed in another study did not demonstrate that cognitive empathy affected online antisocial behavior through online moral disengagement [20].

5. Discussion

Moral disengagement was found to have a significant positive association with various forms of online misconduct, including cyberbullying, online trolling, online aggression, and incivility on the internet. While this association is generally agreed upon for moral disengagement mechanisms as a whole, the extent to which specific mechanisms contribute to this association remains uncertain. Apart from having a direct effect on individuals' perpetration of online misconduct, moral disengagement also operates alongside other related factors such as online disinhibition, cultural influences and personality traits (including the dark triad/dark tetrad traits, callous-unemotional traits, elements of the Big Five, and empathy). These factors may amplify disengagement, increase the likelihood of misconduct, or both. Alternatively, they could act as moderators for the relationship between disengagement and misconduct perpetration.

However, there are certain limitations in currently existent research on the topic. First, the measurements and definition of key variables is not always consistent across studies. When measuring moral disengagement, some studies use the scale for traditional moral disengagement, while others utilize a scale specialized for online moral disengagement. Since the two items measured are similar but not entirely interchangeable, this may have an effect on the comparability of results. Second, most studies on this topic rely considerably on self-report methods. The results of such studies may be influenced by the social expectation effect and sampling bias, and may therefore present certain limitations to data interpretation and generalization. Third, cultural extrapolation is insufficient. Existing literature is mostly concentrated in East Asian countries and a few select Western countries. Cross-cultural studies are scarce, and how collectivist and individualist views can moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and misconduct is still not fully understood.

These limitations hint at possible directions for future research to pursue. Future studies should advance the unification and verification of measurement methods of online moral disengagement, add multi-method and longitudinal experiment designs, and expand to more cultural contexts in order to reach a more generalizable conclusion. This study makes several implications for possible intervention of online misconduct. Due to the strong association observed between moral disengagement and perpetration of harmful behaviors online, reducing moral disengagement may

help in curbing instances of misconduct online. This can be done through educational means in order to promote moral sensitivity and digital citizenship.

6. Conclusion

Moral disengagement has been shown to be significantly positively related to online misconduct. Since moral disengagement may often work in tandem with other influencing factors to facilitate perpetration of online misconduct, it is a significant but not exclusive predictor of online misconduct. Studies have generally reached a consensus about the positive correlation between the two, but there are yet to be conclusive results on the degree to which specific mechanisms affect perpetration of online misconduct. Several moderators and related factors can contribute to this relationship, including online disinhibition, cultural influences, and personal traits. These factors can either heighten moral disengagement levels, heighten probability of online misconduct perpetration, or both while acting as a moderator.

This review reveals several limitations faced by current scholarship related to the topic. First, definitions and measurements of moral disengagement are inconsistent, with some referring to online moral disengagement and some referring to traditional moral disengagement. Most research continues to use traditional measures for moral disengagement in online contexts, which may not capture the full scope of nuances present in online contexts. Second, most studies rely heavily on self-report methods for data collection, which presents potential for bias. Third, cultural influences remain relatively unexplored, and cross-cultural studies are comparatively few. Future research should include more experimental, longitudinal, and cross-cultural studies, as well as expand its scope more to forms of misconduct other than cyberbullying. Effects of specific disengagement mechanisms should also be further investigated.

Identifying and understanding the effects of moral disengagement mechanisms on online misconduct is significant for prevention and intervention of misbehavior online. Because of the positive association present, it can be concluded that building stronger moral character in individuals can potentially lower the possibility of them indulging in misconduct online. This can be done, potentially, through educating people about digital citizenship and building moral character.

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