



# The Role of Moral Disengagement in Cyberbullying Participant Roles

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## Introduction

- Individuals can engage in cyberbullying situations in various ways. In addition to bullying perpetration and victimization, other behaviors include: passive outsider behavior, defending of the victimized individual, and assisting the individual engaged in cyberbullying perpetration (Sarmiento et al., 2019).
- Moral disengagement is a self-regulatory process that facilitates reduced feelings of guilt when individuals behave contrary to their moral standards (Bandura et al., 1996).
- Some studies have shown significant associations between moral disengagement and *traditional* bullying, but research on moral disengagement and cyberbullying is limited (Killer et al., 2019).
- Research has demonstrated a link between moral disengagement and cyberbullying perpetration behavior (Kowalski et al., 2014).
- Similar to perpetrating behaviors, reinforcing behavior has been linked to moral disengagement (Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012), but this association has not been examined in the cyber context.
- Pornari and Wood (2010) found no significant association between cyber-victimization and moral disengagement.
- In-person defending behavior has been negatively related to moral disengagement, but such conclusions remain inconclusive in an online context (Killer et al., 2018).
- Prior research has suggested that passive bystander behavior is positively associated moral disengagement (Cricchio et al, 2020).

## Research Questions

1. What is the nature of potential associations between moral disengagement and the following online bullying role behaviors: bullying, victimization, defending, passive outsider, and reinforcing?
2. Will the associations between moral disengagement and the bullying behaviors above differ by gender?

## Method

### Participants

- $N = 197$  College students attending a public midwestern university
- 65 (33%) Male; 132 (67%) Female
- 49.7% White, 17.8% African American, 9.6% Asian, 19.3% Hispanic/Latino(a), 1.5% American Indian, 1% Other

### Procedure/Measures

Participants completed an online Qualtrics survey. IRB approval was obtained and participants provided consent.

- Bandura's Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS; Bandura, 1996).
- The Cyberbullying and Victimization Survey (CBVS; Brown, Demaray, & Secord, 2014).
- The Cyberbullying Bystander Questionnaire (CBQ; Sarmiento, Herrera-López, & Zych, 2019).

## Cyberbullying behaviors, with the exception of defending behaviors, are significantly associated with moral disengagement.

## Results

### Research Questions 1 and 2

Five hierarchical regressions were conducted:

In Step 1, the Total Moral Disengagement Score and Gender (0 = male; 1 = female) were entered; In Step 2, the Moral Disengagement by Gender interaction was added; DVs were Cyberbully, Cyber Victim, Reinforcer, Passive Outsider, and Defender; NOTE: Lower moral disengagement scores = more disengagement.

**Cyberbully** : Step 2 accounted for significantly more variance ( $p < .001$ ) than Step 1. Moral Disengagement ( $-.015, p < .001$ ), Gender ( $-.119, p < .05$ ), and Moral Disengagement X Gender ( $.015, p < .001$ ) were all significant predictors of the Bully Score. See Figure 1 for a plot of the gender interaction.

*More moral disengagement was associated with more bullying for boys, but not girls.*

### Cyber victim

- Only Step 1 was significant ( $p < .05$ ). Moral Disengagement ( $-.005, p < .016$ ) emerged as the only significant predictor of the Victim score.

*More moral disengagement was associated with more victimization.*

### Reinforcer

- Only Step 1 was significant ( $p < .001$ ). Moral Disengagement ( $.012, p < .01$ ) was the only significant predictor of the Reinforcer score.

*Less moral disengagement was associated with more reinforcing behavior*

### Passive Outsider

- Only Step 1 was significant ( $p < .001$ ). Moral Disengagement ( $0.012, p < .01$ ) and Gender ( $.394, p < .05$ ) were significant predictors of the Passive Outsider score.

*Being a girl and having lower moral disengagement was associated with passive outsider behavior.*

### Defender

- The regression on the Defender score did not emerged as significant.

## Discussion

- In examining how moral disengagement is related to each of the bully role behaviors, the results showed how individuals in the bullying context may be more likely to behave differently according to their level of moral disengagement.
- Findings gleaned from this study may be particularly important for practitioners in designing prevention and intervention programs aimed at helping students recognize, reflect, and discuss personal responsibilities and perceptions related to bullying.

### Limitations & Future Research

- The Cyberbullying Bystander Questionnaire (CBQ) is relatively new and limited in usage, making it difficult to confirm our results with other studies.
- The current sample had disproportionately more females than males, which may have impacted the findings.
- Future research should explore the associations between moral disengagement and bullying role behaviors and how these associations differ between young adults compared to youth.

Figure 1. Moral Disengagement by Gender Interaction on Bullying

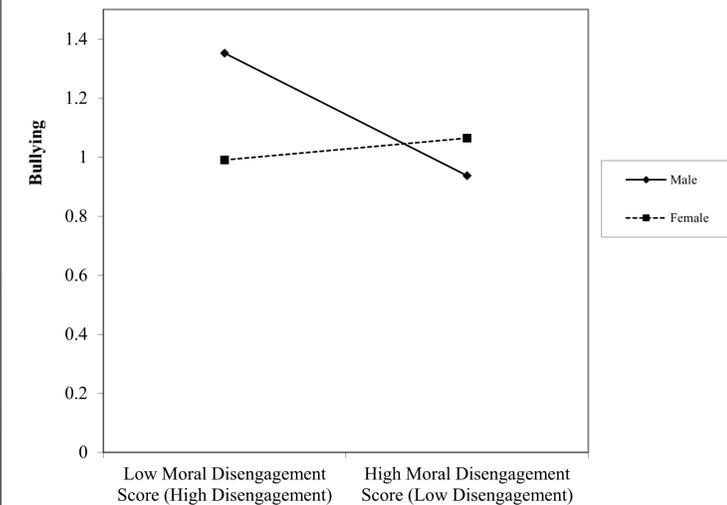


Table 1. Bullying Perpetration Regressions

	B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1 ***				.102	.102
Gender**	-.170	.057	-.216		
MD**	-.004	.002	-.194		
Step 2 ***				.191	.089
Gender*	-.119	.055	-.151		
MD***	-.015	.003	-.707		
MD x Gender***	.015	.003	.585		

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 2. Victimization Regressions

	B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1 *				.048	.048
Gender	-.119	.077	-.115		
MD*	-.005	.002	-.164		
Step 2				.060	.012
Gender	-.094	.078	-.091		
MD*	-.010	.004	-.351		
MD x Gender	.007	.005	.213		

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 3. Reinforcing Behavior Regressions

	B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1 ***				.165	.165
Gender	-.037	.077	-.033		
MD***	.012	.002	.412		
Step 2				.165	.000
Gender	-.037	.079	-.033		
MD**	.012	.004	.410		
MD x Gender	7.9E-5	.005	.002		

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 4. Passive Outsider Behavior Regressions

	B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1 ***				.016	.016
Gender*	.394	.158	.182		
MD**	.012	.004	.198		
Step 2				.019	.003
Gender**	.448	.161	.207		
MD	-9.63E-5	.008	-.002		
MD x Gender	.016	.010	.227		

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$