



Moderating effects of moral reasoning and gender on the relation between moral disengagement and cyberbullying in adolescents



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ABSTRACT

This study examined both the moderating effects of moral reasoning and gender on the relation between moral disengagement and cyberbullying in Chinese adolescents. Four hundred and seventeen adolescents completed the measures of Machiavellianism, moral disengagement, moral reasoning, and cyberbullying. The findings revealed that moral disengagement was significantly associated with cyberbullying even when Machiavellianism was controlled. Moral reasoning moderated the association between moral disengagement and cyberbullying. When adolescents reported a low level of moral reasoning, those with high moral disengagement reported higher scores in cyberbullying than those with low moral disengagement. However, the high and low moral disengagement group had a low level of cyberbullying when moral reasoning was high. Moreover, gender also moderated the link between moral disengagement and cyberbullying. Specifically, the relation between MD and cyberbullying tended to be stronger in boys than in girls.

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1. Introduction

Youth today spend more time online than ever before. The online technology offers young people a large amount of immediate information and facilitates relationship management. Meanwhile, Internet also brings new risks like cyberbullying into the adolescents' life (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). The typical rate of cyberbullying is between 10% and 40% (Bussey, Fitzpatrick, & Raman, 2015). Most importantly, cyberbullying can have a significant psychological impact on the victims, by leading them to mental health problems, or even suicidal ideation (Bannink, Broeren, van de Looij-Jansen, de Waart, & Raat, 2014; Kowalski et al., 2014). Given the negative consequences, it is of theoretical and practical importance to explore those factors that may contribute to an increase in cyberbullying. Moral disengagement (henceforth MD) has been well documented as one of the most examined predictive variables of bullying (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; Sijtsema, Rambaran, Caravita, & Gini, 2014; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014). This relation between MD and bullying has been most strongly demonstrated with traditional bullying (Bussey, Fitzpatrick et al., 2015). However, the results linking cyberbullying with MD have been less consistent than for traditional bullying (Bauman & Pero, 2011; Bussey, Fitzpatrick, et al., 2015; Lazuras, Barkoukis, Ourda, & Tsorbatzoudis,

2013; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Robson & Witenberg, 2013). One of the reasons for these inconsistent findings may be that prior researches did not control for other relevant variables (e.g. Machiavellianism) that may extraneously affect the association between MD and cyberbullying. Another reason for the inconsistencies may be that there are key moderators (e.g., moral reasoning, gender) influencing the relation between MD and cyberbullying. Therefore, the present research examined the effect of MD on cyberbullying, after controlling for Machiavellianism, and explored whether moral reasoning and gender could mitigate or increase the association between MD and cyberbullying.

1.1. Moral disengagement and cyberbullying

MD is conceptualized within the framework of social cognitive theory of morality in which moral standards are translated into conduct through self-regulation processes (Bandura, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1996). MD is a self-regulation process that helps individuals reduce the tension created when enacted behaviors (e.g., aggression) do not match personal standards and moral norms. Moreover, numerous empirical studies have shown positive correlations between MD and aggression (Gini et al., 2014), even after controlling for empathic concern, perspective taking, moral identity, hostile rumination, and rejecting parenting (Bussey, Quinn, & Dobson, 2015; Caprara et al., 2014; Hyde, Shaw, & Moilanen, 2010).

In relation to bullying behavior, the current findings still have not reached agreement. Specifically, two studies showed that MD predicted

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traditional bullying but not cyberbullying (Bauman & Pero, 2011; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). However, other studies indicated that MD was significantly related to both traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Pornari & Wood, 2010; Robson & Witenberg, 2013). Similarly, some studies showed that MD directly predicted cyberbullying (Lazuras et al., 2013), even after controlling for knowledge of cyberbullying moral standards (Bussey, Fitzpatrick, et al., 2015). In other words, the results linking cyberbullying with MD have been less consistent than in traditional bullying. Therefore, the overarching aim of this study was to examine its effect on cyberbullying.

1.2. Machiavellianism as an important covariate

Prior research findings have been inconsistent with regard to the influence of MD on cyberbullying. With these inconsistencies in mind, it is possible that previous studies did not control for other relevant variables (e.g. Machiavellianism) that may extraneously affect the relation between MD and cyberbullying. Considering that Machiavellians can more readily pursue their own interests without guilt and remorse (Moore, Detert, Trevino, Baker, & Mayer, 2012), some theorists have claimed that those high in Machiavellianism may be more inclined to morally disengage (Moore, 2015) and to bully others online (Gammon, Converse, Lee, & Griffith, 2011). Some empirical studies support the hypothesis showing that Machiavellianism is significantly correlated with MD (Egan, Hughes, & Palmer, 2015; Moore et al., 2012) and cyberbullying (Goodboy & Martin, 2015; Pabian, De Backer, & Vandebosch, 2015). To account for the potential confounding effects, we included Machiavellianism in our model, and expected that the relation between MD and cyberbullying would remain significant even after controlling for Machiavellianism.

1.3. The moderating role of moral reasoning

Moral reasoning (henceforth MR) refers to how individuals reason about and justify their behaviors (Palmer, 2005). It has been thought to be particularly important antecedents of aggression and bullying (Malti, Gasser, & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010; Yang & Wang, 2012). Considering the link of MR to aggression (Malti, Gasser, & Buchmann, 2009; Malti et al., 2010; Murray-Close & Crick, 2006), and to traditional bullying (Perren, Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Malti, & Hymel, 2012; Sim & Tan, 2011), we proposed that MR would be negatively correlated with cyberbullying.

Although considerable research has established the association between MD and cyberbullying, few studies have investigated the potential moderators of this association (Bussey, Fitzpatrick, et al., 2015). Several reasons underlie our argument for an interaction effect of MD and MR on cyberbullying. First, in social cognitive theory, one's moral and immoral behaviors are a function of MR and the self-regulatory mechanism of self-monitoring, and self-reactions (Bandura et al., 1996). Second, according to Bandura's MD theory, people usually adopt moral standards that are meant to inhibit them from engaging in immoral conduct (e.g., bullying and aggression), but the above process can be deactivated selectively through MD (Bandura et al., 1996). Third, adherence to moral standards can be strengthened by a number of factors (e.g., MR), and these factors can reduce the propensity to activate MD processes (Bandura et al., 1996; Bussey, Quinn, et al., 2015). MR at the lower stages is underpinned by an egocentric bias. Developmentally, reasoning oriented toward the concerns of others increases (Malti & Keller, 2009; Stams et al., 2006). By focusing on the well-being of others, adolescents are more strongly motivated to act in accord with their moral standards and to experience emotions of remorse, guilt and shame for violating their moral standards (Bussey, Quinn et al., 2015; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014). Therefore, high levels of MR may mitigate the effects of MD on cyberbullying. In contrast, MR at the lower stages (i.e. immature reasoning) is underpinned by an egocentric bias. Adolescents with low levels of MR are more "centered", less able to

take other people's perspectives (Palmer, 2005). Consequently, individuals with low MR and high MD may engage in more cyberbullying.

Some evidence supports this hypothesis. Adolescents' MR about aggression can moderate the relation between MD and aggression (Yang & Wang, 2012). Similarly, the association between MD and aggression is also moderated by other moral variables, such as moral identity (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; Hardy, Bean, & Olsen, 2015). Moral identity has been described as one kind of self-regulatory mechanism that motivates moral action, which can reduce the propensity to activate MD processes (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008), and can also weaken the positive association between MD and adolescents' aggression (Hardy et al., 2015).

1.4. The moderating role of gender

Previous studies have consistently shown that males score significantly higher than females on MD (Detert et al., 2008; Hyde et al., 2010; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Samnani, Salamon, & Singh, 2014; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014). However, findings related to gender differences in cyberbullying are less consistent (Barlett & Coyne, 2014), with some studies reporting that boys cyberbullied more than girls (Erdur-Baker, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013; Topcu & Erdur-Baker, 2012), whereas others concluded the opposite (Görzig & Ólafsson, 2013; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Smith et al., 2008), and in other studies no gender-related differences emerged (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). Because of equivocal findings, we posed the possibility of gender differences in the relation between MD and cyberbullying as a research question. We drew upon Miller's relational theory to predict that females with high MD engaged in less cyberbullying than similar males. Relational theory suggests that females possess a unique desire to develop and maintain personal relations with others (Portman, Bartlett, & Carlson, 2010; Samnani et al., 2014; Schminke, Ambrose, & Miles, 2003). Such desires will tend to make girls more hesitant than boys to engage in cyberbullying because this behavior may likely compromise positive relations with their peers. Therefore, girls' desire for positive personal relations may tend to limit their engagement in cyberbullying even when they have higher levels of MD. In contrast, for boys, a relatively lower desire for relationship building would be associated with a greater engagement in cyberbullying. Furthermore, boys utilize the MD mechanisms more than did girls. Similarly, Kokkinos, Voulgaridou, Mandrali, and Parousidou (2016) recently found that boys are more likely to morally disengage from aggression than girls. Therefore, we proposed that boys with higher levels of MD would engage in more cyberbullying than similar girls.

1.5. The present study

In summary, the present study examined both the moderating effects of MR and gender on the relation between MD and cyberbullying. Based on previous findings, the following three relations were hypothesized: (1) MD would be significantly associated with cyberbullying, even after controlling for Machiavellianism. (2) MR would moderate the relation between MD and cyberbullying. Specifically, high levels of MR would mitigate the effects of MD on cyberbullying. (3) Gender would moderate the association between MD and cyberbullying.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Four hundred and seventeen Chinese adolescents from one middle school in Anhui, China were sampled. Among them, the girls were 202 (48.44%). The average age was 13.08, ranging from 12 to 14 ($SD = .45$).

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