



Moral Disengagement and Cyberbullying among Adolescent Social Media Users: Do Gender Differences Exist?

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents often consider cyberbullying as a normal and natural phenomenon, which is known as moral disengagement. This study aimed to determine the relationship between moral disengagement and cyberbullying among adolescents that actively use social media and to test gender differences in moral disengagement and cyberbullying. This study used a quantitative correlational approach to determine the relationship. Selected using a purposive sampling technique, a total of 265 adolescents who actively used social media with an age range of 15-18 years participated in this study. They were recruited from a state high school in Pekanbaru, Riau. The Hymel's moral disengagement and the Willard's cyberbullying behavior scale were used to measured moral disengagement and cyberbullying behavior, respectively. The result of linier regression analysis indicated a significant relationship between moral disengagement and cyberbullying among young social media users. Furthermore, it was found that the male adolescents significantly scored higher in moral disengagement and cyberbullying. Implication of this findings were further discussed.

ABSTRAK

Remaja seringkali menganggap *cyberbullying* sebagai perilaku normal, yang biasa disebut sebagai *moral disengagement*. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui hubungan antara moral disengagement dan *cyberbullying* pada remaja yang aktif menggunakan media sosial dan untuk menguji perbedaan gender dalam *moral disengagement* dan *cyberbullying*. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif korelasional untuk mengetahui hubungan antara kedua variabel. Dengan menggunakan teknik purposive sampling, sebanyak 265 remaja yang aktif menggunakan dan media sosial dengan rentang usia 15-18 tahun berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Para partisipan diambil dari sebuah SMA Negeri di Pekanbaru, Riau. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan Skala *moral disengagement* Hymel dan skala perilaku *cyberbullying* Willard, masing-masing digunakan untuk mengukur *moral disengagement* dan perilaku *cyberbullying*. Hasil analisis dengan regresi linier menunjukkan adanya hubungan yang signifikan antara moral disengagement dan *cyberbullying* pada remaja pengguna media sosial. Selain itu, ditemukan bahwa remaja laki-laki secara signifikan mendapat skor lebih tinggi dalam moral disengagement dan cyberbullying. Implikasi dari temuan ini dibahas lebih lanjut.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology has made it increasingly convenient for individuals to quickly disseminate and access information, largely due to the widespread use of the internet. The technology and communication sector has witnessed significant progress, resulting in a digitalized lifestyle and an upsurge in internet consumption within communities. According to data from the Data Portal (Kemp, 2021), the number of internet users in Indonesia reached 202.6 million in January 2021,

reflecting a growth of 27 million users or approximately 16% compared to the previous year. Furthermore, social media usage in Indonesia stood at 170 million users in January 2021, indicating a rise of 10 million users or around 6.3% from 2020. Based on the information provided by Hootsuite (We Are Social) in 2021, YouTube emerged as the most popular social media platform among Indonesians, with a user base of 93.8% of the population. WhatsApp ranked second with 87.7%, followed by Instagram with 86.6% and Facebook with 85.5% (Rizaty, 2021a). Social media usage among adolescents are particularly high. The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) recorded that 75.8% of children aged 7-17 years in Indonesia used internet access for social media purposes (Rizaty, 2021b).

For adolescents place great importance on using social media as it enables them to stay updated among their peers (Azis & Salam, 2018). They strive to keep up with the latest trends both globally and within their social circles, as they do not want to be seen as unpopular by their friends. Additionally, adolescents who do not engage in social media activities are often labeled as old-fashioned and outdated, which further motivates them to remain active on these platforms (Tangkudung, 2019). Furthermore, Williams (2012) suggested several issues can arise with the excessive use of technology in adolescents. Firstly, adolescents who have been heavily influenced by technological advancements find it challenging to detach themselves from their smartphones. Secondly, technology has enhanced the lives of adolescents in multiple ways, enabling them to connect with others regardless of time and location. Thirdly, it can also have adverse effects if not properly supervised. This includes risks such as online predators, child pornography, and identity theft. Finally, there are additional negative consequences associated with information technology advancements, such as cybersex and cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying behavior is becoming an increasingly widespread issue, because on social media adolescents are becoming more flexible, even crueler and merciless to do cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In Indonesia, cyberbullying is not a new phenomenon. According to an annual survey conducted by Microsoft called the Digital Civility Index (DCI), Indonesia is one of the countries in Southeast Asia that frequently experiences cyberbullying. Furthermore, a survey conducted by Ditch The Label, an anti-bullying donation organization, found that 42% of 10,020 adolescents aged 12 to 20 claimed to be victims of cyberbullying on Instagram. Facebook was used by 37%, Snapchat by 31%, WhatsApp by 12%, YouTube by 10%, and Twitter by 9% (Pramudya, 2021). Unfortunately, as of 2021, many problems related to cyberbullying still ensnare adolescents. As many as 60% of adolescents experience acts of bullying and 87% experience acts of cyberbullying (Kominform, 2014).

Cyberbullying behavior is the act of uploading harmful and aggressive texts or images via the internet or other digital communication devices. These texts or images can be posted via personal websites, blogs and websites. Text messages that contain cyberbullying is usually posted via e-mail, online groups, chats, instant messaging and while the digital picture messages that contain cyberbullying usually distributed across social media (Willard 2005 in Satalina, 2014). Hinduja and Patchin (2010) stated that cyberbullying behavior includes sending harassing or threatening messages (via text messages) that intimidate someone, spreading news about someone, or stalking someone physically through various media or digital communication methods.

Cyberbullying behavior was also seen to be carried out by adolescents in Pekanbaru City. This was found through observation of the authors via the Instagram. There were several when students uploaded embarrassing images and followed by rude captions. The Instagram account "x6class" for example, upload images of their members taken with a bad angle and followed by the caption "*anak kukang (son of loris)*". In the other image post the caption "*babun (puffer pig)*", in the upload there is also a comment that is rude and uses bad language, namely "*karampang ko hart*". Another account, was also found to have done the same thing, namely uploading a photo that embarrassed someone, rude comment such as, "*Bianatang!!!*" and "Fuck".

Various reasons for adolescents to engage in cyberbullying behavior include hurting and embarrassing their victims, reducing their boredom, asserting power or demonstrating their strength so that they feel self-satisfied, channeling their aggressive energy, and so on (Kowalski et al., 2012).

One reason that can make adolescents behave this way is moral values which are built independently of themselves (Williams and Guerra, 2007 in Kowalski et al., 2014). According to Bandura (2002), moral standards do not apply in regulating behavior unless activated by individuals themselves, so that when these moral standards are not activated, it will make adolescents behave below existing moral standards. Meanwhile, social media is the safest social context for adolescents to carry out aggressive behavior that is contrary to ethical and moral standards, so that adolescents can justify aggressive behavior that is carried out (Ramadan, 2018). Aggressive behavior is closely related to cyberbullying behavior, and adolescents can bully others without feeling guilty (Luo & Bussey, 2019). Adolescents will distance themselves cognitively, and get rid of emotions such as shame and guilt when carrying out behavior that is contrary to moral standards. Adolescents will also ignore the tendency to judge their behavior as morally wrong (Runions & Bak, 2015). Bandura et al., (1996) suggested that moral disengagement is based on cognitive mechanisms that make it possible to support behavior contrary to moral values without guilt. Hymel et al., (2005) explained, individuals rarely accept that their behavior is immoral. Individuals will show and justify wrong behavior by involving various kinds of circumstances outside the context that affect behavior. For this reason, individuals may feel that carrying out cyberbullying behavior is normal.

Wang et al., (2016) revealed that when adolescents frequently engage in moral disengagement, there will also be a tendency for adolescents to engage in aggressive behavior in using social media. Kowalski et al (2012) said, to the extent that individuals have a tendency to detach themselves morally, it can make them more likely to do cyberbullying. Pornari and Wood (Runions & Bak, 2015) show that the online context can support moral disengagement by stating that the distance from the victim and the inability to see the victim's reaction can create the illusion that no harm has been done. The online context provides a structural capability for moral disengagement which can increase the use of certain moral disengagement mechanisms, thus enabling cyberbullying behavior to occur.

Furthermore, gender differences have been also found to contribute to variations in moral disengagement, as highlighted by Aprilia & Solicha (2019). Men tend to rely less on their emotions and act based on their thoughts, which may result in lower levels of moral reasoning and ethical behavior compared to women. This is supported by Wang et al. (2016), who suggest that young men have a reduced capacity to experience moral emotions like guilt or empathy compared to young women. Thornberg & Jungert (2014) also found that men exhibit higher levels of moral disengagement compared to women. Overall, these studies emphasize the influence of gender on moral disengagement, highlighting that men are more likely to detach themselves from moral standards and exhibit lower moral reasoning abilities compared to women. Therefore, there may also be variation in cyberbullying behavior among male and females adolescents.

From the previous studies and the existing literature, it appears that cyberbullying behavior is increasingly prevalent among adolescents. This is because adolescents begin to ignore existing moral values, cyberbullying behavior in adolescents is interested in studying cyberbullying behavior which is increasingly prevalent among adolescent social media users. Cyberbullying behavior that occurs can also be caused by adolescents ignoring existing moral values. Thus, moral disengagement can be a factor that may predict of the emergence of cyberbullying behavior among adolescents who use social media. Therefore, the present study tried to determined the effect of moral disengagement on cyberbullying behavior among adolescents that actively used social media in the city of Pekanbaru, Riau. This study also sought to determine whether gender differences existed in moral disengagement and cyberbullying behavior among adolescent social media users.

Methods

Participants in this study were 265 adolescents who attended a high school in Pekanbaru, aged 15-18 years, active users of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) accessed via smartphones. Participants were obtained through simple random sampling technique. The scale used

in the data collection process is the moral disengagement scale adapted from the scale of Hymel et al (2005). This scale reveals the four dimensions of moral disengagement, namely cognitive restructuring, minimizing agency, distortion of negative consequences and blaming/dehumanizing the victim. The scale was compiled based on the Likert scale model which consisted of 16 favorable items and 2 unfavorable items, with Cronbach's alpha = 0.846. The cyberbullying scale is based on Willard's (2007) consisting of flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, and exclusion. The items in this study totaled 18 items with Cronbach's alpha = 0.869.

Results

Before carrying out the linear regression analysis, a normality test was first carried out using the Shapiro Wilk test to determine the distribution of data in this study. Based on the Shapiro Wilk test, the Shapiro-Wilk coefficient was 0.990, $p = 0.054$. This indicated that the data distribution of the two variables in the study was normal or data normality assumption was fulfilled. Furthermore, a linearity test was also carried out to find out that the two variables significantly had a linear relationship. Based on the results of the linearity test with the test for linearity, the value of $F = 0.820$ and $p = 0.01$ was obtained, which means that the two variables, namely moral disengagement and cyberbullying behavior, have a linear relationship.

Table 1. Categorization of cyberbullying behavior

Category	Cyberbullying			Moral Disengagement		
	Frequency	Score	Percent	Frequency	Score	Percent
High	65	$X < 36$	24.52%	124	$X < 30$	46.80%
Low	200	$X \geq 36$	75.48%	141	$X \geq 30$	53.20%

To see the level of cyberbullying behavior and moral disengagement, the participants were placed into different groups separately, as shown in Table 1. Most of the adolescents filled out the cyberbullying scale were in the high category, with 75.48%, meaning that most of the adolescents who participated in this study often engaged in cyberbullying behavior when using social media. Furthermore, in terms of moral disengagement scale, 53.20% of the participants were in the high category, meaning that most of the adolescents who took a part in this study often behave without engaging the moral standard when using social media.

Table 2. Differences in cyberbullying and moral disengagement between the male and female participants

Variable	Gender	N	M	p
Cyberbullying	Male	119	38,58	0.003
	Female	146	35,17	
Moral disengagement	Male	119	31.69	0.002
	Female	146	28.96	

Based on the results of data processing carried out regarding the relationship between moral disengagement and cyberbullying among adolescent social media users, the results obtained are coefficients $R = 0.205$, $F = 11,496$ and $R^2 = 0.042$ with $p = 0.001$ ($p \leq 0.05$). From these results it can be interpreted that there is a relationship between moral disengagement and cyberbullying behavior in adolescent social media users. This study also further analyzed gender differences in terms cyberbullying behavior and moral disengagement as presented in Table 2. Based on the table, the average value of cyberbully among the male participants was 38.58, while the average value of female was 35.17, which means that the male score higher than women in cyberbullying behavior. The resulting significance value was 0.003 ($p < 0.05$) which means that there is a gender difference in cyberbullying behavior among adolescent social media users. Furthermore, in terms of moral disengagement variable, the data analysis revealed that the average value obtained by the male was 31.69, the female was 28.96, which means that moral disengagement was easier for the male than the

female adolescents. The resulting significance value is 0.002 ($p < 0.05$) which means there were gender differences in moral disengagement among adolescents who use social media.

Discussion

The present study aimed to determine the relationship between moral disengagement and cyberbullying behavior. This study was conducted among adolescents in the City of Pekanbaru, Riau. Based on the results of the statistical analysis, there was a significant relationship between moral disengagement and cyberbullying behavior among adolescent social media users in Pekanbaru. Thus, that moral disengagement can be one of the triggering psychological factor of cyberbullying behavior. Ramadan (2018) suggested that moral disengagement were related to cyberbullying behavior because the digital world is the safest social context for someone that allows them to display aggressive, unethical, and immoral behavior such as cyberbullying behavior. The findings of this study indicate that adolescents translate cyberbullying behavior into reasonable and justifiable behavior in social media. For adolescents, cyberbullying behavior was morally acceptable. Moreover, cyberbullying behavior makes adolescents more comfortable due to less intense contact with victims.

Adolescents who carry out moral disengagement will more easily conceptualize cyberbullying behavior as normal behavior so that they become more accustomed to cyberbullying behavior on social media. Lazuras et al. (2013) also explained in their research that moral disengagement has a significant effect on cyberbullying behavior. Individuals who easily conceptualize aggressive behavior into moral behavior will be more prone to influence behavior to always justify other aggressive behavior, such as cyberbullying. The notion of contemplating cyberbullying behavior becomes morally acceptable because the perpetrator's identity remains elusive to the victim. The victims, sometimes, cannot directly identify the perpetrators. This grants the perpetrator greater freedom to carry out their actions, leading adolescents to behave irresponsibly towards the victim, as they believe the victim deserves such treatment. Eventually, the perpetrator convinces themselves that their actions align with moral righteousness. In line with this, Hoareau et al. (2019) demonstrated a significant correlation between moral disengagement and cyberbullying. This is due to the ease of moral disengagement in cyberspace, where anonymity allows individuals to act without accountability. The veil of anonymity shields perpetrators from guilt, as victims remain unaware of the identities of those engaging in cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Furthermore, from the categorization of score of moral disengagement scale, it was evident that a majority of the youth participants in this study fall into the high categorization group, accounting for 53.20%. This finding highlights the susceptibility of adolescents to engage in moral disengagement when using social media. As adolescent disengaged morally, they can easily rationalize immoral behavior as acceptable and in accordance with prevailing moral values. Consequently, these adolescents develop a diminished sense of accountability when engaging in negative or morally questionable actions. Cyberbullies, for instance, derive satisfaction from witnessing their victims' helplessness as a consequence of their own actions. This assertion was supported by Thornberg & Jungert's (2014), demonstrating that moral disengagement activated by adolescents in cyberbullying leads to immoral behaviors, such as demeaning, intimidating, and blaming the victim. Consequently, adolescents lose their sense of responsibility and guilty feeling, enabling them to justify their actions.

Meanwhile, further inspection of the categorization of cyberbullying behavior among the participants in this study reveals that the majority of adolescents (75.48%) were in the high category, indicating frequent involvement in cyberbullying behavior while utilizing social media platforms. Looking at a closer analysis, this high prevalence of cyberbullying can be attributed to peer groups. Adolescents who associate with negative peer groups are more susceptible to engaging in detrimental behaviors. These negative peer groups can serve as catalysts for actions that contravene established rules and norms. In such peer groups, cyberbullying is normalized and deemed justifiable, leading to diminished feelings of guilt and a decreased ability to empathize with others. Mawardah & Adiyanti

(2014) have demonstrated that peer groups are among the influential factors affecting individuals' inclination toward cyberbullying. However, it is worth noting that 24.52% of the participants in this remained in the low category, indicating limited involvement in cyberbullying behavior.

In terms of gender, the male participants significantly score are higher in moral disengagement scale than the male. Female adolescents tend to use their logic compared to their female counterparts who dominantly use their emotion in dealing with problems. Thus, the male adolescents tend to make instant decisions to solve problems without involving their emotions. Male adolescents rarely make deliberate consideration in making decisions, therefore sometimes they use aggressive ways to solve their problems. Cyberbullying behavior can be an instant way for men to solve their problems, a means of expressing their dislike of other people, unlike women who are more sensitive to their emotions, making it easier for them to articulate their likes and dislikes about others without resorting to cyberbullying as a means of communication. According to Aprilia & Solicha (2019), gender differences contribute to variations in moral disengagement, primarily due to the tendency of male individuals to act without relying on their emotions, whereas women demonstrate greater sensitivity in human relationships and often follow their feelings. The limited utilization of emotions among men enables them to act based on their thoughts, irrespective of whether the behavior aligns with moral standards. Consequently, boys exhibit lower levels of moral reasoning and ethical behavior compared to girls. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2016) support this notion by suggesting that young men possess a reduced capacity to experience moral emotions such as guilt or empathy, in comparison to young women. Additionally, Thornberg & Jungert (2014) found that men display higher levels of moral disengagement when compared to women.

In regards to cyberbullying behavior in this study, male adolescents demonstrate a higher propensity for engaging in such behavior compared to their female counterparts. Boys often possess a stronger and more dominant self-perception than girls, leading them to employ various means to assert their power and strength. Harassment and disturbing others are tactics that boys may utilize to showcase their perceived strength. Cyberbullying behavior can serve as a mechanism for male adolescents to show their power and maintain their self-esteem. Consequently, male adolescents may encounter challenges in developing and maintaining relationships with others. In contrast, female adolescents tend to exhibit greater proficiency in nurturing and sustaining relationships with one another. This perspective aligns with the findings of Erdur-Baker (2010), which suggest that men are more inclined than women to engage in disruptive behaviors in the virtual realm.

Another viewpoint, as expressed by Wang et al. (2016), suggests that men face challenges in developing and maintaining personal relationships, which may contribute to their increased involvement in cyberbullying compared to girls. Additionally, Portman et al. (2010) revealed that male adolescents' difficulties in forming relationships make them more prone to judging individuals who are different from them, in contrast to their female counterparts. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that there is indeed a correlation between moral disengagement and cyberbullying behavior among adolescents who utilize social media. The majority of adolescents in this study exhibited a tendency to engage in moral disengagement, which subsequently increased their likelihood of participating in cyberbullying behaviors when using social media platforms.

There are some practical implications of this study, particularly concerning the higher involvement of male adolescents in moral disengagement and cyberbullying compared to their female counterparts. To effectively combat this issue, one key approach involves the implementation of moral development programs aimed at enhancing ethical understanding and moral reasoning skills among adolescents. Additionally, cognitive skills training can help equip adolescents with critical thinking and decision-making abilities, enabling them to consider the ethical consequences of their actions. It is crucial to design interventions that are gender-specific, addressing the unique challenges and pressures experienced by male adolescents. These interventions should encourage healthy expression of emotions, promote positive relationship-building skills, and provide alternative strategies for conflict resolution. Taking a comprehensive approach that addresses multiple factors

influencing cyberbullying, such as peer influence, social norms, family dynamics, and digital literacy, is essential. By adopting these practical implications, we can work towards preventing cyberbullying, fostering ethical behavior, and creating a safer online environment for adolescents.

Conclusion

The significant relationship between moral disengagement and cyberbullying behavior in adolescents using social media suggests that if adolescents cognitively disengage with moral standards, adolescents are more likely to engage in cyberbullying behavior when using social media. For morally disengaged adolescents, sending aggressive or rude messages that intimidate someone, spreading news about someone, or stalking someone physically through various media or digital communication methods is morally acceptable. The present study also highlights that men are more prone to moral disengagement and exhibit higher involvement in cyberbullying compared to women. Intervention to prevent cyberbully may focus on improving moral development and cognitive capacity of the male adolescent.

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