Correlates of Cyber Aggression in Young Adults

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Abstract

This research papers explored the relationship between self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression in young adults. The primary hypotheses of the study were (a) self-control and moral disengagement are likely to have a negative relationship with cyber aggression in young adults; (b) self-control and moral disengagement are likely to predict cyber aggression in young adults. The secondary hypotheses were (c) men are likely to show more cyber aggression and moral disengagement as compared to women, (d) women are likely to show more self-control as compared to men. Correlational research design was used with purposive sampling technique. Sample size was calculated by using G*-power formula. A total of 200 participants (Men, n = 100; women, n = 100) were included. The Self-control scale (Tangney et al., 2004b), the Propensity to Morally Disengage scale (Moore et al., 2012), and the Cyber MAD scale (DeMarsico et al., 2021) were used to test the hypotheses. Results revealed a negative correlation between self-control and cyber aggression and a positive relationship between self-control and moral disengagement. Regression analysis revealed that self-control negatively predicted cyber aggression. Independent sample t-test results revealed that moral disengagement was higher in women *(M = 38.83, SD = 6.34)* compared to men *(M = 35.37, SD = 7.77)*. The findings of this research will provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of cyber aggression and will be helpful in developing targeted interventions that promote positive and ethical online relationships for young adults.

Keywords: Self-control, moral disengagement, cyber aggression, young adults

Introduction

The growing prevalence of online interactions in today's digital world highlights an urgent need to understand the psychological foundations of behavior in cyberspace. The present research focuses on the intricate relationships between self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression in young adults. As young adults spend much of their time on online media platforms, they face new and complex challenges. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend how young adults regulate their behavior on social media platforms and how they rationalize their unethical actions on these platforms (Kowalski et al., 2014). By examining these connections, this research paper aimed to understand the role of self-control and moral disengagement in online aggressive behaviors. The outcomes of this research will provide an in depth understanding of the phenomenon of cyber aggression and will be helpful in developing the targeted interventions that promote positive and ethical online relationships for young adults.

Self-control plays a critical role in various areas of life. Self-control is not a fixed trait, rather it can be developed and improved through continuous practice, self-awareness and different strategies such as goal setting, self-monitoring and planning. Practicing self-control

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of any form can improve the ability to overcome any type of impulses (Baumeister et al., 2007). According to research multiple factors in cognitive functioning and personality traits also contribute to differences in self-control abilities across individuals, these factors include early life experiences, genetics, environmental influences, and individual differences (Moffitt et al., 2011; Willems et al., 2019). When self-control weakens, individuals may experience various challenges, such as excessive multi-screen usage and higher levels of procrastination (Allemand et al., 2019). Low self-control reduces individuals' ability to regulate their behavior according to the moral standards which make them more likely to engage in morally disengaged activities to justify harmful actions (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement is higher in those who intentionally harm or bully others, and in some cases, victims of bullying showed a higher level of moral disengagement as compared to non-bullies, who have neither been bullied nor bullied others (Obermann, 2011). Moral disengagement and victimization are considered to be as risk factors, while empathy and social competencies as protective factors in the development of harmful behaviors, whether in school or at home (Espejo-Siles et al., 2015). Cyberbullying is rapidly increasing in Pakistan, and is particularly affecting young women to a great extent, who, in return, rarely report such cases of cyberbullying. Perpetrators of cyberbullying manipulate language, threaten, humiliate, and degrade their targets using online and digital platforms (Batool & Shah, 2023).

This current study was primarily grounded in the strength model of self-control (Baumeister et al., 2007), which conceptualizes self-control as a limited yet developable resource influencing aggressive behavior. Individuals with lower self-control are more likely to act impulsively and engage in maladaptive behaviors, including cyber aggression, particularly when their regulatory resources are exhausted. While the strength model explains the capacity to regulate aggressive impulses, the theory of techniques of neutralization (Skyes & Matza, 1957) provides insight into moral disengagement processes that allow individuals to justify cyber aggression. Additionally, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) supports the study by explaining how aggressive online behaviors are learned and reinforced through observation and social approval within online communities. Above mentioned three frameworks explained a comprehensive thoughtful understanding of the psychological and social mechanisms that underlie cyber aggression in young adults.

With the increase of digital platforms and internet usage, cyber aggression has become a major concern among young adults**,** which is causing serious psychological and social risks (Kowalski et al., 2014). Due to the decreased accountability on online platforms, it has become much easier for people to engage in aggressive behavior. Therefore, understanding the psychological factors that cause cyber aggression is very important. Self-control and moral disengagement are two central concepts related to aggressive behavior. Having low self-control may escalate careless online practices (Baek et. al., 2016), while moral disengagement makes it possible for people to justify unethical actions without feeling guilt (Bandura, 2016). In virtual settings, these factors may collaborate to facilitate cyber aggression, yet their combined role is still insufficiently explored. Nisa et al., (2025) and Mukhtar et al., (2025) reported inverse relationship between self-control and bullying, while a positive correlation between moral disengagement and aggression. However, cyber aggression in young adults has not been thoroughly researched that is a major research gap. The present research was planned to

examine the association between self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression among young adults in Pakistan**.** It aims to increase understanding of cyber aggression and provide support in the development of impactful interventions that enhance ethical and good online behavior and mitigate cyber aggression.

Objectives

- To find the relationship between self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression in young adults.
- To find out self-control and moral disengagement as predictors of cyber aggression in young adults.
- To find out gender differences in study variables.

Hypotheses

H1: Self-control is negatively related to cyber aggression and moral disengagement in young adults.

H2: Self-control and moral disengagement are likely to predict cyber aggression in young adults.

H3: Men are likely to show more cyber aggression and moral disengagement as compared to women.

H4: Women are likely to show more self-control as compared to men.

Method

Research Design

Correlational research design was employed to explore the relationship between self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression in young adults.

Sample

A total of 220 students studying in the University of Management and Technology, Lahore, were approached in person (Men, *n*=110; Women, *n*=110). After removing the incomplete questionnaires, a total of 200 participants were included in the study. Non-probability purposive sampling method was used, considering the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Young adults aged 18-26 years who were enrolled in university were included were included while young adults who had no access to smartphones or the internet were excluded.

Assessment Measure

Demographics

In the demographic sheet, there were questions asked about age, gender, number of siblings, and education of the participants, family system (joint or nuclear family), working status, marital status, and the birth order of the participants.

Self-Control Scale

The self-control scale, developed by Tangney et al. (2004b), is a 36-item self-report. It was used to assess how well people can manage and control their impulses, thoughts, and emotions, and how strong control they have over themselves. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from "*Not at all like me"* (1) to "*Very much like me"* (5) is used to rate items. It demonstrated internal consistency (α=.52).

Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale

Moore et al. (2012) developed this scale. There is total 8-items of this scale. It measured 8 mechanisms: (i) diffusion of responsibility, (ii) euphemistic labelling, (iii) displacement of responsibility, (iv) comparison, (v) moral justification, (vi) dehumanization, (vii) distortion of consequences, and (viii) attribution of blame. The ratings were given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "*Strongly disagree"* (7) to "*Strongly agree"* (1). It has a strong reliability (α=.68). It has no subscales and reversed-score items.

Cyber MAD Scale

Cyber MAD developed by DeMarsico et al. (2021) was used to evaluate the motivation of cyber aggression in adults. It consists of a total of 28 items and a 3-point Likert scale ranging from "*Not at all true of Me"* (0) to "*Very true of Me"* (2) is used to rate items. These 28 items are further divided into 8-factor model which includes, social bonding (item numbers 2, 6, 19), social activism (item numbers 9, 10, 20, 23), reactive aggression (item numbers 4, 12, 15, 25), interpersonal distress (item numbers 5, 8, 17, 21, 26), thrill seeking (item numbers 1,11, 22), impulsivity (item numbers 14, 18, 28), vengeance (item numbers 3,13, 24),virtual dissociation (item numbers 7,16, 27). It has no reversed-score items. It has a strong reliability (α=.71).

Procedure

After the selection of the research topic, permission to use the scales was obtained from their respective authors. After taking permission, a pilot study was conducted to ensure that there are no issues in the administration and scoring of the scales. Data were primarily collected from a private university. The questionnaires were administered in person after obtaining their consent. The participants were fully guided, and the researchers remained present during questionnaire administration to address participants' queries and clarify doubts, if they had any, during data collection. On average, 15 -20 minutes were taken by the participants to complete the questionnaire. All the collected data were then entered into SPSS, and the relevant statistical analyses were performed.

Ethical Considerations

- Permission from the concerned authorities was obtained for the ethical approval of the topic.
- Permission from the original authors of scales was obtained before using their tools.
- Informed consent from participants was obtained and they were informed that their identities will be kept anonymous.
- Participants were also informed about their right to withdraw.

Results

Descriptive statistical and reliability analyses were performed. Pearson product-moment correlation was performed to assess the relationship between study variables. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to find the predictors of cyber aggression. Independent sample t-test was performed to assess gender differences in self-control, moral disengagement and cyber aggression.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Psychometric Properties of Scales

Scales	*M*	*SD*	Range	Cronbach's α
Self-Control	111.32	10.66	69-149	.52
Propensity to Morally Disengage	37.10	7.28	15-54	.68
Cyber MAD	26.81	7.88	4-45	.71

Above mentioned table explains the psychometric properties of the variables that are in an acceptable range.

Table 2

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation between Age, Self-Control, Moral Disengagement, and Cyber Aggression

Variables	*n*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Age	200	21.59	2.17	_			
2. Self-control	200	111.32	10.66	.08	_		
3. Moral disengagement	200	37.10	7.28	.10	.24***	_	
4. Cyber aggression	200	26.81	7.88	.06	-.28**	-.15*	_

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

Table 2 shows that there is a negative relationship between self-control and cyber aggression. Moral disengagement is also negatively related to cyber aggression. There is positive correlation between self-control and moral disengagement. Additionally, relationship between age and study variables was also checked and no significant relationship was found between these variables.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis to Predict Age, Self-Control, Moral Disengagement and Cyber Aggression

	Cyber Aggression		
Variables	*B*	*B*	*SE*
Constant	45.32***		7.56
Age	-0.31	0.09	0.25
Self-Control	-0.19***	-0.26	0.05
Moral Disengagement	-0.10	-0.10	0.08
R^2	.09		

Note. ***p<.001

In table 3, the results of a multiple regression analysis are given which was performed to find if age, self-control and moral disengagement predicted cyber aggression. The R^2 value of .09 shows that the predictor variables explained 9% variance in the outcome variable with F (3,196) = 6.43, p=.000. The results revealed that only self-control was the negative predictor of cyber aggression, while age and moral disengagement were not found to be significant predictors of cyber aggression.

Table 4

Gender Differences in Self-Control, Moral Disengagement and Cyber Aggression

Variables	Men		Women				
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(198)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Self-control	110.82	11.14	111.82	10.19	-0.66	.51	0.09
Moral Disengagement	35.37	7.77	38.83	6.34	-3.45	.001	0.49
Cyber Aggression	26.88	7.91	26.73	7.89	0.13	.89	0.02

Note. Men= 100; Women= 100

An independent sample t-test was performed to examine the gender difference in study variables. In Table 4, results showed that women reported higher levels of moral disengagement as compared to men. Moreover, no gender differences were found in self-control and cyber aggression in young adults.

Discussion

This research was conducted to explore the relationship between self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression in young adults. The following section discusses the results of the present study in light of previous research and theories. The first hypothesis was stated as self-control and moral disengagement are likely to have a negative relationship with cyber aggression in young adults. The results showed that self-control was negatively related to cyber aggression, which is consistent with previous literature suggesting that self-control is an individual's ability to resist impulses and immediate desires (Tangney, et al., 2004a). Therefore, individuals who are better able to control and regulate their impulses and urges then are less likely to engage in cyber aggression (Baumeister et al., 2007). Furthermore, the results showed that self-control was positively related to moral disengagement, indicating that individuals with higher level of self-control also reported to have higher levels of moral disengagement. This result was unexpected, as self-control is generally associated with increased moral behavior and reduced engagement in unethical or harmful actions. This positive association between self-control and moral disengagement could be explained by the fact that morality can be corrupted and is not a fixed personal trait (Bersoff, 1999; DeCremer, 2011). Therefore, it is not necessary that individuals with high self-control may still engage in immoral actions or display moral disengagement. Gino (2015) further explained that even highly moral individuals can act immorally, as morality is dynamic and context-dependent rather than a stable quality that defines an individual. It is also necessary to consider that individual and cultural differences may have contributed to these findings. Studies suggest that factors such as genetics, early experiences, environmental influences, and individual differences in cognitive functioning and personality traits contribute to variations in self-control abilities among individuals (Moffitt et al., 2011; Willems et al., 2019). According to socio-cognitive theory, moral disengagement is also not a stable trait but the outcome of the combination of situational and personal factors (Bandura, 2002, 2016; Martínez-Bacaicoa et al., 2024). Moral disengagement can vary across different situations and circumstances, and it does not remain consistent throughout one's lifetime. Therefore, even people with high self-control may exhibit moral disengagement depending on the ongoing situation.

The second hypothesis, self-control, and moral disengagement are likely to predict cyber aggression in young adults, was also partially supported. It was found that self-control is a negative predictor of cyber aggression and is consistent with the previous literature (Koroh et al., 2025). Baumeister et al. (2007) explained self-control as a person's ability to choose between when they want to do and what they should do. The individual with high self-control has maximum control over their impulses and urges and has strong willpower, and with that they can resist temptations and distractions without any difficulty (Tangney et al., 2004a). Based on previous literature, it is evident that self-control is a significant negative predictor of cyber aggression, as an individual with higher self-control is less likely to engage in cyber aggression and is better capable of regulating their impulses. The remaining two variables, age and moral disengagement, are not significant predictors of cyber aggression. Although correlational analysis indicated a weak negative relationship between moral disengagement and cyber aggression, regression analysis showed no significant predictive relationship. These findings revealed that moral disengagement alone does not account for cyber aggression; other predictors of cyber aggression may also contribute to its development and maintenance, as discussed in previous theories and literature (Bandura et al., 1961). Bandura (1977) explained in social learning theory that individuals learn new behaviors through imitation, observation, and reinforcement. Individuals are more inclined to copy behaviors they witness if they are rewarded or seen as socially acceptable. Therefore, moral disengagement is not the only cause of cyber aggression, watching other people who are doing immoral actions and learning from them just to gain desired results, such as attention and praise from peers, is also an important predictor of cyber aggression. Another strong predictor of cyber aggression was found to be offline violence and imbalanced parenting practices. People who experience violence may become perpetrators themselves, as explained by Bandura's social learning theory. Children learn many behaviors and attitudes by observing their parents or caregivers, so if violence occurs in the family, the child may be more likely to become violent as an adult. However, it is important to note that not everyone who experiences violence becomes aggressive; there are exceptions as well (Jahng, 2024). In the present study, age is not a significant predictor of cyber aggression in this study. But previous research shows that with increasing age, aggression also increases (Ybarra et al., 2007; Bauman et al., 2010). A previous study also states that as age increases, physical aggression decreases but verbal aggression remains the same (Olweus, 1994).

The third hypothesis was stated that men are likely to show more cyber aggression and moral disengagement. However, no significant gender differences were found in cyber aggression in the present study. Although past studies (Millaku et al., 2025; Uddin & Rahman, 2022) have shown that men are more likely to engage in overall aggressive behavior, including cyber aggression, compared to women, further investigation is needed to understand the underlying mechanisms. Research also states that women are likely to engage in cyber aggression because of the indirect nature of cyber aggression (Kowalski et al., 2014; Xiao et al., 2024). As women are more likely to engage in indirect aggressive behaviors like gossiping, spreading fake news, etc. Therefore, cyberspace could provide a convenient medium for them to vent and express their anger (Xiao et al., 2024). The findings of the study revealed that women engaged in higher levels of moral disengagement in comparison to men. The finding

contrasts with previous research, which suggests that men are more likely to engage in moral disengagement than women (Menesini et al., 2013). De Caroli and Sagone (2014) also reported that men are more likely to use moral disengagement mechanisms than women. The reason behind this inconsistency could be cultural differences, as well as the fact that the data were mainly collected from one private university.

The last hypothesis, that women are likely to have higher levels of self-control as compared to men, was not supported. Contrary to the hypothesis, the result of this study showed no significant gender differences. Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) reported that men typically exhibit low levels of self-control as compared to women (as cited in Gibson et al., 2010). Previous research has suggested that women are more likely to exhibit self-control skills to avoid any risk-taking and aggressive behaviors (Liu et al., 2018; Sang et al., 2023). Some studies also showed that women have higher self-control than men (Gibson et al., 2010).

Conclusion

The findings of the present research showed that self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression are interlinked. Self-control is a significant negative predictor of cyber aggression, whereas moral disengagement did not significantly predict cyber aggression. aggression. Gender differences were observed only in moral disengagement, with women showing higher levels than men, and no differences were found in self-control and cyber aggression in young adults.

Limitations and Recommendations

- Purposive sampling method was used and data was collected only from one private university which limits generalizability of the results. Future researches should be done on a diverse sample for generalization.
- In the Present research, only the quantitative research method was used. In the future, more valuable findings can be explored by using qualitative research methodologies.

Implications

This study highlights the protective role of self-control in the context of cyber aggression. Educational programs can be developed that focus on enhancing self-control and moral awareness. Academic institutions can develop programs to raise awareness on the harmful effects of cyber aggression and moral disengagement and to promote ethical social media use among young adults. Parents can also benefit from understanding how their parenting practices influence their child's moral development, as children learn from observing their parents' and caregivers' actions.

Author Declarations

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest between authors.

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