

# The role of moral disengagement and authoritarian parenting style towards cyberbullying attitude among social media users

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## Abstract

The increase in internet users and the lack of ethics in using the internet have become one of the phenomena that trigger cyberbullying on social media among adolescents. Various internal and external factors can influence cyberbullying attitudes, including moral disengagement and authoritarian parenting style. This study examines the role of moral disengagement and authoritarian parenting style towards cyberbullying attitudes in social media users. The participants in this study were 271 junior high school students aged 12-15 years, accessing social media for more than 2 hours a day and living with both parents. The data collection method used a survey by distributing questionnaires to junior high schools in Surabaya. The scales used were Cyberbullying Attitudes, Moral Disengagement Scale, and Authoritarian Parenting Style (PAQ). The data analysis technique used multiple regression analysis. They are reporting multiple regression results in the role of moral disengagement and authoritarian parenting style towards cyberbullying attitudes,  $R^2=0.434$ ,  $F(102.626)$ ,  $p < 0.001$  from the mother side and  $R^2=0.432$ ,  $F(102.003)$ ,  $p < 0.001$  from father side. However, in this study, 43/% contribution comes from moral disengagement, and the authoritarian parenting style has no effect, considering that research participants are individuals in the stage of social identity confusion, so the role of peers could be more influential.

## Keywords

cyberbullying, moral disengagement, social media users.

## Introduction

The post-pandemic era of Covid-19 has led to structural changes in internet usage, particularly in the economic and educational sectors. A survey conducted among the population in Indonesia reported that approximately 77% of the population is connected to the Internet (Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia, 2022). This figure has been increasing each year, particularly from 2019 to 2020, experiencing a growth of 8.9%, and in the years 2021-2022, witnessing a 3.3% increase compared to the previous year. Of 7,568 internet users surveyed, 905 were adolescents in secondary school, with 99.2% exposed to internet usage (Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia, 2022). According to the Digital Civility Index (DCI) in 2020, Indonesia was reported to have a low level of internet etiquette. It ranked twenty-nine out of thirty-two regions in the Asia Pacific (Microsoft, 2021). This data indicates that internet users in Indonesia frequently engage in online violence, particularly cyberbullying. Internet etiquette issues reported include inappropriate online behavior, including cyberbullying (Mazrieva, 2021). A survey conducted in 2020 among Indonesian adolescents said that 45% of the respondents had been victims of cyberbullying (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). Adolescent perpetrators of cyberbullying engage in actions such as teasing, insulting, intimidating, and publicly embarrassing others through social media platforms (Aprilia & Diany, 2022).

The number of Indonesian adolescents who have fallen victim to cyberbullying reaches 80% and occurs daily

(Safaria, 2016). Cyberbullying has been found to negatively impact the victims, including feelings of anxiety, depression, fear, somatization, sleep disturbances, and even thoughts or attempts of suicide (Pham & Adesman, 2015; Campbell et al., 2012; Iranzo et al., 2019). Cyberbullying is deliberate, repetitive behavior intended to harm individuals or groups using digital media (Barlett et al., 2016). Adolescents dominate most cyberbullying perpetrators due to their tendency to act impulsively without considering the consequences they or their victims may face (Bhat, 2008). An action categorized as bullying occurs when an individual inflicts physical, verbal, or psychological harm upon a victim, there is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, and the action is repeated (Hazler, 1996). Consistent perpetration of such acts indicates a social inequality between the parties involved (Marsinun & Riswanto, 2020). In the case of cyberbullying, the behavior may occur only once. However, it can be repeated without interruption through comments, sharing posts, and the commonly used forwarding function on the internet (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015). The internet also allows individuals to remain anonymous in social interactions (Dempsey et al., 2011). This diminishes the sense of guilt

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experienced by a cyberbullying perpetrator due to the absence of immediate consequences faced by adolescent perpetrators in the context of cyberbullying.

Behavior is formed through the development of individual attitudes, where behavior is a function of various decisions, attributions, and psychological processes arising from situational predictors and personality factors (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Gentile et al., 2009). Furthermore, if attitudes are positively reinforced, the stimulus-behavior pairing based on the situational context is learned to help shape positive attitudes towards that stimulus (Bandura & Walters, 1963). Similarly, in the study of cyberbullying perspectives among adolescents, it is hoped that it can predict the tendencies of adolescents who have the potential to become cyberbullying perpetrators. This is supported by previous studies demonstrating the importance of researching attitudes towards cyberbullying, as a pro-cyberbullying perspective can contribute to the tendency to engage in cyberbullying (Barlett & Genitile, 2012; Barlett, 2015; Barlett et al., 2016; Doane et al., 2014; Heirman & Walrave, 2012). During early adolescence, individuals undergo significant biological, psychological, and social changes, which subsequently influence their self-formation in later developmental phases (Santrock, 2019).

The emergence of cyberbullying attitudes is not solely attributed to internet penetration. Still, it is also influenced by the characteristics of adolescents that contribute to pro-cyberbullying attitudes and the interactive role of the surrounding environment (Hymel et al., 2005). One internal factor associated with aggressive behavior is the presence of moral disengagement in adolescents (Ramadan, 2019). Bandura's social-cognitive theory, which addresses individual moral agency in determining the boundaries of right and unethical behavior, explains that moral disengagement is a learning process in the social environment that enables individuals to engage in maladaptive behaviors towards others (Hymel et al., 2005). Moral disengagement is a mechanism by which individuals alter their perspectives to justify their amoral behaviors (Hymel et al., 2005). There are four distorted mechanisms within moral disengagement in adolescents, which simultaneously constitute its dimensions (Hymel et al., 2005). Cognitive restructuring is related to the beliefs of the perpetrators, where this mechanism enables adolescents to perceive their cyberbullying behavior as a justifiable action to uphold justice or to compare their efforts as less severe than other cases (Runions & Bak, 2015). The minimizing agency can be achieved by attributing the steps to a larger group, such as engaging in cyberbullying anonymously and online, which diminishes the clarity of responsibility for the cyberbullying behavior (Wang & Sek-Yum Ngai, 2020). The distortion of negative consequences addresses how adolescents with higher levels of moral disengagement tend to feel less guilt about their cyberbullying behavior, which is influenced by the perceived proximity, yet distance, created by the effects of social media (Wang & Sek-Yum Ngai, 2020). Blaming the victim or engaging in behaviors that demean the victim and attribute blame to them further increases the likelihood of justifying the mistreatment of the victim through mass comments and interactions on social media (Runions & Bak, 2015). Adolescents with a higher tendency of moral

disengagement are more prone to engaging in cyberbullying behaviors (Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2019).

The external factor of adolescents' environmental interactions in this study that is perceived to protect a pro-cyberbullying attitude is parental education. According to the U-Report Indonesia survey in 2020, 58% of the total 3,140 respondents agreed that parents play a crucial role in educating their children to protect themselves on social media and avoid becoming victims of cyberbullying, as parents are trusted and listened to by their children (U-Report Indonesia, 2020). The way parents carry out parenting and their involvement in monitoring the development of their children's behavior plays a role in shaping both adolescents' positive and negative behaviors of adolescents (Charalampus et al., 2018). However, several parenting styles contribute to adolescents' tendency to adopt a pro-cyberbullying attitude, one of which is the authoritarian parenting style. The authoritative parenting style is a parenting figure who is colder in their relationship with the child, preferring punishment to control the child's behavior to an extreme extent (Buri, 1991). The authoritarian parenting style may be effective in controlling the behavior of young children, but it is not effective when applied to adolescents (Baumrid, 1971). This can be related to the developmental stage of adolescence, where individuals experience an identity crisis, seek affection beyond their parents, have a fragile sense of self, prioritize peer group influence, and tend to rebel against their parents (Batubara, 2016). Adolescents must grow up in an environment with positive interactions within the family. However, in authoritarian parenting, adolescents witness aggressive interactions between their parents and overlook the child's need to understand these interaction patterns.

Bullying perpetrators among adolescents is strongly associated with an authoritarian parenting style due to the aggressive behavior of parents, which renders their advice and perpetrators' guidance ineffective in suppressing or controlling adolescent behavior (Stavriniades et al., 2014). This leads to cyberbullying because adolescents project their parents' aggressiveness onto social media. The relationship between parental control strategies and the prevention of cyberbullying involvement is not correlated; it is perceived to direct adolescents toward such behavior (Zhu et al., 2021). Authoritarian parents tend to control and monitor adolescents' internet access, depriving them of appropriate emotional support and increasing the potential for internet misuse (Charalampus et al., 2018).

The research becomes important, considering the urgency of addressing the issue of cyberbullying among adolescents, which occurs frequently. Furthermore, adolescents in identity exploration tend to rebel against their parents, as their development is highly influenced by the peer groups in their environment (Santrock, 2019). Cyberbullying, which often takes place on social media, has become a concerning issue for society, particularly for adolescents. Supported by the fact that the ethical use of the internet in Indonesia is still relatively low, conducting studies on cyberbullying attitudes is crucial. Previous research Hymel et al. (2005); Marsinun & Riswanto (2020); Runions & Bak (2015) has extensively discussed the triggers of cyberbullying behavior. Still, it has not addressed the issue of adolescents' pro-cyberbullying attitudes in identifying the general attitudes

**Table 1.** Demographic

Demographic	F	%
Gender		
Male	106	39
Female	165	61
Age		
12	41	15
13	76	28
14	97	36
15	57	21
Screen time		
<2 hours	11	4
>2 hours	260	96
Cyberbullying experience		
Victim	73	27
Perpetrator	27	10
Never experienced	171	63

of adolescents that may potentially contribute to their involvement as perpetrators. This study examines the role of moral disengagement and authoritarian parenting style concerning cyberbullying attitudes among junior high school students. Through this research, it is expected that a more comprehensive understanding of attitudes toward cyberbullying among adolescents can be established, serving as a foundation for preventive measures in future studies.

## Method

### Research Design

This study utilized a correlational quantitative research design. Two independent variables are used in this study. The first variable is the moral disengagement role, and the second is the authoritarian parenting style. Cyberbullying attitude is the dependent variable of this study.

### Participants

The sample in this study was taken through purposive sampling and involved 271 students from a certain junior high school. The participants selected are junior high school students from Surabaya, 12 - 15 years old, who spend their time on social media for more than 2 hours per day and still reside with their parents. An individual's average social media use is 2 hours; therefore, students who spend more than the average time on social media would have poorer well-being than the normative [Hunt et al. \(2021\)](#). Thus, it became the basis of choosing the participants. Before gathering the data, the researcher asked for consent from the school through a constitutional letter. The data was collected using the Google form that spread among the seventh to ninth-grade students in 3-4 weeks. Participants who filled out the informed consent attached could proceed to the questionnaire. The participants' demographic information is shown in detail below in [Table 1](#).

### Research Instruments

The cyberbullying attitude was measured using the 9-item Cyberbullying Attitude Scale, which has two dimensions, hostile cyberbullying attitude (HCA) and general cyberbullying attitude (GCC) ([Doane et al., 2014](#)). HCA is

the dimension that shows the compliant tendency towards cyberbullying that happened to others. Meanwhile, GCC is the dimension that shows how identical someone is with the characteristics of a perpetrator of cyberbullying activities. A Likert rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used as the response for cyberbullying attitude scale. This measurement has Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.90$  for the HCA dimension and Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.68$  for the GCC dimension; hence, this scale is considered reliable.

Moral disengagement was measured using the Moral Disengagement Scale adapted from Bandura's cognitive-social theory ([Hymel et al., 2005](#)). Eighteen items were derived from four dimensions— cognitive restructuring, minimising agency, distortion of negative consequences, and blaming the victim. The responses were collected using a Likert rating scale, choosing 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) on each statement. The item on number 2 from the cognitive restructuring dimension was eliminated to make a higher Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , from 0.67 to 0.80. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the minimising agency dimension was 0.56. Meanwhile, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the distortion of negative consequences dimension was 0.54. One item had a low CITC (0.28) but was kept since there was no significant difference from the reliability score; moreover, it lowered Cronbach's  $\alpha$ . Blaming the victim dimension has Cronbach's  $\alpha$  0.75. Therefore, this measurement is moderately reliable by showing  $0.5 < \text{Cronbach's } \alpha < 0.8$  ([Ekolu & Quainoo, 2019](#)).

Authoritarian Parenting Style was measured using Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) and took only the 9-item Authoritarian Parenting Style Dimension ([Buri, 1991](#)). This scale assessed the level of authoritarian parenting style from the child's perspective toward their parents. The response was collected using a Likert rating scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for each statement. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of this scale for the mother context is 0.87 and 0.92 for the father context; thus, this measurement is reliable.

### Data Analysis Technique

Normality and multicollinearity tests were done before the multiple linear regression hypothesis testing. Shapiro-Wilk test of normality shows a p-value of  $<0.001$ , showing that the data were not distributed normally. VIF score was 1.027 on Moral Disengagement and Authoritarian Parenting Style for Mother and VIF 1.014 on Moral Disengagement and Authoritarian Parenting Style for Father. It can be concluded that there is no multicollinearity in the data. All the analysis was done using JASP 0.16.2.0.

## Result

The descriptive data obtained reveal that the variable "cyberbullying attitudes" has a mean (M) of 16.58 and a standard deviation (SD) of 4.85. This indicates that the data exhibits a low level of variability, as it is dispersed around the mean. On the other hand, the variable "moral disengagement" shows a mean of 32.35 with a standard deviation of 6.51, indicating a higher level of variability in the data. Similarly, the variable "authoritarian parenting style (mother)" has a mean of 27.09 and a standard deviation of 7.41, reflecting considerable variability. Likewise, the variable "authoritarian



**Table 2.** Multiple linear regression analysis (overall)

Variable	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	p
Mother	0.659	0.434	0.429	102.626	<0.001
Father	0.657	0.432	0.428	102.003	<0.001

parenting style (father)” has a mean of 26.51 and a standard deviation of 7.95, signifying significant variability in the data distribution.

Furthermore, the multiple linear regression analysis results indicate that moral disengagement and authoritarian parenting style collectively play a role in predicting the cyberbullying attitudes of social media users. When considering moral disengagement and maternal authoritarian parenting style together, they account for 43% of the variance in cyberbullying attitudes among social media users. Similarly, when considering moral disengagement and paternal authoritarian parenting styles together, they account for 43% of the variance in cyberbullying attitudes among social media users. The overall significance value is  $< 0.001$ . Please refer to Table 2 for detailed information.

Further partial analysis was conducted to examine the individual contributions of each independent variable. The results indicated that only moral disengagement significantly influenced the prediction of cyberbullying attitudes among social media users, with a p-value of  $< 0.001$ . However, both maternal and paternal authoritarian parenting styles did not demonstrate significant effects on predicting cyberbullying attitudes, with p-values of  $> 0.339$  for the maternal authoritarian parenting style and  $> 0.647$  for the paternal authoritarian parenting style. Please refer to Table 3 for detailed information.

## Discussions

The results of the hypothesis testing indicate that the hypothesis is accepted. This means a relationship exists between moral disengagement and authoritarian parenting style in predicting attitudes towards cyberbullying among social media users. Moral disengagement is a contributing factor that leads individuals to engage in maladaptive behaviour, such as cyberbullying on social media. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting moral disengagement as an internal factor learned from one’s environment, leading individuals to perceive unethical actions as justified and resulting in negative consequences for others (Hymel et al., 2005). The actions frequently carried out on social media by many individuals can contribute to increased moral disengagement (Wang & Sek-Yum Ngai, 2020). One example of increased moral disengagement related to social media usage is the widespread practice of sharing photos or videos without the owner’s consent, as it is perceived as harmless (Suriyabandara, 2017). Social media users vulnerable to increased moral disengagement are more likely to engage in cyberbullying due to the prevalence of such actions by other individuals.

Regarding external factors, the authoritarian parenting style contributes to cyberbullying attitudes among social media users as it serves as a learning mechanism for children to engage in aggressive behaviour. Previous studies have indicated that children raised in an authoritarian parenting

style are more prone to projecting the aggression they receive from their parents onto others when using social media, and it often leads adolescents to seek freedom from the constraints imposed by their parents (Charalampus et al., 2018). Instead of serving as a form of supervision, authoritarian parenting is ineffective in controlling adolescent behaviour outside the home, including their behaviour on social media (Stavriniades et al., 2014).

The increase in moral disengagement and the impact of authoritarian parenting style on social media users are considered to increase the likelihood of children or adolescents engaging in cyberbullying. This aligns with previous research that examined the internal factor of moral disengagement and the external aspect of parental monitoring, showing that they contribute to an increase in cyberbullying attitudes among social media users (Ramadan, 2019). Based on the findings, both variables, moral disengagement and authoritarian parenting style, were able to predict cyberbullying attitudes among the study participants, accounting for 43%

Nevertheless, upon partial analysis of the two examined independent variables, it was revealed that only moral disengagement exhibited a significant association with cyberbullying attitudes among social media users. In contrast, the impact of the authoritarian parenting style was statistically non-significant in this context.

The first reason moral disengagement can influence attitudes towards cyberbullying is the phenomenon of displacement of responsibility. With moral disengagement, individuals can shift the blame onto the bullying victims and perceive them as deserving of the mistreatment they experience (Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2019). Consistent with previous research, cyberbullies perceive their actions as harmless because they believe the victims will be blamed or deserve negative treatment (Yang et al., 2018). This further reinforces the recurrence of the desire to engage in cyberbullying behavior.

The second reason is that moral disengagement affects how students perceive the consequences of cyberbullying. The online social media ecosystem creates a sense of detachment, where individuals engaging in cyberbullying do not directly experience the immediate impact of their actions. This leads to the assumption that the effects are not negative and will fade away. For instance, the widespread use of teasing or mocking with maladaptive patterns on social media contributes to the distortion of perceptions regarding the impact of cyberbullying, leading to its normalisation (Sari, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to impose limitations on the technology used to mitigate the negative effects on individuals’ attitudes and behaviors, especially during the developmental phase of adolescence (Zhao & Yu, 2021). Typically, feelings of guilt regarding bullying arise when individuals face direct physical consequences and face the person involved. However, the internet provides a safe environment for hiding one’s identity, thereby suppressing the emergence of guilt (Ercag, 2021). Moral disengagement can influence cyberbullying by justifying harmful behavior towards others and reducing individuals’ sense of responsibility and empathy towards the victims. This study aligns with previous research findings demonstrating a connection between moral disengagement

**Table 3.** Partial multiple linear regression analysis

Variable		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother	Moral disengagement	0.494	0.035	0.664	14.260	<0.001
	Authoritarian parenting style	-0.029	0.030	-0.045	-0.958	0.339
Father	Moral disengagement	0.487	0.034	0.655	14.124	<0.001
	Authoritarian parenting style	0.013	0.028	0.021	0.459	0.647

and adolescent cyberbullying behavior (Kesdu & Amalia, 2021).

When analyzed in partial, the non-significant finding of authoritarian parenting style in predicting cyberbullying attitude is attributed to several factors. First, it is influenced by the various elements and impacts of parental involvement in child-rearing. The presence of overly strict parental supervision is indeed considered to play a significant role in predicting cyberbullying attitudes compared to moral disengagement (Ramadan, 2019). However, the impact can differ if children interpret parental factors as positive. In addition to being a risk factor, parental factors can also serve as protective factors for children, preventing the development of various negative behaviors that may harm others (Syakarofath, 2019; Majid et al., 2023). This finding contradicts previous research findings, providing an opportunity for further investigation and exploration.

The second factor is related to the developmental stage of adolescence, where individuals become more connected to their peers than their family or parents as they develop autonomy and independence. Parents are no longer crucial in character formation during this stage, but peers play a larger role (Sugiarti et al., 2022). In the context of cyberbullying attitudes, attachment to peers has a greater influence on adolescents (Kesdu & Amalia, 2021). Research has shown that parenting style influences cyberbullying mood when mediated by peer attachment (Charalampus et al., 2018). The role of parenting style is more dominant during childhood rather than adolescence. Furthermore, adolescents tend to have more role models for social media-related activities among their peers and fellow teenagers (Soh et al., 2018).

Thus, as children enter adolescence, not only parents but also peers contribute to influencing the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents, including their attitudes toward cyberbullying. The inconsistent findings from numerous studies, confirmed by the present study, present an opportunity for future researchers to consider several limitations. One such limitation is the use of scales. It is important to carefully consider the use of scales, particularly in the case of the moral disengagement scale, which exhibits low item-total correlation values in the dimensions of minimizing agency and distortion of negative consequences. Additionally, the online distribution of the scale should be considered to ensure that participants accurately represent their experiences, given the limitations of direct interaction with the researchers during the scale completion process.

## Conclusion and Implications

Moral Disengagement and Authoritarian Parenting style simultaneously predicted the cyberbullying attitude of social media users. However, only moral disengagement

significantly influenced cyberbullying attitudes when tested separately; no significant influence was found on the authoritarian parenting style. Furthermore, for teenagers, the authoritative parenting style only contributed to exhibiting cyberbullying behavior with the mediation of peer support. This conclusion could prove previous research findings.

To prevent the cyberbullying attitude of social media users, the act to inhibit moral disengagement in teenagers is necessary. One of the attempts that could be made is to make teenagers improve their values and social norms about harming others and restructure their cognitive thinking. Besides strengthening parents' role in parenting as the predictive factor, peer influence must be taken seriously. Therefore, parents must direct their children to grow in a positive and nurturing environment. Educational information about the right attitude toward gadgets and social media use is preferable so they will not misuse the internet further to cyberbullying.

## Declarations

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### Authors' contributions

NPR designed the study, performed research, analyzed data, and drafted the paper. SV as the research adviser.

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