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Correlates of Cyber Aggression in Pakistani Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the link between self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression in young adults. It was hypothesized that (a) self-control would be negatively related to cyber aggression and moral disengagement, (b) self-control and moral disengagement would predict cyber aggression, and (c) significant gender differences would exist among young adults. A correlational cross-sectional research design was used with a non-probability purposive sampling technique. A total of 200 participants (men = 100; women = 100) were included using the G*Power formula, and in-person data collection was conducted. The Self-Control Scale (Tangney et al., 2004), Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (Moore et al., 2012), and Cyber MAD Scale (DeMarsico et al., 2021) were used. Results revealed a negative correlation between self-control and cyber aggression, while an unexpected positive relationship was found between self-control and moral disengagement. Regression analysis showed that self-control was a negative predictor of cyber aggression. Independent sample t-test results indicated that moral disengagement was higher in women as compared to men. The findings highlight implications for college and university students in learning how to manage online interactions in more ethical ways.

Key Words: Self-control, Moral Disengagement, Cyber Aggression, Online interaction

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1. Introduction

Due to the growing prevalence of online interactions in today's digital world, there is an increasing need to understand the psychological foundations of behavior in cyberspace. The present study focuses on the interaction between self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression among young adults. Young adults are among the most frequent users of online platforms, where extended exposure, peer influence, and anonymity can shape behavioral responses. These factors may influence how individuals regulate their impulses, justify unethical conduct, and engage in aggressive behaviors in online environments (Kowalski et al., 2014).

The rise in cyber aggression has made it essential to examine how young adults manage their impulses and rationalize unethical behavior on social media platforms. Cyber aggression refers to hostile or harmful behaviors conducted through digital means, including harassment, threats, and hostile communication. Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying such behaviors can help explain why some individuals engage in aggressive online conduct while others refrain from it.

Several theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding these variables. The Strength Model of Self-Control explains self-control as a limited resource that can be depleted or strengthened through use (Baumeister, 2000). The theory of techniques of neutralization explains how individuals justify immoral actions through cognitive strategies that minimize guilt (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Social learning theory further suggests that individuals learn aggressive behaviors by observing and imitating others in their environment, especially when such behaviors are reinforced or socially accepted (Bandura, 1977).

Prior research has linked low self-control, moral disengagement, and excessive internet use with various forms of aggression and maladaptive behaviors. Moral disengagement has been associated with bullying, victimization, and aggressive conduct, while excessive internet use has been linked to impulsivity and emotional dysregulation. Empirical evidence also indicates that cyber aggression is a growing concern in Pakistan, particularly among young adults, and that females may experience and respond to online aggression differently due to social and cultural factors (Batool & Shah, 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2021).

Despite the increasing relevance of this issue, limited empirical research has examined the combined role of self-control and moral disengagement in predicting cyber aggression within the Pakistani context. The present study addresses this gap by examining these variables together and exploring gender differences among Pakistani young adults.

1.1. Rationale

Keeping the advancements of today's digital age in view it is important to understand the link between self-control, moral disengagement, and cyber aggression in young adults. How and to what extent the three of the above are interconnected and whether or not they impact each other. Cyber aggression is increasing rapidly with the increase in online platforms and internet usage and advancements of modern technology and it is very concerning and harmful. Exploring and understanding these factors together can highlight the basis of cyber aggression its psychological and behavioral dynamics, additionally it will also provide in-depth understanding about how Self-control and Moral disengagement lead to Cyber Aggression in young adults. To recommend useful interventions to foster positive online interactions and to reduce cyber aggression among young adults. To overcome the research gap on Cyber Aggression in Pakistan.

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1.2. 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 the predictors of Cyber aggression in young adults
- To find out gender differences in self-control, moral disengagement and cyber aggression.

1.3. Hypotheses

- Self-control is negatively related to Cyber aggression and Moral Disengagement in Young adults
- Self-control, and Moral Disengagement are the Predictors of Cyber Aggression in Young adults
- There will be significant gender differences in Young adults

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

A Quantitative correlational cross-sectional design research was conducted to find out the relationship between Self-control, Moral Disengagement, and Cyber Aggression in Young Adults.

2.2. Sample

By using g-power formula the sample size was calculated. Total 200 participants were included in the research, (Men=100; Women=100). Non-Probability Purposive Sampling method is used in this research using these inclusion and exclusion criteria such as, only university going young adults who can understand and read English with age range 18-26 are included, while college and academies going young adults or those who have no access to smartphones or internet and do not use social media are excluded.

2.3. Assessment Measures

2.3.1. Demographics

In the demographic sheet, there were questions asked about Age, Gender, Number of siblings, and Education of Participant, family system joint or nuclear family, working status, marital status and birth order of the participants have also been asked.

2.3.2. Self-Control Scale

Self-control scale developed by Tangney et al., (2004) is a 36-item self-report Questionnaire that takes a maximum of 7-8 minutes to complete. It is used to assess how well people can manage and control their impulses, thoughts, and emotions and how strong control they've over themselves. 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Not at all like me* (1) to *Very much like me* (5) is used to rate items. It has a high previous Reliability of .89 (Tangney et al., 2004). Item no 1,2,3,5,7,8,9,10,11,13,15,16,18,19,20,22,24,27,28,30,31,32,33,34 are negatively stated items and are reversed scored also.

2.3.3. Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale

Propensity to Morally disengage developed by Moore et al., (2012) consist of total 8 items. This scale measure each of the eight mechanisms of Moral Disengagement i.e., Moral Justification, Euphemistic Labelling, Advantageous Comparison, Displacement of Responsibility, Diffusion of Responsibility, Distortion of Consequences, Dehumanization, and Attribution of Blame. Ratings are given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly disagree* (7) to *Strongly agree* (1). It has

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a strong previous reliability of .80 (Moore et al., 2012). It takes maximum 3-4 minutes to complete this. It has no Subscales and reversed score items.

2.3.4. Cyber MAD Scale

Cyber MAD developed by DeMarsico et al., (2021) is 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# 2,6,19), Social Activism (item# 9,10,20,23), Reactive Aggression (item# 4,12,15,25), Interpersonal distress (item# 5,8,17,21,26), Thrill seeking (item# 1,11,22), Impulsivity (item# 14,18,28), Vengeance (item# 3,13,24), Virtual Dissociation (item# 7,16,27). It has no Reversed score items and takes 7 to 8 minutes to complete.

2.4. Procedure

The topic of the research was selected after the approval of the supervisor. After topic selection permission to use scales of the respective variables of research were requested from their original authors once they gave the permission to use their scales then pilot testing was done to ensure there is no problem in scoring or administration. All of the three scales showed fair reliability in pilot testing, and after that formal data collection started. Data was collected mainly from one private university students. The questionnaires were handed to them in person after taking their consent. The participants were fully guided and the researchers stayed there at the time of questionnaire filling and tried their best to answer participants' queries and clear their doubts if they had any during data collection. The average time required to fill out the Questionnaire was 15-20 mins. All the collected data were then entered into SPSS and analyses were run.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Permission from the concerned authorities (Supervisor and head of department) was obtained for the approval of topic. Permission from the original Authors of Scales was obtained before using their tool. Consent from participants was taken and their identities were kept anonymous they were also given the right to withdraw.

3. Results

The sample consisted of 200 young adults with an age range of 18–26 years (M = 21.59, SD = 2.17). The sample was equally divided by gender, including 100 men and 100 women. All participants were university students who could read and understand English and reported regular use of smartphones and social media platforms.

Descriptive statistical and reliability analyses were performed. After this, Pearson product-moment correlation was performed to find the relationship between demographic variable (Age), Self-control, Moral Disengagement, and Cyber Aggression. Regression analysis was conducted to find whether Age, Self-control and Moral Disengagement are the predictors of Cyber Aggression or not. And lastly, Independent sample t-test was performed to assess gender differences across the three study variables

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Psychometric Properties of Scales

Scales	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Range	Cronbach's α
Self-Control	36	111.32	10.66	69-149	.52
Propensity to Morally Disengage	8	37.10	7.28	15-54	.68
Cyber MAD	28	26.81	7.88	4-45	.71

Note. *N*= No of items, *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard Deviation

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The reliability analysis showed acceptable internal consistency for the Cyber MAD Scale (α = .71) and marginal reliability for the Propensity to Morally Disengage Scale (α = .68). However, the Self-Control Scale demonstrated low internal consistency (α = .52), which is below the commonly accepted threshold. This limitation suggests that findings related to self-control should be interpreted with caution, as measurement reliability may have influenced the observed relationships.

Table 2

Using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis to Find the 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	_	.08	.10	.06
2-Self-control	200	111.32	10.66		_	.24***	-.28***
3-Moral disengagement	200	37.10	7.28			_	-.15*
4-Cyber MAD	200	26.81	7.88				_

Note. n= No of participants, *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard Deviation, *p*= Significance $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$

Table 2 shows that there is a negative relationship between Self-control and Cyber aggression. Moral Disengagement is negatively related to Cyber Aggression while there is positive correlation between Self-control and Moral Disengagement. Additionally, relationship between Age and Study Variables was also checked. No significant relationship was found between these variables.

Table 3

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

	Cyber Aggression		
Variables	*B*	*β*	*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. $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$, *B*= Unstandardized regression Coefficient, *β*= Standardized regression Coefficient (beta), *SE*= Standard Error

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive role of age, self-control, and moral disengagement on cyber aggression. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(3,196) = 6.43$, $p < .001$, explaining 9% of the variance in cyber aggression ($R^2 = .09$). Self-control emerged as a significant negative predictor of cyber aggression, whereas age and moral disengagement did not significantly predict cyber aggression. These findings indicate that higher levels of self-control are associated with lower levels of cyber aggression among young adults.

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Table 4

Independent Sample t-Test Is Used to Find 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. M= Mean, *SD*=Standard Deviation, *t*= Standardized sample mean difference, *df*= Degree of freedom, *p*= Significance, Cohen's *d*= Effect size

In Table 4 Independent sample t-test was performed to examine the gender difference in these variables. Results shows that Women have more Moral Disengagement as compare to Men. And no gender differences were found in Self-control and Cyber Aggression.

4. Discussion

According to First hypothesis of the study self-control is negatively related to moral disengagement and cyber aggression, results showed that self-control is indeed negatively related to Cyber Aggression which is consistent with previous literature which states that Self-control is an individual's ability to resist urges and immediate desires. So, if a person is able to control his impulses and urges then he won't easily engage in Cyber Aggression (Baumeister et al., 2007).

Contrary to the proposed hypothesis, the findings revealed a positive relationship between self-control and moral disengagement. This result was unexpected, as self-control is typically associated with moral behavior and ethical decision-making. One possible explanation is that moral disengagement is not a fixed trait but varies across situations and contexts. Individuals with higher self-control may still employ moral disengagement strategies to justify certain behaviors when situational or social factors make such justifications acceptable. Cultural and contextual influences may also play a role in shaping how moral reasoning and self-regulation operate among Pakistani young adults. Therefore, self-control alone may not be sufficient to prevent moral disengagement in all circumstances.

This positive association between Self-control and Moral disengagement could be explained by the fact that morality can be corrupted (Bersoff, 1999; De Cremer, 2011). This means that there is no defined boundary or line that on one side only good people will remain and on the other side only bad people, either it is good or bad person both can engage in some kind of opposite actions at some point of their life. Therefore, it is not necessary that people with high self-control would not engage in immoral actions or would not display Moral disengagement. Gino (2015) explained that even those who have high morality can act immorally because morality is not a fixed quality that defines people rather, it keeps changing and is flexible. Therefore, in some people with high Self-control it is possible that Moral Disengagement is also high. It is necessary to consider the likelihood that individual and cultural variances may have contributed to the reported results. Research suggests 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 across individuals (Moffitt et al., 2011; Willems et al., 2019). Socio-cognitive theory states that, Moral disengagement is not a stable trait but the outcome of the combination between situational and personal factors (Bandura, 2002, 2016; Martínez-Bacaicoa et al., 2024). Means that Moral Disengagement varies to different situations and circumstances, it

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doesn't remain same throughout lifetime. Therefore, even people with high Self-control can also exhibit Moral disengagement depending on the ongoing situation. Thus, the results do not comply with the above hypothesis which states that Self-control is negatively related to Moral Disengagement.

Second hypothesis was that Self-control, and Moral Disengagement are the predictors of Cyber Aggression. After analysis it was found that Self-control is a negative predictor of Cyber Aggression and is consistent with previous literature. 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 has maximum control on his impulses and urges and has a strong willpower with that he can resist temptations and distractions without any difficulty (Tangeny et al., 2004). From these previous literatures it is clear that Self-control is significant negative predictor of Cyber Aggression, as a person with more Self-control is less likely to engage in Cyber Aggression frequently and is better capable of controlling his impulses. The remaining two variables Age and Moral Disengagement are not significant predictors of Cyber Aggression and the results for these two are inconsistent with hypothesis. In correlational analysis Moral Disengagement was found to be in negatively negligible correlation with Cyber Aggression but in Regression analysis there is no significant relationship between Moral disengagement and Cyber Aggression that means that Moral Disengagement is not the only predictor of Cyber Aggression there could be other possible predictors of Cyber Aggression too that are discussed in previous theories and literatures. Bandura's (1977) theory of Social Learning states that by imitation, observation, and reinforcement, people learn new behaviors from the people around them. According to this theory, people 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 doing immoral actions and learning from them just to gain desired results such as attention and praise from peers is also the cause of Cyber Aggression (Bandura, 1977). 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 can learn behaviors 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's important to note that not everyone who experiences violence becomes violent there are exceptions as well (Jahng,2024).

The Study variable Age is not 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). Some past literature also states that as age of a person increases physical aggression decreases but verbal aggression remains the same (Olweus, 1994).

The third hypothesis examined gender differences across study variables. The findings indicated that women reported higher levels of moral disengagement than men, which contradicts some prior research. This inconsistency may be explained by cultural and social factors specific to the study context, as well as the fact that data were collected from a single private university. Social expectations, online interaction patterns, and contextual norms may influence how moral disengagement is expressed among women in this setting. No significant gender differences were observed for self-control or cyber aggression, suggesting that these behaviors may be similarly expressed among male and female young adults within the sampled population.

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5. Conclusion

This study investigated how self-control, moral disengagement and cyber aggression are interlinked and how their increase or decrease causes young adults to behave unethically on online media platforms. Results showed that Self-Control negatively predicts Cyber Aggression, means that higher self-control leads to less cyber aggression. Moral Disengagement was a non-significant predictor of Cyber Aggression but positively correlated with Self-Control, as discussed earlier. Age was not a significant predictor of the study variables. Gender differences were observed only in Moral Disengagement, with women showing higher levels than men and no differences were found for Self-Control and Cyber Aggression.

6. Limitations and Recommendations

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Data were collected primarily from one private university, which limits the generalizability of the results to a broader population of young adults. Additionally, the Self-Control Scale demonstrated low internal consistency, which may have affected the strength and accuracy of the observed relationships involving self-control.

Future research should address these limitations by including more diverse samples from multiple educational institutions and by employing longitudinal or experimental research designs to better examine causal relationships. Further studies should also consider using alternative or culturally adapted measures of self-control to improve measurement reliability.

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