



Moral Disengagement and Aggressive Behaviour among Young Adults

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Abstract: Moral disengagement refers to the cognitive mechanisms, including moral justification, euphemistic labelling, diffusion of responsibility, and dehumanization, that allow individuals to commit harmful acts without self-censure. Grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, this study examined the relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour among young adults. A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design was employed with a convenience sample of 144 Indian young adults (aged 18–30 years). Participants completed the Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS; Bandura et al., 1996) and the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ; Buss & Perry, 1992). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and simple linear regression (IBM SPSS). Moral disengagement was significantly and positively correlated with aggressive behaviour, $r(142) = .398$, $p < .001$, and significantly predicted aggressive behaviour, accounting for 15.8% of the variance, $F(1, 142) = 26.65$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .398$. Findings indicate that young adults who more frequently employ cognitive mechanisms of moral disengagement are more likely to exhibit aggressive tendencies. The results extend Social Cognitive Theory to a non-Western, Indian young adult population and underscore the need for interventions that strengthen moral self-regulation and empathy in academic and community settings.

Keywords: *Moral disengagement, aggression, young adults, Social Cognitive Theory, cognitive mechanisms*

1. Introduction

Human behaviour is regulated by internalized moral standards that ordinarily inhibit harmful conduct and promote socially appropriate action. According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, this self-regulatory system can be selectively disengaged through a set of cognitive mechanisms — moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame — that together are termed moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996). By reframing harmful conduct through these mechanisms, individuals reduce personal responsibility and empathic concern for victims, thereby weakening the internal deterrents to aggression.

Aggressive behaviour, defined as action intended to cause physical or psychological harm to another person, is a multidimensional construct encompassing physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility (Buss & Perry, 1992). Physical and verbal aggression represent behavioural expressions of aggression, whereas anger and hostility reflect its emotional and cognitive components. Young adulthood (18–30 years) is a developmental period marked by identity formation, expanding social autonomy, and heightened exposure to academic, occupational, and interpersonal pressures, all of which can precipitate aggressive responding (Paciello et al., 2008). In the Indian context, rapid social change and the growing centrality of digital communication have further reshaped how young adults regulate and justify their own conduct.

A substantial body of research links moral disengagement to aggressive and antisocial conduct. Bandura et al. (1996), in foundational work with Italian adolescents, found that moral disengagement was strongly and positively associated with peer-directed aggression, predicting aggressive behaviour even after accounting for empathy. Longitudinal research has since shown that moral disengagement is a relatively stable individual difference that predicts aggression and antisocial behaviour into later adolescence and early adulthood (Hyde et al., 2010; Paciello et al., 2008). A meta-analytic synthesis by Gini et al. (2014) confirmed that moral disengagement is a robust and consistent predictor of bullying and aggression across child and adolescent samples, operating partly through reduced empathy. Comparable associations have been documented for dating aggression among young adults, where partners who morally justified controlling or aggressive conduct reported greater perpetration (Rubio-Garay et al., 2017), and for organizational

settings, where moral disengagement has been linked to counterproductive and aggressive conduct toward colleagues, particularly among individuals with hostile personality tendencies (Detert et al., 2008; Fida et al., 2015; Pelton et al., 2004).

Moral disengagement also appears to function as a mechanism linking low empathy to aggression. Thornberg and Jungert (2014) found that adolescents low in empathy were more likely to morally disengage, and that this disengagement, rather than low empathy alone, accounted for their bullying behaviour. Related findings from Obermann (2011) and Gini (2006) indicate that bullies rely on moral disengagement, particularly victim-blaming and minimization of harm, to sustain a positive self-image while continuing to aggress, with disengagement levels highest among individuals who are both bullies and victims.

The expansion of digital communication has introduced new contexts in which moral disengagement may operate. Bussey et al. (2015) found that adolescents were more likely to morally disengage, and consequently engage in cyber aggression, when they believed their online conduct was anonymous or unlikely to be observed. Kircaburun et al. (2018) similarly linked problematic social media use to online aggression, proposing that disengagement mechanisms allow users to rationalize hostile comments and cyberbullying. Broader reviews indicate that passive, comparison-driven social media use is associated with negative affect and hostility (Verduyn et al., 2017), that heavy digital engagement is linked to psychological distress and hostility among youth (Twenge & Campbell, 2018), and that perceived exclusion online can provoke anger that individuals subsequently rationalize through disengagement-type reasoning (Schneider et al., 2017). Cognitive appraisal processes of this kind have also been implicated in aggressive responding to negative peer feedback more generally (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

Despite this evidence, three gaps remain in the literature. First, research has concentrated heavily on adolescents and school-based samples, leaving the applicability of moral disengagement to young adults, a period of greater autonomy and more complex interpersonal demands, comparatively unexamined. Second, the bulk of empirical work originates from Western, individualist cultural contexts; collectivist societies such as India, where social harmony and relational norms shape moral reasoning differently, remain underrepresented. Third, aggression has often been studied as a unidimensional outcome (e.g., bullying or cyber aggression alone) rather than across its physical, verbal, cognitive, and emotional dimensions simultaneously, using standardized psychometric measures. The present study addresses these gaps by examining

the relationship between moral disengagement and multidimensional aggressive behaviour among Indian young adults.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Bandura's (1999) Social Cognitive Theory of moral agency, which holds that moral conduct is regulated by self-sanctions that individuals ordinarily apply against harmful behaviour. Moral disengagement describes the cognitive restructuring processes, moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame, through which these self-sanctions are selectively deactivated, permitting harmful conduct without commensurate guilt or self-condemnation. Because moral disengagement is learned and reinforced through social interaction, repeated use of these mechanisms is theorized to progressively weaken moral self-regulation, increasing the likelihood of aggression. This framework is complemented by the General Aggression Model, which conceptualizes aggressive behaviour as the joint product of personal factors, such as disengaged cognitions, and situational appraisal processes, offering a basis for understanding how moral disengagement translates cognitive justification into behavioural aggression.

2.1 Research Gap and Objectives

Building on the gaps identified above, the present study aimed to establish a relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour among young adults aged 18–30 years in India, using standardized psychometric measures.

2.2 Research Objectives

1. To measure the level of moral disengagement among young adults.
2. To measure aggressive behaviour across its dimensions, including physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility.
3. To investigate the relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour.
4. To establish whether moral disengagement significantly predicts aggressive behaviour among young adults.

2.3 Research Questions

1. Is there a significant relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour among young adults?

2. Does moral disengagement significantly predict aggressive behaviour among young adults?

2.4 Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour among young adults.

H2: Higher levels of moral disengagement will be associated with higher levels of aggressive behaviour.

H3: Moral disengagement will significantly predict aggressive behaviour among young adults.

H0: There will be no significant relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour among young adults.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Design

A quantitative, non-experimental, correlational design was employed. Participants were 144 young adults aged 18–30 years, recruited through convenience sampling from educational institutions and online networks across India. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 18–30 years, willing to participate, and able to respond to the questionnaire; individuals below 18 years, those who did not provide complete responses, or who did not provide consent were excluded.

3.2 Measures

Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS). Moral disengagement was assessed using Bandura et al.'s (1996) 32-item scale, which measures the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher total scores indicate greater moral disengagement. Prior research has reported Cronbach's alpha above .80.

Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ). Aggressive behaviour was assessed using Buss and Perry's (1992) 29-item questionnaire, which measures physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility on a 5-point scale (1 = extremely uncharacteristic of me, 5 = extremely characteristic of me). Higher scores indicate greater aggression. Reported reliability across studies ranges from $\alpha = .70$ to .85.

3.3 Procedure and Analysis

Participants were contacted through academic and online networks and informed of the study's purpose. Informed consent was obtained prior to administration; confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and participation was voluntary with the right to withdraw at any stage. No harm was caused to participants, and data were used strictly for academic purposes. Questionnaires were administered online over several weeks. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) characterized the study variables; Pearson correlation examined the association between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour; and simple linear regression tested whether moral disengagement predicted aggressive behaviour. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

4. Results

Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 1, participants reported a mean moral disengagement score of 84.95 ($SD = 16.72$, range = 44–133) and a mean aggressive behaviour score of 88.01 ($SD = 14.35$, range = 49–119), indicating moderate levels and variability on both variables. Assumptions of normality, linearity, and independence of observations were met, supporting the use of parametric correlational and regression analyses.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables*

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Moral Disengagement	144	84.95	16.72	44	133
Aggressive Behaviour	144	88.01	14.35	49	119

Note. $N = 144$.

Correlational Findings

Pearson correlation revealed a significant, moderate, positive relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour, $r(142) = .398$, $p < .001$ (Table 2), indicating that young adults with higher moral disengagement reported greater aggressive behaviour. Hypotheses H1 and H2 were therefore supported.

Table 2: *Correlation Matrix for Moral Disengagement and Aggressive Behaviour*

Variable	1	2
1. Moral Disengagement	—	

2. Aggressive Behaviour	.398**	—
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Note. ** $p < .001$.

Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression tested whether moral disengagement predicted aggressive behaviour (Table 3). The overall model was significant, $F(1, 142) = 26.65$, $p < .001$, explaining 15.8% of the variance in aggressive behaviour ($R^2 = .158$, adjusted $R^2 = .152$). Moral disengagement significantly predicted aggressive behaviour, $B = .341$, $SE = .066$, $\beta = .398$, $t = 5.16$, $p < .001$, supporting H3.

Table 3: Simple Linear Regression Predicting Aggressive Behaviour from Moral Disengagement

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	59.01	5.72	—	10.31	.000
Moral Disengagement	.341	.066	.398	5.16	.000

Note. $R = .398$, $R^2 = .158$, Adjusted $R^2 = .152$.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 4: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Result
H1: Significant relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour	Supported
H2: Higher moral disengagement associated with higher aggressive behaviour	Supported
H3: Moral disengagement significantly predicts aggressive behaviour	Supported
H0: No significant relationship between the variables	Rejected

Overall, the results indicate that moral disengagement is positively associated with aggressive behaviour and significantly predicts aggression among young adults.

5. Discussion

Moral Disengagement and Aggressive Behaviour

The results revealed a significant, moderate, positive relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour among young adults, supporting Hypothesis 1. This finding is consistent with Bandura's (1999) Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that the

selective deactivation of internal moral standards permits aggressive conduct without commensurate guilt. It also aligns with prior evidence from adolescent and school-based samples (Bandura et al., 1996; Gini et al., 2014; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014), extending these associations to an Indian young adult population using standardized psychometric measures.

Prediction of Aggressive Behaviour by Moral Disengagement

Regression analysis indicated that moral disengagement significantly predicted aggressive behaviour, accounting for 15.8% of its variance, supporting Hypothesis 3. This finding supports the proposition that cognitive processes related to moral disengagement contribute meaningfully to aggression: when individuals justify or excuse harmful conduct, they experience reduced personal accountability, which in turn facilitates aggressive responding. Consistent with the General Aggression Model, moral disengagement functions as a personal cognitive factor that interacts with situational appraisal to increase the likelihood of aggression. Young adults who habitually engage in moral justification, euphemistic labelling, or diffusion of responsibility may therefore be more prone to interpreting situations in ways that legitimize aggressive conduct.

Implications

These findings carry several practical implications. Psychologically, the results reinforce the relevance of cognitive-behavioural interventions that target disengagement mechanisms, such as victim-blaming and minimization, alongside anger-management strategies. Educationally, universities and colleges can incorporate ethics- and empathy-building modules into student development programmes to strengthen moral self-regulation among young adults. Socially, the findings can inform community and policy-level initiatives, such as awareness campaigns and counselling services, aimed at reducing aggression and promoting prosocial, morally engaged conduct among young adults in India.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant consideration. The use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings to the broader population of Indian young adults. Reliance on self-report measures may have introduced social desirability bias. The cross-sectional, correlational design precludes causal inference regarding the direction of the relationship between moral disengagement and aggression. Finally, the study examined only two variables, whereas aggressive behaviour is likely shaped by additional psychological, social, and environmental factors not captured here. Future research should employ probability sampling and longitudinal

designs to clarify causal pathways, incorporate mediating variables such as empathy and hostile attribution bias, and examine how moral disengagement operates across digital and offline contexts among Indian young adults.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between moral disengagement and aggressive behaviour among 144 Indian young adults. Moral disengagement was significantly and positively correlated with aggressive behaviour and significantly predicted aggression, accounting for 15.8% of its variance. These findings support Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory in a non-Western, young adult population and highlight moral disengagement as a crucial cognitive mechanism underlying aggressive conduct. The results underscore the importance of fostering moral awareness, empathy, and ethical responsibility among young adults through educational and clinical interventions targeting the cognitive justifications that sustain aggression.

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