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Moral Disengagement and Cyber Bullying, A Mediator Role of Emphatic Tendency

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate a mediator role of emphatic tendency in the relationship between moral disengagement and cyber bullying. The participants comprised 338 Turkish adolescents. The age of participants ranged between 11 and 18 years. The study data was gathered using the Moral Disengagement Scale, the Cyber Bullying Scale and the Emphatic Tendency Scale. The data was analyzed using structural equation modeling. A bootstrapping analysis was conducted in order to determine any indirect effects. The results show that moral disengagement predicted cyber bullying positively and emphatic tendency negatively, and that emphatic tendency predicted cyber bullying negatively. It was further found that the structural equation model, which proposes that moral disengagement, has a direct and an indirect effect through emphatic tendency on cyber bullying was confirmed. The results of the study are discussed in the light of Social Cognitive Theory, and suggestions for future studies are made.

KEYWORDS

Adolescents, Cyber bullying, Empathic tendency, Moral Disengagement

INTRODUCTION

Becoming popular and being socially accepted is among adolescents, especially with the technological developments, cyber bullying (Reynold & Repetti, 2010; Werner & Hill, 2010) is a type of electronic aggression, and has negative consequences both in Turkey and throughout the world. Understanding the risks and protective factors of cyber bullying has recently become the focus of psychological research due to its adverse effects. Research during the past two decades has emphasized socio-cognitive processes affecting antisocial behavior, either in a facilitating way, such as moral disengagement (Menesini, et al. 2003) and enhancing prosocial behavior (Warden & Mackinnon, 2003), such as empathy. For this reason, in this study, the behavior of cyber bullying in adolescents is be examined in relation to moral disengagement and empathic tendency.

Cyber bullying is described as intentional, repetitive, and hostile aggression among adolescents through electronic media (Smith & Slonje, 2010). Ejecting individuals from chat rooms without reason, secretly taking shameful photos of someone, preparing websites discrediting or embarrassing someone, adding offensive, insulting, or threatening messages or pictures to a victim's website or blogs, sharing inappropriate images online, and spreading rumors about someone are among the most common examples of cyber bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Topçu, 2008; Moses, 2013).

Cyber bullying results in adverse consequences in physical, psychological, and academic areas. Its results include higher absentee rates in schools, excuse making for non-attendance at school (Katzer, et al. 2009), low grades (Beran & Li, 2008), low self-esteem and high depression levels (Ybarra et al., 2006) and attempted suicide rates (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Schneider et al., 2012). Compared to traditional bullying, cyber bullying may hurt victims much severely since it can happen at any time

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of day, involve anonymous behaviors, and it has the capacity to reach many people through different means (Moses, 2013). Due to the widespread effect in a short time, research into the risk factors and protective factors of cyber bullying has been rapidly increasing. Moral disengagement (Wang, Lei & Zhao, 2017) was examined as one of the risk factors while empathy (Wang, Lei & Zhao, 2017) was focused as a protective factor that have an effect on bullying.

Regarded as an immoral behavior, cyber bullying was associated with moral disengagement (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). The term moral disengagement was addressed by Bandura in his social-cognitive theory of the moral self (Bandura, 1991). Moral disengagement is an internal cognitive mechanism which deactivates cognitive internal control in order to minimize the moral effects of impairing behaviors and avoid moral self-sanctions (Bandura, 1991). According to Bandura, individuals rationalize aggressive behaviors by activating moral disengagement mechanisms to avoid negative self-sanctions when they behave immorally (Bandura, 2002). This process enables the individual to reason his/her immoral behaviors or to allow his/her inappropriate behaviors to be accepted more easily (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein, 1995). Cyber bullies use cognitive reasoning and rationalization to start and maintain their aggressive behaviors (Pornari & Wood, 2010). They make use of moral disengagement mechanisms by isolating their victims, inhumane treatment, intimidation and controlling the behaviors of their victims (Bandura, 2002; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). The electronic media is frequently used by individuals with higher moral disengagement behaviors because of its anonymity and opportunity to avoid face-to-face interaction with victims (Pornari & Wood, 2010). A cyber bully acts both immorally without feeling guilty (Slonje & Smith, 2008) and uses cognitive strategies in order not to take moral responsibility (Almeida et al., 2008), since interaction through the electronic media allows for communication without direct contact.

Empathic personality trait has been the focus of research as one of the protective factors of bullying. Empathy is considered to be a factor that can inhibit antisocial behavior and facilitate prosocial behavior (Wang, Lei, & Zhao, 2017; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003), and is an important construct to assess when examining bullying behavior. Bandura (1986) identified empathy as an important factor in social cognition, influencing one's ability to recognize and react appropriately to emotions presented by others. As a dimension of empathy, emphatic tendency is defined as the potential of forming empathy of people in their daily lives and social sensitivity (Dökmen, 1988). An empathic tendency is mostly related to an individual's potential to understand and feel the experiences and emotions of others and constitutes the basis of empathic abilities (Dökmen, 1994). The literature emphasizes the negative relationship between empathic tendency and bullying (Slonje et al., 2012; Steffgen et al., 2011; Tangney et al., 2007; Topçu, 2008). A higher empathic tendency reduces aggression since it makes it possible to anticipate possible harms given to others (Tangney et al., 2007). A lower empathic tendency, on the other hand, is seen as a risk factor for traditional and cyber bullying (Steffgen et al., 2011). It has been determined in studies that individuals who were bullies and who demonstrated the characteristics of victims were less empathic and displayed cyber bullying behaviors more often (Renati et al., 2012; Steffgen et al., 2011; Stavrinides et al. 2010). It is also asserted that a virtual environment decreases empathic communication since it is unable to receive nonverbal clues, such as facial expressions, which reveal the feelings or reactions of a person (Ang & Goh, 2010) and lack of immediate reaction (Steffgen et al., 2011). With respect to all of these explanations, it can be said that a virtual environment is frequently preferred by those whose empathic tendency is low and have a tendency for aggressive behaviors.

The relationship between empathy and moral disengagement has been the focus of especially bullying and cyber bullying research. Empathy is an essential element for pro-social behaviour (Wang, Lei, & Zhao, 2017) and moral development is risk factor (Wang, Lei, & Zhao, 2017) in bullying and cyber bullying. Recent studies found that lack of empathy (Renati et al., 2012; Steffgen et al., 2011) and high MD (Kyriacou, 2016; Meters, 2018; Runions, 2015) assists cyber bullying behavior. Moreover, in studies focusing on both variables, it was found that the lack of empathy increased moral disengagement and cyber bullying behaviors (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2018; Postorino, 2014; van Noorden, Haselager, Cillessen, & Bukowski, 2015; Zelidman, 2014).

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