

Why do Teenagers Lose Their Sense of Guilt? Moral Disengagement Antecedents in Aggressive Behavior Among Teenagers: A Scoping Review

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| KEYWORDS | ABSTRACT |
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| moral release, bullying, adolescence, antecedent, scoping review | Moral detachment is a crucial cognitive mechanism that enables individuals to engage in aggressive or unethical behaviors without experiencing guilt, shame, or self-sanctions. This mechanism allows harmful actions to be cognitively justified by minimizing responsibility, distorting consequences, or dehumanizing victims. The study aims to describe and synthesize antecedent factors contributing to the development of moral detachment among adolescents and young adults through a scoping review. A total of 23 scientific articles published between 2020 and 2025 were systematically analyzed using thematic analysis, drawing from international and national academic databases. The findings indicate that moral detachment emerges from complex interactions across multiple domains, including individual characteristics, social relationships, digital environments, and organizational or institutional contexts. At the individual level, intrapersonal traits such as dark personality characteristics (Dark Triad), high trait anger, and low self-control consistently emerge as dominant predictors. From an environmental perspective, weak parental attachment, negative peer influences, exposure to violent or aggressive digital media, and permissive or poorly regulated school climates significantly increase the likelihood of moral detachment. These factors collectively shape cognitive justifications that normalize aggressive behavior. Overall, the study highlights that moral detachment does not form in isolation but results from cumulative psychosocial and contextual influences, emphasizing the need for comprehensive preventive interventions targeting both individual and environmental factors. |

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INTRODUCTION

Modern teenagers today live in two realms at once between the real world (school/home) and the virtual world (internet, online social media). In adolescence, identity formation involves the process of defining who they are, what they believe in, and the direction of life they choose (Berk, 2018). However, dual living poses more complex moral challenges. The presence of online spaces offering anonymity often makes the consequences of behavior vague. This ambiguous condition makes adolescents vulnerable to rationalizing mass behavior, both face-to-face and behind-the-scenes interactions.

Joint data from JPPI and KPAI states that the number of bullying cases in Indonesia has jumped to almost one hundred percent. The forms of bullying that occurred included physical bullying 55.5% and verbal or psychological bullying as much as 29.3% (GoodStats, 2025). No less worrying, the trend of cyberbullying is also quite massive. The UNICEF report states that 41-45% of Indonesian adolescents have experienced online violence, a figure that shows the scale of a large problem that needs special attention (UNICEF, 2020). A local study in the city

of Bandung shows that 60% of the 1,610 children and adolescents in Indonesia have been victims cyberbullying (Maesya & Nugraha, 2025).

Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying this behavior is important in the study of adolescent moral development. (Bandura et al., 1996), the higher the level of moral disengagement (MD), the weaker the guilt felt, and the lower the urge to correct the mistake made. In international studies, cognitive mechanisms are referred to as moral disengagement. It is often associated with aggressive and antisocial behavior, including in online contexts. Moral Disengagement is a psychological process that allows individuals to let go of personal moral standards of their behavior, so that they can engage in immoral (transgressive) actions without experiencing guilt or shame (Luo & Bussey, 2023).

These behavioral changes raise fundamental questions about the function of adolescent internal control, which in the study is explained through the mechanism of Moral Disengagement (MD). (Bandura et al., 1996) explained that if moral standards are separated from transgressors, then these actions can be carried out without obstacles (self-censorship). So that the higher the moral disengagement, the weaker the guilt felt. Moral Disengagement is a cognitive process that is motivated by an individual's self-interest. Individuals tend to let go of their pre-defined moral standards when they benefit them (Moore, 2015). So that individuals who experience moral detachment will engage in aggressive actions without the burden of shame.

This loss of guilt is clearly reflected in the field data. Joint data from JPPI and KPAI recorded a serious spike in cases of bullying in Indonesia of almost one hundred percent, dominated by physical (55.5%) and psychological (29.3%) violence (GoodStats, 2025). The trend of violence in cyberspace is no less massive. Reports (UNICEF, 2020) said that 41-45% of Indonesian teenagers have experienced online violence. These statistics show a spate of pressing problems where aggression occurs across dimensions.

Various literature has consistently placed Moral Disengagement as a strong predictor of negative behavior. Studies show MD predicts bullying behavior in adolescents (Nisa et al., 2022) and cyber aggression in the early adult age group (Nocera et al., 2022). Meta-analysis also found a positive correlation between MD and cyberbullying (Mateus Francisco et al., 2024). Specific aspects such as verbal violence, sending provocative content, and stalking have been proven to be closely related to the high level of MD (Fissel et al., 2021; Lee & Jun, 2024).

Literature studies of antecedent factors still leave room for exploration. (Luo & Bussey, 2023) has successfully mapped between various personal factors such as empathy and moral identify with moral disengagement. The study made a major contribution to identifying risk factors in general. However, the meta-analysis approach specifically highlights the conceptual overlap in which the terms "aggression" and "bullying" are frequently used in various studies. This is where we begin to understand the moral of disengagement in the broader context of aggression.

This scoping review aims to map the global literature on the antecedents of moral disengagement in adolescents. This review will use a comprehensive approach to the concept of aggression (including physical, verbal, and cyber aggression) to identify how the triggering factors of MD work across contexts from the school yard to behind the scenes.

METHOD

The design and procedure of this scoping review followed systematic stages: planning (identification of objectives and protocol development), implementation (search, selection, quality assessment, extraction, and data synthesis), and comprehensive reporting of results (Kitchenham, 2004). This approach mapped the diverse literature on antecedents of moral disengagement in adolescents.

The data search employed the PCC framework (Population, Concept, Context). The PCC elements included the following: Population comprised adolescents aged 16–21 years; Concept focused on antecedents, predictors, or triggers of moral disengagement; and Context covered offline (e.g., school) and online (e.g., digital) environments for aggressive behaviors.

The main research question was: "What are the antecedents of moral disengagement in adolescents in offline and online aggressive behaviors?" Literature was searched comprehensively in Google Scholar, Scopus, and Crossref using Publish or Perish software, with Boolean operators (AND, OR) and keywords such as moral disengagement, predictor, adolescents, teenagers, aggression, bullying, and cyberbullying.

Journals were screened for duplicates using Rayyan AI and Zotero. The first stage screened titles and abstracts based on inclusion/exclusion criteria. The second stage involved full-text review for validation.

Inclusion criteria encompassed articles in English or Indonesian; primary empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) published in the last 5 years that examined self-control as an antecedent/predictor of moral disengagement or its mediation/moderation role; studies involving adolescents (early or late teens); and peer-reviewed journal articles. Exclusion criteria included reviews, systematic literature reviews, opinions, editorials, or non-empirical works; as well as studies dominated by children, adults, or clinical populations without generalizability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the review indicate that the antecedents of moral disengagement (MD) are quite diverse. Based on a study of 23 studies, we can find that the moral antecedents are disingenuous (MD) that individual factors trigger moral release in adolescents with a percentage of 56.25%. This Personality Factor is related to personality traits such as Dark Triad, CU Traits, Neuroticism, emotions (Trait Anger), Cognitive (self-control, paranoia).. In addition, social factors include family dynamics and peer influence, and the dynamics of perpetrators contributed 39.13%.

Environmental and digital factors were found in 30.43% of literature that included exposure to media that presented violence (violent video games), cyber contexts such as anonymity and aggressive humor. Meanwhile, organizational and cultural factors including strict and loose school climate and school culture, collective efficacy, and religiosity values accounted for a total of 17.39% of the total studies. Although they are percentages lower in the scope of the literature analyzed, these external factors still present an integrative element in complementing the understanding that moral detachment in adolescents is not just a single phenomenon, but the result of multifactorial interactions between individuals and social ecosystems.

| Table 1 List of Antecedents of Moral Disengagement to Aggressive Behavior | | | | |
|--|-------------------------|----------------|--|--|
| No | Author | Country | Samples/Population | Found Antecedent Variables |
| 1 | Yudhani et al., (2020) | Indonesia | Teens (13-17 years old) | Family Function, Religiosity |
| 2 | Dou et al., (2020) | China | 1,183 Students | Cyberbullying Victimization, Trait Anger |
| 3 | (S. Jiang et al., 2022) | China | 435 Students | Bullying Victimization, Bullying sensitivity |
| 4 | Yang et al., (2020) | China | 404 Teens | Perceived School Climate, Peer Defending |
| 5 | Bao & Yu, (2025) | China | 1083 Teenagers (11-20 Years) | Parental Attachment |
| 6 | Ak et al., (2022) | Turkey | 478 High School Teens (11-14 Years) | Violent Video Game |
| 7 | Song & Wang, (2021) | China | 850 Middle Students | School Culture (Loose-Tight), Collective Efficacy |
| 8 | Zhang et al., (2021) | China | 1,796 Students | Parenting style, Moral identity |
| 9 | Zhu et al., (2022) | China | 305 Students | Aggressive humor style, Online Normative Tolerance |
| 10 | Lubis et al., (2022) | Indonesia | 346 Teens (17-21 Years Old) | Emotional intelligence and anonymity |
| 11 | Luo & Bussey, (2022) | Australia | 563 Students (12-15 Years) | Cyber bystanding (spectators), Cyber Victimization (victims) |
| 12 | L. Yang & Gao, (2023) | China | 906 Teens | Peer status (peer role), social self-efficacy |
| 13 | H. Jiang et al., (2022) | China | 491 Teens | Normative belief about aggression (normalization of aggression behavior), self control |
| 14 | Lin & Xiao, (2023) | China | 1519 Teens Grades 1-3 High School | Paranoid tendency |
| 15 | Paciello et al., (2023) | Finland | 853 Students (14-17 Years) | Impulsivity, Self Regulation |
| 16 | Abdulaliam, (2024) | Saudi Arabia | 804 High School Teens | Power, Ideology, Sadism, Revenge |
| 17 | Jia et al., (2025) | China | 1,055 Beijing Vocational Schools and Students | Traditional Bullying Victimization, Social Support, Gender |
| 18 | Sun et al., (2025) | China | 7,837 Late Adolescents (18-21 yrs) | Lack of digital literacy |
| 19 | Xu et al., (2025) | China | 688 Elementary School Students (Early Teens) | Psychological Control of Ortu (PPC), Status of an Only Child, Ortu Education |
| 20 | Brehmer & Meyer, (2025) | UK | 419 undergraduate students from the United Kingdom | Basic Moral Sensitivity, Cognitive Attitudes, Subjective Norms |
| 21 | Gholami et al., (2025) | Iran | 344 students from the University of Tehran | Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy |

| No | Author | Country | Samples/Population | Found Antecedent Variables |
|----|-----------------------------|---------|--------------------------------|--|
| 22 | Wang & Liu, (2025) | China | 495 Students (17-24 years old) | Parental Rejection, Emotional Warmth, Neuroticism |
| 23 | Thornberg et al., (2025) | Sweden | 706 Teens (Average 14.5 Years) | Callousness, Uncaringness, Unemotionality (cruelty, indifference, and heartlessness) |

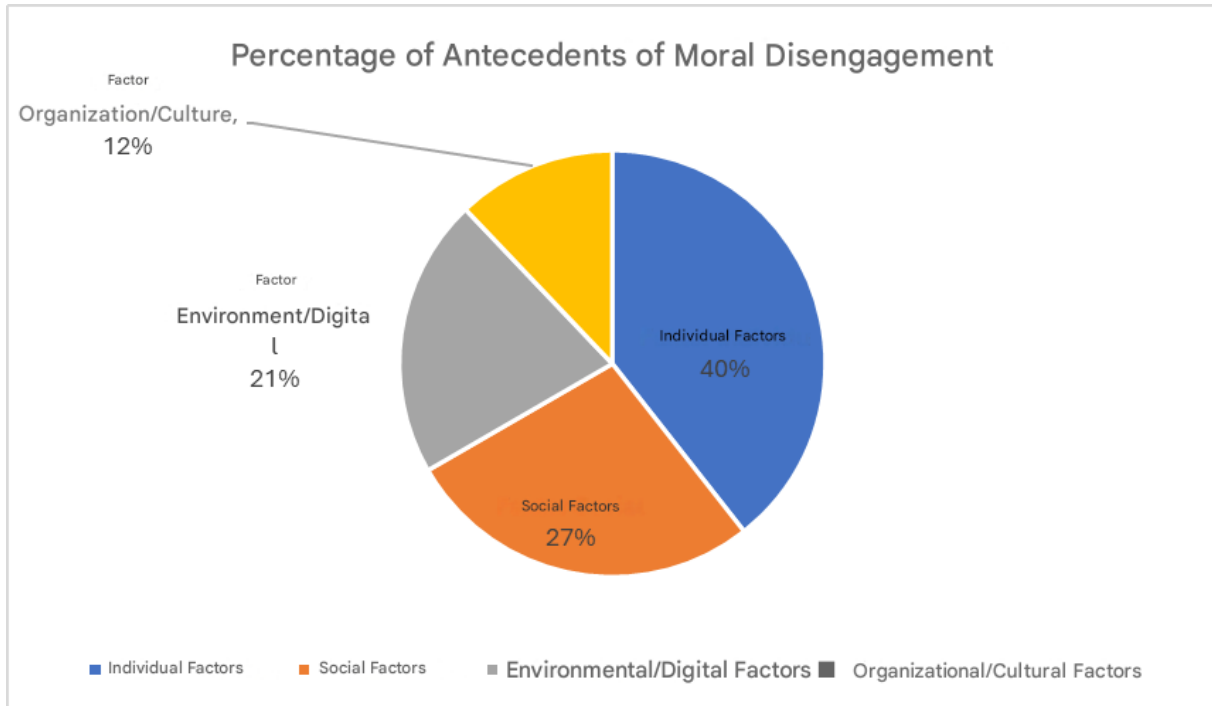


Figure 1. Percentage of Antecedent List of Moral Disengagement to Aggressive Behavior

Individual factors are the most dominant determinants in triggering moral discharge or moral disengagement (MD). This factor includes the dark personality dimension (dark triad personality) and emotional vulnerability. Two of the three properties dark triad personality i.e. Machiavellianism and psychopathy is indirectly related to moral violations such as cyberbullying through moral disengagement (MD) (Gholami et al., 2025). In addition, individuals with Callous-Unemotional (CU) which is characterized by cruelty and empathy deficit is proven to use moral release (MD) as a mediator to legitimize legal actions (Thornberg et al., 2025).

In addition to this study from Paciello et al., (2023) Provides affirmation that individual factors such as impudence play a role in cyberbullying behavior through moral release mediation. In other words, impulsivity not only drives aggressive behavior directly but increases the tendency of individuals to relinquish cognitive moral control so that cyberbullying is subjectively acceptable. Individuals who are highly impulsive tend to react quickly and automatically when an emotional stimulus occurs. This condition weakens the self-control mechanism, opening up space for activation moral disengagement as a cognitive strategy in justifying actions that violate norms. In addition, individuals with low moral sensitivity will tend to rationalize bad behavior more, so that they can activate moral mechanisms (Brehmer & Meyer, 2025).

Individual factors associated with reactive emotions such as trait anger (tendency to anger) and neuroticism act as catalysts that make it easier for adolescents to let go of their moral standards (Dou et al., 2020). Trait anger can be categorized as predictors moral disengagement at the individual level, but are indirect, situational, and contextual. In certain situations trait anger can directly trigger aggression directly without a mechanism moral disengagement. Furthermore, neuroticism serves as an individual antecedent that is dispositional to moral disengagement (Wang & Liu, 2025). Individuals with high levels of neuroticism tend to experience emotional instability, anxiety, and affective distress. In situations of social conflict, individuals with high neuroticism often experience moral detachment as a cognitive strategy to reduce moral and emotional tension.

One of the individual factors that is the antecedent of moral disengagement is a paranoid emotional tendency characterized by chronic negative emotions, excessive suspicion and an unstable affective state will allow them to activate the mechanism moral disengagement (Lin & Xiao, 2023). In this condition, moral release has a function as a cognitive strategy in reducing moral tension and conflict by justifying aggressive actions so as to cause a sense of indifference to the victim of bullying. Paranoid emotional tendencies are not only related to the appearance of aggression, but trigger cognitive activation that allows such aggression to be morally acceptable. Emotional intelligence plays a role in the regulation of emotions, empathy, and interpersonal relationships that allow it to be the protection of individuals in committing crimes or acts of hurting others. However, empirical findings suggest that emotional intelligence does not guarantee inhibiting bullying behavior when the individual has activated moral disengagement (Lubis et al., 2022).

In addition to individual factors, social factors in microsystem interactions play a crucial role in moral release in adolescents. Especially the family environment and peer dynamics. Roles in family microsystems such as parental attachment, parenting patterns, emotional warmth (emotional warmth), and religiosity in the family has a role in activating the mechanism of moral release (Bao & Yu, 2025; Wang & Liu, 2025; Xu et al., 2025; Yudhani et al., 2020). Detached from the level of moral identity, the parenting style factor acts as a strong contextual antecedent for moral disengagement (Zhang et al., 2021). The results of this series of findings are an integration between Bandura's social cognitive theory and Bowlby's theory of attachment, in which the poor quality of child-parent relationships inhibits the internalization of healthy moral standards so that it has an impact on specific moral mechanisms. Especially in the spread of responsibility (diffusion of responsibility) and victim attribution (victim attribution).

Longitudinal study by Bao & Yu, (2025) emphasizes that pro-bullying behavior (pro-bullying bystander behaviors) mediated by moral disengagement (MD). In line with previous research, adolescents who are observers of bullying indirectly support this behavior through moral release mechanisms. Peers' defending (Peer support) is a social factor that plays an important role as a protector that can suppress the tendency to release morals and adolescent bullying behaviors. In Bandura's cognitive social framework, peer support is understood as a social context that influences the moral regulation of individuals. In particular, peer support serves as a moderator in weakening the tendency to moral detachment that has a behavioral impact bullying (J. Yang et al., 2020). In addition, peer status is an important social context for adolescent moral development in reducing moral detachment (L. Yang & Gao, 2023).

Adolescents who are liked by their peers tend to receive more positive moral treatment than peers who are less liked or socially marginalized.

Individuals who have experienced bullying tend to act as observers (bystander) passive when seeing an incident of bullying, it triggers moral release as a mechanism of bullying (S. Jiang et al., 2022; Luo & Bussey, 2022). Meanwhile, social support (social support) shows a complex role towards moral release for victims of bullying. Excessive social support can actually act as a psychological burden that increases the moral release of individuals due to the pressure of social expectations (Jia et al., 2025). In this context, the experience of victimization serves as a psychosocial antecedent that affects the bullying situation cognitively and morally.

The digital environment factor, especially in violent content, acts as a catalyst in the moral release of teenagers in cyberspace. Based on the findings Ak et al., (2022), the use of violent games positively correlates significantly with cyberbullying behavior through the mediation of moral release. This is theoretically aligned with GAM (General Aggressive Model) where repeated consumption of aggressive content will have an impact on normalizing violent piercings in adolescent cognition. This situation will be worse if cyber moral literacy is low. Individuals with low levels of cyber moral literacy show a higher tendency to experience moral detachment (Sun et al., 2025). In addition, anonymity in online interactions can be used as a significant contextual antecedents in the activation of moral release in adolescents (Lubis et al., 2022). Moreover, the characteristics of the cyber environment create a psychological distance between the perpetrator and the victim, resulting in a reduced understanding of the direct consequences of adverse cyber actions.

In addition to exposure to digital content, the culture formed in online communication also affects the activation of moral release. The study states that aggressive humor combined with normalization creates a permissive climate for cyber aggression. Aggressive humor is linked to moral detachment, whereas moral detachment contributes to cyberbullying (Zhu et al., 2022). In this context, bullying is defined as "just a joke" or entertainment so that normalization tolerance occurs that activates the mechanism of moral release in the individual. The digital environment offers a space of anonymity and emotional distance that makes the cognitive distortion of adolescents so that the consequences of adverse actions become blurred.

The findings of the study suggest that moral detachment is achieved through certain cognitive mechanisms that make individuals justify despicable actions without experiencing guilt. Individuals in maintaining self-esteem and social security will avoid internal control of prevailing moral standards (Abdülaliam, 2024). Moral detachment in this context is motivated by the perception of the ideology and beliefs of the perpetrator. For example, minority groups, members of unwanted groups, the opposite sex or victims of bullying have low social and material status. Organizational factors are macro structures that determine the effectiveness of social control over bullying behavior, especially school climate and culture. This is in line with the findings J. Yang et al., (2020) which states that schools with a "strict" culture, namely schools that have clear and consistent norms, can strengthen the collective efficacy of students. So that the opportunity for teenagers to make moral justifications for their acts of aggression becomes minimal.

CONCLUSION

Moral disengagement among adolescents emerges from complex interactions between internal factors—such as Dark Triad traits, high trait anger, and low moral sensitivity—and external influences like insecure parental attachment, permissive school environments, and digital media that normalize violence through anonymity, enabling justifications for bullying and bystander inaction. Interventions should adopt a multi-layered approach, combining individual character-building (e.g., emotional regulation and empathy training) with systemic improvements in family supervision and school climates to prevent early moral disengagement. For future research, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term efficacy of these integrated interventions across diverse cultural contexts, particularly testing culturally adapted programs in digital-heavy environments like Indonesia to address evolving online aggression.

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