



Moral Disengagement as a Predictor of Attitude towards Cybercrime: The Moderating Role of Social Identity

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Abstract

This study examined the predictive relationship of moral disengagement on attitude towards cybercrime as well as the moderating role of social identity among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. 539 undergraduates participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years with mean age of 22.50 and standard deviation of 3.50. 341 (63.3%) were male while 198 (36.7) were females. Three instruments were used for data collection: Moral Disengagement scale, Attitude towards Cybercrime scale and Social Identity Scale. This study is a correlational study and moderated regression analysis was adopted for data analyses. The result indicated that the first hypothesis was accepted at $\beta = .84, p < .001 (n = 529)$. However, the second hypotheses of the study was rejected at $-.009, p > .05 (n = 529)$; which indicated that while moral disengagement predicted attitude towards cybercrime, social identity did not moderated the relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime. Hence, it was recommended that tertiary institutions should enact laws that can deter students from going into cybercrime.

Keywords: Moral disengagement, attitude towards cybercrime, social identity

Introduction

The high rate of get-rich-quick syndrome among our youths is in the increase. As such, many of the youths avoids the mainstream mood of livelihood which they considers as cumbersome and time consuming, and embraced what they believe to be a soft work which entails all manner of cybercrimes with intention of exploiting other cyberspace users. Adesina (2017) describe cybercrime as any form of unhealthy act directed towards any cyberspace user; intending to make the individual lose valuables such as information,

finance, integrity, morality, market value, customers, etc. Cybercrime could as well be seen as any kind of unhealthy and socially unacceptable behaviour carried out using internet support device or digital device (Izevbuwa & Ngwoke 2022). These unhealthy mindset of taking advantage of other cyberspace users; aiming at enriching oneself could be responsible for an increased negative attitude towards cybercrime and as such, have negative implications on social development as well as hampers many other genuine business owners on the cyberspace from flourishing. Alabi et. al., (2023) opined that the recent influx of cyberspace users contributes to the high rate of unhealthy attitude towards cybercrime as observed among youths.

Attitude is an important phenomenon within psychological palace why because it helps in understanding an individual and it connotes an individual's perception, behavior (action), emotion and or affection (Jang & Elfenbein, 2015). Attitude of youths is very important in every society as it impacts their behaviour towards their environment, interpersonal relationship, perception, etc. Quadrel et al., (1993) stated that adolescent often underestimates the negative outcomes of their behaviours; thus making them susceptible to unhealthy behaviours like cybercrime. Hence, understanding the mechanism and psychological factor (moral disengagement) that could predict attitude of Nigerian youths towards cybercrime; as well as factor (social identity) that could moderate the negative impact of the predictive factor would be of notable research.

Within the scope of this study, psychological factor such as moral disengagement will be accessed to explore the extent to which it could impact attitude towards cybercrime. Also, the moderating effect of social identity will as well be investigated to know its potency in moderating the relationship between moral disengagement and attitude to cybercrime.

Trommsdorff (1979) provided a comprehensive definition of future orientation that included eight dimensions: extension, detail, domain, affect, motivation, control, sequence of events, and number of cognitions.

Moral disengagement is a serious challenge among the youths as it comes with so many unhealthy behaviours which include but not limited to cybercrime, rape, substance use disorder, etc. Luo and Bussey (2019) opined that moral disengagement is the process by which a person believes that social norms is not applicable in a particular situation; it also have to do with an individual or group disassociating themselves from the normal social

standards or behaviour and become certain that their new unethical standards are reasonable due to some perceived excuses or circumstances. Disengagement from social norms involves a person rationalizing their actions despite their social and moral consequences (Meter & Bauman, 2018). Thus, this rationalization becomes the sustenance of their deviant behaviours. According to Bandura (2016), moral disengagement is seen as a progressive degeneration of ethical conducts and morality that occurs in eight critical stages till an individual is fully disengaged.

Another important stage leading to moral disengagement is 'justification (Thornberg et al., 2018). In the instance of Nigerian unemployment rate and the bleak economic situation in Nigeria, many youths have found economic justification for engaging in all forms of internet crimes; especially, the much nick-named "yahoo-yahoo". Thus, it could be said that to a great extent, the economic woes of Nigeria unemployment, lack of adequate social amenities, poverty, hunger as well as bad government could be the driving force for cybercrime among youths as means of livelihood and survival while many others may have been involved in cybercrime in order to enhance their social identity.

Social identity is an individual's self-concept which is derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group and influences the way the individual behaves towards the group and how the awareness of belonging to the group affects his behaviour in the society (Charness & Chen, 2020). It also refers to an individual's sense of who they are in relation to their group memberships; as well as the marks, quality and uniqueness or differences between two persons or their identifiable groups. Sternisko et al., (2020) opined that group membership can influence people to instill meaning in social situations and how they live in reference to that group and the rest of human society. In this line of thought, group membership (social affiliations and identity) influences how people define who they are and also determines how they relate to others. In relation to behaviour, social identity connects cognitive processes and behavioral motivation towards a group which may explain the relationship between how the groups/society is perceived by individuals and their attitudes towards the group/society (Charness & Chen, 2020). Given the antecedents of bad governance and leadership in Nigeria, youths' social identity with Nigeria as a group may overly have negative motivation and reinforcement towards their behavior, especially the ease to

perpetuate crimes such as involvement in cybercrimes. However, the extent at which the youths remain hopeful despite their negative situation could spur positive motivation which can reduce the tendency of negative behaviour such as participating in cybercrimes. In view of this relationship, there is tendency that social identity may moderate the impact of moral disengagement on youths' attitude towards cybercrime.

Despite some scholarly efforts in the area of cybercrime; such as Gyaisyet al., (2019), Kwak et al. (2021) and Orjiakor et al. (2022) emphasizing the easy accessibility and proliferation of mobile phones and internet as proximal to youth's discouraging attitudes towards cybercrime. However, much has not been done to the best of the researchers' knowledge on the impact of some psychosocial factors such as moral disengagement on youth's attitude towards cybercrime. Based on the forgoing, this present study aimed at exploring the extent to which this psychological factor (moral disengagement) could predict attitude towards cybercrime among youths as well as how psychosocial factor (social identity) could moderate the negative impact of moral disengagement on youths' attitude towards cybercrime. The above highlighted gap makes this current study of great importance for a better understanding and explanation of possible predictor and moderator of youths' high rate of involvement in cybercrime among Nigerian youths.

Theoretically, this study was anchored on rational choice theory (RCT) by Cornish and Clarke, (2014) which assumes a practical certainty that an individual is a cognitive player whose calculation of costs and benefits in any given situation, helps in making rational choices. This theoretical underpinning explains the motivational, intentional, conscious and calculative dimensions of behaviour which are in play in the formation of attitudes towards something where and when there is a free will or freedom. Thus, the theory provides an understanding of attitude towards cybercrime as rational choice behavior in which individuals make a conscious decision of risk, cost and advantage to meet the common place needs for things such as money, status, sex or excitement (Cornish and Clarke, 2014). There are some empirical findings that implied an association between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime such as Selzer and Oelrich (2021), Fissel et al., (2021), Parlangelis et al. (2019) which investigated the relationship between moral disengagement and cybercrime, and observed moral disengagement to impact cybercrime.

Also, Nurse and Bada (2019) carried out a study on the group element of cybercrime: Types, dynamics, and criminal operations; they discover an association between group dynamics and criminality.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been formulated to guide the study:

1. M
Moral disengagement will significantly predict attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State.
2. S
Social identity will moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State.

Participants

The sample population for the main study was 539 (341 males and 198 females) undergraduates drawn from Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Anambra State Nigeria and 30 participants for the pilot study from Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igabariam also in Anambra State Nigeria. Their age ranged from 18 to 25 years with mean age of 22.50 years and standard deviation of 3.50. Among the 539 participants, 60 were from Psychology department, 50 were from Political Science, 53 were from Economics, 49 were from English, 47 were from History and International Relations, 43 were from Computer Science, 53 were from Mathematics, 49 were from Statistics, 45 were from Physics, 54 were from Educational Foundations while the remaining 36 participants were from Human Kinetics. Among the 539 participants, 71 were married whereas 468 were single. 399 among them were Christians, 89 were Muslims while the others 51 participants did not disclose their religious affiliation.

Instrument

Three instruments were used in this study for data collection; they include: Moral Disengagement scale developed by Moore, et al., (2012), Attitude towards Cybercrime scale

developed by Gozler and Tasci (2015) and Social Identity Scale developed by Cheek and Briggs (2013).

Moral disengagement scale

The Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS) is a short form 7-item questionnaire developed by Moore et al. (2012). It was designed to measure an individual's tendency to disengage from moral standards and ethical norms as well as assesses proneness to moral disengagement. The items are rated on a five point scale (1) "Strongly Agree" to (5) "Strongly disagree". The MDS assesses eight mechanisms of moral disengagement: Moral justification, Euphemistic language, Advantageous comparison, Displacement of responsibility, Diffusion of responsibility, Distorting consequences, Attribution of blame, and Dehumanization. The author established internal consistency of .82 for the scale. A discriminant validity test was carried out by the researchers during the pilot test to enhance the validity and reliability of the scale by correlating Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS with Ethical Behavior Scale (EBS) and a negative correlation of -.72 was obtained with a Cronbach alpha reliability of .69.

Attitude towards cybercrime questionnaire

Attitude towards Cybercrime (ATC) Scale developed by Gozler and Tasci (2015); consists of 16 items that measures attitudes towards cybercrime, including the perception of cybercrime as a serious problem, the likelihood of being a victim of cybercrime, and the responsibility of individuals and organizations for preventing cybercrime; and it is rated on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from (1) "Strongly Agree" to (5) "Strongly disagree"; with a Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient of 0.84. For its use in this study, a discriminant validity test was carried out by the researchers during the pilot test to enhance the validity and reliability of the scale by correlating Attitudes towards Cybercrime (ATC) Scale with Ethical Behavior Scale (EBS) and a negative correlation of -.65 was obtained with a Cronbach alpha reliability of .70.

Social Identity Scale

Social identity scale is a 7-item questionnaire developed and validated by Cheek and Briggs (2013) which measures ways in which a group is unique and distinct from other groups. The authors reported validity measures ranging from 0.76 to 0.83 for the American sample.

The questionnaire is a self-report type on a 5-point likert format rated in the following format: 1 – Strongly Agree, 2 – Agree, 3 undecided, 4 –disagree and 5 – strongly disagree. For its use in this study, a discriminant validity test was carried out by the researcher during the pilot test to ensure the validity and reliability of the scale by correlating Social Identity Scale (SIS) with Ethical Behavior Scale (EBS) and a negative correlation of $-.64$ was recorded while a Cronbach alpha reliability of $.76$ was observed.

Procedure

Prior to the main study, a pilot study was conducted to ascertain the validity and reliability of the instruments intended to be used for the study. In the pilot study, responses of 30 participants from the undergraduate population of Chukwumemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University were sampled to elicit their opinion on their attitudes towards cybercrime and moral disengagement. The choice of using the sample for pilot study is because they have similar characteristics with the population of the main study (undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka). The researchers visited the university with a letter of introduction from Head of Department of Psychology of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka for formal introduction. The researchers conveniently selected Psychology and Sociology Department for this pilot study while convenient sampling was used in selecting participant that were administered 40 copies of the questionnaire with both oral and written instructions on how they may fill in the items in the questionnaire. However, 30 properly filled copies were selected from the 36 copies of the questionnaires that were returned. The 30 valid copies were coded and analyzed for the pilot study.

In the main study, the researchers randomly selected 4 faculties from the 14 faculties in Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka; they include: Social Sciences, Arts, Natural Sciences, and Education. The researchers obtained a letter of introduction from the Head of Department of Psychology of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka for a formal introduction of the researchers to the 11 Departments selected using convenient sampling from the 4 faculties that were selected from the 14 faculties in University using simple random sampling; (see participants section). After the researchers have gotten the introduction letter from the H.O.D of Psychology Department, the researcher went to each of the Departments for a formal introduction before going to the undergraduate students for data collection.

Purposive sampling method which was based on the inclusion criteria was used in selecting 550 undergraduate students that were administered the copies of the questionnaires with both oral and written instructions on how they may fill the items in the questionnaire; they were also assured of the confidentiality of their responses. From the 550 administered copies of the questionnaires, 544 copies were returned while 539 were properly filled and were coded for analysis.

To be included in the study, the participant must be admitted as a student in any of the 11 selected departments from the 4 selected faculties. The participant must be willing to participate in the study. Also, must be between the age of 18 and 25 years.

Design and Statistics

This study is a correlational design and moderated regression analysis was adopted as the statistical tools for analyses using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 to ascertain the relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime as well as the moderating effect of social identity on the relationship moral identity and attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics showing mean and standard deviations for all the variables

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Moral disengagement	24.7	6.9487	539
Social identity	32.1	3.0616	539
Attitude towards Cybercrime	53.6	3.1980	539

Mean score from the descriptive data in Table 1 reveals that undergraduates' attitude towards cybercrime is elevated at $M = 53.6$ $SD = 3.20$ as participants mean score is above the average score of attitude towards cybercrime. This indicates that participants' are aware of the dangers and consequences of cybercrime and how it easily affect both individuals and the society at large. It is left to see how moral disengagement and social

identity will influence the observed attitude towards cybercrime.

Table 2

Correlation matrix showing relationship between variables of the study: moral disengagement, attitude towards cybercrime and social identity among undergraduates in Nnamdi Azikiwe Univeristy Awka

Variables	1	2	3
1 Moral disengagement	1.00	-	
2 Social identity	-.041	1.00	-
3 Attitude towards cybercrime	.87*	.27*	1.00

Findings from the correlation (Table 2) shows significant correlations among variables of interest. Positive correlation was found between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime at $r(3, 539) = .87, p < .05$. Also, the relationship between social identity and attitude towards cybercrime was ascertained at $r(3, 539) = .27, p < .05$. Which indicate that there is a relationship between moral engagement, social identity and attitude towards cybercrime.

Table 3: Predictive influence of moral disengagement on undergraduates' attitudes towards cybercrime

Model Coefficient

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	25.511	0.9335	27.33	<.001
Moral disengagement	0.843	0.0250	33.77	<.001

Dependent variable - Attitude towards cybercrime

Data in Table 3 reveals that moral disengagement positively and significantly predicted

undergraduates' attitude towards cybercrime at $\beta = .84, p < .001 (n = 529)$.

Table 4: Moderating effects of work ethics social identity on the relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates in Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

Moderation Estimates

	Estimate	SE	Z	P
Moral disengagement	0.91553	0.02270	40.32	<.001
Social identity	0.07145	0.02789	2.56	0.010
Moral disengagement* Social identity	-0.00904	0.00809	-1.12	0.264

Data in Table 4 reveals that the moderating effects of social identity on the relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka was not significant as indicated by the moderation estimate at $-.009, p > .05 (n = 529)$. This means that social identity did not moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates

Discussion

This study explored the moderating effects of social identity on the predictive relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Following the aim and objectives of the study, a correlation design was adopted and moderated regression statistics was utilized to analyze the data obtained from the field work. The analysis was carried out and two hypotheses were tested.

In hypothesis I, the predictive effect of moral disengagement on attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka was explored and the findings revealed that moral disengagement significantly predicted attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates. The findings indicate that there was a significant relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime. This implies that moral disengagement explains certain undergraduates' attitudes in relation to cybercrime.

The reason for the expected outcome may not be far from the theoretical framework that proposed an underpinning foundation that explains that cybercrime may be inherent in their cognitive choice. In this perspective, moral behaviour or ethical consciousness of knowing good and evil may remain intact while the cognitive need to escape from poverty, socialize and belong may be the driving force influencing attitude towards cybercrime. This present observation is in line with the findings of Fissel et al., (2021). They investigated cyberstalking perpetration among young adults as an assessment of the effects of low self-control and moral disengagement and observed an association between cyberstalking and moral disengagement.

Also, Selzer and Oelrich (2021) examined moral development and dark triad influences on cybercriminal intent using the theory of planned behavior to measure cybercrime. They observed that higher Machiavellian and psychopathic tendencies are associated with higher cybercriminal intention.

Furthermore, Sari et al. (2022) explored the correlation between parental communication pattern, self-esteem, and moral disengagement with cyberbullying behavior in early adolescents and found that there were significant correlations between cyberbullying behavior with moral.

In hypothesis II, the moderating role of social identity on the relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime was equally investigated and the findings revealed that the moderating effects were not significant and negative which means that social identity does not influenced the impact of moral disengagement on undergraduates' attitude towards cybercrime. The finding is in line with the work of Eze-Michael (2020) who evaluated internet fraud and its effect on Nigeria's image in international relations. The finding indicated an association between Nigeria's negative image and internet fraud.

Also, Sternisko, et al (2020) evaluated the dark side of social movements: Social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories and observed that anti-democratic attitudes, prejudice and non-normative political behavior are linked with malicious behaviour.

Considerable support also abounds theoretically. For instance, Merton strain theory associated deviance to moral justification, exoneration and freedom from guilt. This

explains the influence of moral disengagement which is most likely to be fueled in the presence of social identity which makes one see self as justifiable to engage in any cybercrime behaviour. The theoretical perspective which supports the motivation and sustenance for behaviour tries to justify cybercrime as necessary route for the offenders to meet up with their socioeconomic responsibility; irrespective of their circumstances and alternatives.

Implications of the Study

The findings have theoretical, practical and policy implications. The findings emphasized motivation as central force in the initiation and sustenance of goal-directed behaviour; including students' attitude towards cybercrime. The study equally buttressed the role of social spectrum such as social identity in predicting behaviour especially bordering on criminality. Rationality was also thrown as basis of human behaviour although it may be argued that rationality may be relative. Among undergraduates, the possibility of social misconstruction through peer pressure may be the leading factor influencing undergraduates' moral disengagement and consequently their cybercrime behaviour. The campus arena presents a very challenging and pressuring environment which may be too strong to resist by a certain type of students considering the background differences.

Limitations of the Study

A few limitations were experienced in the study and effort was made to reduce their impacts on the study to the barest minimum in order to ensure high empiricism and accuracy of the findings. One of such limitation is inherent respondents' bias which may have affected participants' responses leading social responding. There was a significant effort from the researcher to reduce this bias to the barest minimum by ensuring that participation in the research was based on free volition.

Recommendations

Considering the danger of cybercrime and its geometrical prevalence especially among youths and students, it is recommended that tertiary institutions enact laws that can deter students from going into cybercrime. There should be intentional effort to promote good moral and ethical behaviour among students as standard bearer and nuance moral decadence in its entire ramification. As such, students can brace up to their challenges and work hard to achieve merit legitimately without going into crime whether as cybercrime or

otherwise.

Suggestions for Further Study

To further confirm the findings of the current study as behavioural attitudes among students, there is the need to replicate the study among other public sector students and private university students in order to compare the outcomes on whether the antecedents had the same effects or would they impact private university students differently.

There is also the need to ascertain the dimensions in the student's perception and attitude towards cybercrime in order to localize the effects than generalize them. This will enable stakeholders including law enforcement agencies to understand areas of students' vulnerability and interest in cybercrime.

Conclusion

The evolution of the internet is not without consequences, one of the consequences of internet evolution and permeation in our society is cybercrime. Many crimes can be committed on the internet especially financial fraud on the grounds of anonymity. This anonymity has attracted students into cybercrime. Many factors are responsible for this attraction especially students' moral disposition. Against this backdrop, this study investigated the moderating role of social identity on the relationship between moral disengagement and attitude towards cybercrime among undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; using a correlation design while a moderated regression statistics was utilized for the analysis primary data from the field.

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