Research Article

# How online inhibition fuels incivility through moral disengagement

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| | This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of moral disengagement in the link between online disinhibition and cyber incivility, against the backdrop of digital technology's profound impact on human communication and the emergence of online communities. This transformation has highlighted a range of behaviors, including the negative spectrum of cyber incivility, necessitating an exploration of its underlying dynamics. Utilizing a mediation analysis approach, the research examined the interplay among online disinhibition, moral disengagement, and cyber incivility. The participant consisted of 780 Indonesian students, with an average age of 20.3 years, who reported spending 4-7 hours daily on social media. The study was conducted via an online survey distributed to participants. Moral disengagement was assessed using a Moral Disengagement Scale, cyber incivility was measured with a purpose-built scale, and online disinhibition was evaluated using the Online Disinhibition Scale to measure levels of online disinhibition. Findings indicated a significant correlation among the variables, with a substantial portion of participants exhibiting moderate to high levels of online disinhibition, moral disengagement, and cyber incivility. Mediation analysis further revealed that online disinhibition mediated the relationship between moral disengagement and cyber incivility, suggesting that the lowering of inhibitions online facilitates the manifestation of uncivil behavior, influenced by moral disengagement. This study underscores the complex mechanisms driving cyber incivility, highlighting the crucial mediating role of online disinhibition between moral disengagement and cyber incivility. These insights contribute to the broader understanding of digital communication's impact on behavior, emphasizing the need to address online disinhibition and moral disengagement to mitigate cyber incivility.<br><br>**Keywords:** online disinhibition, incivility, moral disengagement, digital world, cyber, digital |

## INTRODUCTION

The growing adoption of digital lifestyle has a major impact on how people interact in their social life. This sort of social interaction enables unique forms of online communication expression that might leads to number of social issues, including how one's behaved when their identity is under anonymity. Scholars have expressed concern that the digital anonymity has contributed to negative online behaviors (e.g., cyberbullying) (Lowry et al., 2016). Following that, the lack of face-to-face interaction resulting anonymity of

online interactions would reduce social disinhibitions (Green et al., 2016; Pearson et al., 2005), which fostered engagement in behaviors that may not be appropriately exhibited in face-to-face interaction (Chan, 2018). Existing studies showed that online anonymity promotes individual behavior incivility in the social media (Masullo Chen et al., 2019). This behavior eventually evolves into cyberbullying, trolling, flame, harassment, and the use of offensive language or behavior toward others on the internet (Lim & Cortina, 2005; Porath et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2023). This sort of individual cyber/online incivility can result the toxic online environments, damage relationships and reputations, or lead to emotional distress toward to the victim. Online incivility can have emotional impacts on the victim that range from decreased sense of safety to one's tendency to do self-injury. Given the growing prevalence of this detrimental behavior, it can be difficult to estimate the exact number of those engaged in it. Seto (2017) marked this phenomenon as the breakdown of social norms which brought by the digital age.

To establish a safe online environment based on the empirical findings, it is crucial to have a thorough understanding about the mechanics of individual cyber incivility. Stuart and Scott (2021) emphasized the key significance of reasonable online disinhibition in maintaining decency in digital interactions. Online disinhibition involves the suppression of thoughts, emotions, or behaviors while using the internet, as well as filtering and censoring specific content or interactions (Kosmidis & Theocharis, 2020). According to Scott et al. (2022), individuals who engaged in online disinhibition would experience higher levels of security when accessing the internet. The capacity of an individual to engage in online activities to the fullest extent is promoted by such effect. Nevertheless, the relationship between these two variables is complex and multifaceted. While disinhibition can contribute to the reduction of incivility, it is not the sole factor, as other relevant contributors include the anonymity of the digital world and individual differences in personality and behavior may precipitated the cyber incivility.

Recent finding by Sharma et al. (2020) has empirically demonstrated that the practice of moral based online behavior can effectively reduce instances of online incivility. This reduction is facilitated by limiting impulsive responses and utilizing technological tools to screen out offensive content, thereby contributing to a more congenial and respectful online atmosphere. Moral disengagement is the process of rationalizing or justifying unethical or uncivil behavior based on individual norms and values. This variable significantly impacts the relationship between online disinhibition and incivility. Recent study also indicated that people engaging in moral disengagement are more likely to exhibit uncivil behavior as their actions are rationalized. While for those engaged in online disinhibition are less likely to participate in incivility when they feel morally disengaged, they are consciously restrained from such behavior. Moral disengagement may modify the link between disinhibition and incivility which later affecting the likelihood of persons engaging in inappropriate behavior. According to Wang et al. (2022), engagement in moral values may decrease the likelihood of participating in disinhibition, thereby lowering the probability of engaging in uncivil behavior (Lowry et al., 2016). This study aiming to confirm the mediating role of moral disengagement in the link between disinhibition and incivility in the Indonesian population context. The country has experienced a significant increase in the number of internet users. Indonesia is one of the fastest-growing countries of internet usage with estimated internet user population of over 224 million in 2022. Conducting the study within this setting would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological rationale and explanation about individual online activities. We propose a hypothesis that the extent to which individual moral disengagement would significantly mediate the association between online disinhibition and cyber incivility.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Online Disinhibition

Online disinhibition refers to the distinct behavioral patterns individuals exhibit in the digital environment, which differ markedly from their face-to-face interactions. This phenomenon typically involves a tendency towards greater openness and impulsivity in online communications, contrasting with "online inhibition," which denotes conscious self-regulation aimed at curtailing discourtesy or impoliteness (Suler, 2004).

Research on online disinhibition has significantly evolved, highlighting three main perspectives: behavioral, psychological, and attribute-based. Each perspective sheds light on how online disinhibition contributes to online incivility.

From the behavioral perspective, Suler (2004) distinguishes between benign and toxic disinhibition. Benign disinhibition involves sharing personal details and emotions online for self-exploration (Bareket-Bojmel & Shahar, 2011). In contrast, toxic disinhibition is characterized by rude language, harsh commentary, hate speech, and threats – behaviors rarely seen in face-to-face interactions (Wachs et al., 2019). These toxic behaviors significantly contribute to online incivility.

The psychological perspective posits that users feel less restrained online compared to offline environments, leading to behaviors they wouldn't normally exhibit. Schouten et al. (2007) captured this idea with a three-item scale, while Wright et al. (2019) developed a four-item scale to assess adolescents' perceptions of disinhibition in online interactions. This reduced self-restraint allows incivility to thrive, as individuals feel less accountable for their actions.

The attribute-based perspective explains online disinhibition through specific internet characteristics that facilitate uncivil behavior. Suler (2004) identified six key attributes: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjections, dissociative imagination, and minimization of status and authority. These attributes interact to amplify online disinhibition (Barak et al., 2008).

Disinhibition manifests in various uncivil online behaviors, such as flaming, impoliteness, and hostile communication (Chesney et al., 2009). Joinson (1998) suggested that disinhibition occurs when behavior is no longer controlled by self-consciousness or concerns about social evaluation. This "online disinhibition effect," as termed by Suler (2004), explains why individuals might express themselves more freely and aggressively online than offline.

Toxic disinhibition includes behaviors like online flaming and acting-out, which can damage self-image without fostering personal growth (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Suler's (2004) six factors create an environment conducive to behaviors such as cyberbullying (Wang et al., 2021). These factors collectively explain why negative and uncivil behaviors are prevalent in digital contexts, emphasizing the need to understand the mechanisms driving online incivility.

Understanding online disinhibition through various lenses, focusing on its role in fostering incivility is crucial. The behavioral, psychological, and attribute-based perspectives all highlight different mechanisms through which disinhibition contributes to uncivil behavior online. Addressing online incivility requires a deep understanding of these factors to develop strategies for promoting more respectful and constructive digital interactions.

## Cyber Incivility

Cyber incivility refers to communicative behaviors that violate norms of mutual respect in online interactions. Lim et al. (2009) describe it as including actions such as intentionally delaying responses to urgent situations, making demeaning or derogatory remarks, and ignoring emails altogether. These behaviors can negatively impact employees' psychological needs for vitality and effective functioning, potentially diminishing feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which are essential for internalized self-regulation (Machin & Jeffries, 2013).

Cyber incivility encompasses a broad spectrum of disrespectful, insensitive, or disruptive behaviors in online environments. These behaviors range from mild annoyances, such as typing errors and terse responses, to more aggressive actions like cyberbullying, harassment, and the dissemination of false information. The anonymity and reduced social accountability inherent in online interactions often exacerbate these behaviors, making them more prevalent and harmful (Kim et al., 2019).

Common forms of cyber incivility include impersonation, aggressive verbal behaviors, and social exclusion. Impersonation involves using someone else's identity to cause harm or damage their reputation. Aggressive verbal behaviors consist of rude comments, insults, and hateful speech, while social exclusion refers to deliberately ostracizing individuals from online groups or activities. These behaviors are often facilitated by social media platforms, which provide a conducive environment for such interactions due to their features that enable anonymity and rapid communication (Kim et al., 2019).

The motivations for engaging in cyber incivility are diverse and complex. Anonymity is a significant factor, allowing individuals to act without fear of identification or repercussions, thus lowering the barriers to uncivil behavior. The disinhibition effect, where people feel less restrained online than in face-to-face interactions, also plays a crucial role. This effect is amplified by the absence of immediate social cues and feedback, leading individuals to express themselves more freely and, often, more aggressively.

Other motivations include rage or frustration, which can drive individuals to vent their emotions through hostile online behavior. Group dynamics can further exacerbate cyber incivility, as individuals may conform to the behavior of their peers, especially if such behavior is normalized within the group. A lack of empathy is another critical factor, as the impersonal nature of online interactions can make it easier for individuals to disregard the feelings and perspectives of others (Kim et al., 2019). The impacts of cyber incivility are profound and multifaceted, affecting both the psychological and physical well-being of individuals. Victims of cyber incivility often experience significant emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation. These negative emotions can lead to more severe mental health issues such as suicidal ideation. The persistent and pervasive nature of online incivility means that victims can be targeted at any time, exacerbating feelings of helplessness and fear.

Physically, cyber incivility can lead to symptoms such as sleep disturbances, weight loss, and eating disorders. Academically, it can result in declining performance and increased absenteeism, as victims may avoid school or work to escape their tormentors. Socially, it can damage relationships and reputations, further isolating the victims and impacting their social interactions.

Understanding cyber incivility and its effects on individuals is crucial for developing effective interventions. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that includes promoting digital literacy, fostering empathy and respectful communication, and implementing stricter moderation and accountability measures on online platforms. By comprehensively understanding the motivations and impacts of cyber incivility, educators, employers, parents, and policymakers can better protect individuals and promote healthier online interactions.

## Moral Disengagement

The concept of moral disengagement is rooted from Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory that explains how individuals justify actions that contradict their moral standards without experiencing guilt or remorse (Bandura et al., 1996). This process involves rationalizing actions to reduce the distress associated with behavior that misaligns with internal moral values. According to Shulman et al. (2011), moral standards guide future behaviors that align with internal values to avoid both external and internal distress.

Moral disengagement explained why people commit harmful actions despite knowing their behavior is hurtful. Research indicates that individuals with high levels of moral disengagement tend to be more irritable and less likely to feel guilt or a desire to correct their misbehavior (Bandura et al., 1996). These individuals are also more prone to interpersonal aggression and delinquent behavior. Scholars have increasingly focused on the role of moral disengagement mechanisms to understand why individuals engage in behaviors that contradict their moral standards (Hymel & Bonanno, 2014).

The role of gender and age in moral disengagement has been less frequently examined. Studies suggest that males exhibiting both verbal and physical aggression tend to have higher levels of moral disengagement than females (Bandura et al., 1996).

Additionally, gender appears to moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and cyberbullying, with the link being stronger in males than in females (Wang et al., 2016). Developmentally, older children and adolescents report greater use of moral disengagement mechanisms than younger children (Bandura et al., 1996), indicating that as youth mature, they increasingly use moral disengagement to justify behaviors that contradict their moral values.

## METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative research design using a mediation analysis approach. The research aimed to investigate the mediating role of moral disengagement in the relationship between

online disinhibition and cyber incivility. Data were collected at a single point in time to capture a snapshot of the variables of interest among the participants. The mediation analysis was conducted to understand how online disinhibition affects cyber incivility through the indirect effect of moral disengagement.

## Sampling Procedure

The survey was administered online using Google Forms that included questions about demographic information, such as age, gender, and place of residence. In addition, a range of measures on moral disengagement, cyber incivility, and online disinhibition was included. Participants in this study were Indonesian university students (N = 780) aged 17-35 years, most were female (n = 720), with the remaining being male (n = 60). The majority resided in Java (85%) and were recruited through convenience online sampling.

Using G*Power 3.1.9.2 software (Faul et al., 2007), a preliminary power analysis determined the minimum sample size needed for our mediation model test. The analysis indicated that to identify a medium effect size (0.15) at a 5% significance level (α = 0.05), at least 146 participants are needed to ensure 95% statistical power. The study's sample size exceeded this minimum threshold.

## Instrument

The measurement of moral disengagement comprised 32 items developed by Detert et al. (2008) based on the questionnaire of moral disengagement from Bandura (2016). This questionnaire was used to assess the involvement of participants in moral disengagement. Participants indicated their agreement with each item using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), where higher scores signified greater disengagement. The scale provided both a total score and eight sub-scales reflecting eight techniques of moral disengagement (moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, responsibility displacement, diffusion of responsibility, consequence distortion, blaming attribution, and dehumanization). The total score used to create an overall index was calculated by summing the responses to the items and subsequently dividing by the number of items. The size showed adequate internal consistency in adult samples that emerged (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014; Chugh et al., 2014; Detert et al., 2008) as well as evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Alqurashi, 2016; Bandura et al., 1996; Detert et al., 2008).

To assess levels of online disinhibition, the study employed the online disinhibition scale developed by Udris (2014). This scale comprises two distinct dimensions: benign disinhibition (7 items) and toxic disinhibition (4 items). The scale, encompassing 11 items in total, comprehensively encompasses various theoretical factors contributing to online disinhibition. Respondents indicated their agreement on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = agree). Scores were aggregated by summing the item responses, yielding potential scores ranging from 11 to 55.

Presently, measures for instigated cyber incivility are lacking; the focus has primarily been on victimized cyber incivility (Lim & Teo, 2009). Even within broader incivility research, only a limited number of measures address instigated incivility. Notably, the most prevalent measure for instigated incivility is the "Internet withdrawal impairment scale" (IWIS scale) is a measurement tool developed by Blau and Andersson (2005) to assess the negative effects of internet use and potential withdrawal symptoms experienced by individuals when they reduce or stop their internet usage. In alignment with this approach, the present study created an instigated cyber incivility scale by modifying and reversing the perspective of items from Lim and Teo's (2009) cyber incivility scale. For instance, an item originally phrased as "made demeaning remarks about you through email" was adapted to "made demeaning remarks about someone through email or text." The resulting 14-item scale is divided into two subscales, one for passive incivility and another for active incivility. Responses are quantified based on frequency using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "not at all," 2 = "seldom," 3 = "often," 4 = "frequently," 5 = "all the time"). For this study, a composite score was computed to signify levels of instigated cyber incivility, after omitting one item due to its conceptual overlap with online disinhibition.

**Table 1.** Participants demographic data

| Characteristic | Distribution: N (%) |
|---|---|
| Gender | |
|    Female | 720 (92%) |
|    Male | 60 (8%) |
| Age group | |
|    Adolescent (17–19 years old) | 286 (36%) |
|    Early adult (20–25 years old) | 471 (60%) |
|    Mid-adult (> 25 years old) | 23 (4%) |
| Highest education | |
|    Junior high school | 4 (0.5%) |
|    Senior high school | 585 (75%) |
|    Diploma (D3/D4) | 29 (3.7%) |
|    Undergraduate | 162 (20.8%) |
| Social media used (in hours/day) | |
|    Below 1 hour/day | 3 (0.4%) |
|    1–3 hours/day | 121(15.6%) |
|    4–7 hours/day | 343 (44%) |
|    Above 7 hours/day | 313 (40%) |

## Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and mediation analysis conducted with Jamovi. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were employed to summarize the demographic information. Mediation and path analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses and ascertain whether there was a significant mediation effect of moral disengagement on the relationship between online disinhibition and incivility.

## Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Universitas Negeri Jakarta. Participants provided informed consent before beginning the survey, and their responses were kept confidential and anonymous. The data collected from the survey was used solely for research purposes and will not be shared with any third parties.

# RESULTS

## Descriptive Statistics and Measurement Model Result

The following descriptive analysis summarized the data collected from a total of 780 participants (mean age = 20.3 years) who completed the survey (**Table 1**). Out of these participants, 60% were categorized as early adults and 75% held a high school degree or equivalent qualification. In addition, the majority reported spending approximately 4 to 7 hours/day on social media. Regarding the levels of engagement, the majority indicated moderate to high levels of moral disengagement (M = 17.015, SD = 4.127), online disinhibition (M = 19.515, SD = 3.437), and cyber incivility (M = 5.566, SD = 1.625).

The descriptive analysis showed the study sample predominantly compromised young adults, with a mean age of 20.3 years. The majority of participants had completed high school, some reported using social media for 4-7 hours/day, while others indicated engaging in moderate to high levels of moral disengagement, online disinhibition, and cyber incivility.

The measurement model analysis showed all indicators of the latent variables (moral disengagement, online disinhibition, and cyber incivility) fit the model, and all factor loadings of the items were significant (p < .001). Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) scores for these constructs were within acceptable limits, with moral disengagement at .042, online disinhibition at .44, and cyber incivility at .60, thereby establishing convergent validity for each scale.

It's important to highlight that while the general scholarly guideline recommends an AVE of at least 0.50 for adequacy, a lower AVE of 0.40 can be acceptable if the composite reliability (CR) is above 0.60, as indicated by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and further elaborated by Hair et al. (2008). In our study, the CR scores for online

**Table 2.** Descriptive & Pearson correlation table

|  | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Moral disengagement | 17.015 | 4.127 | 1 |  |  |
| Online disinhibition | 19.515 | 3.437 | 0.368*** | 1 |  |
| Cyber incivility | 5.566 | 1.625 | 0.332*** | 0.270*** | 1 |

***Significant level < 0.000

**Table 3.** Measurement model table (95% confidence intervals)

| Latent | Observed | Estimate | SE | Lower | Upper | $\beta$ | Z | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Online disinhibition | OD1 | 1.000 | 0.0000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 0.823 |  |  |
|  | OD2 | 0.953 | 0.0451 | 0.865 | 1.042 | 0.753 | 21.12 | < .001 |
|  | OD3 | 0.233 | 0.0322 | 0.170 | 0.296 | 0.269 | 7.23 | < .001 |
|  | OD4 | 0.400 | 0.0298 | 0.341 | 0.458 | 0.488 | 13.42 | < .001 |
|  | OD5 | 0.708 | 0.0381 | 0.634 | 0.783 | 0.662 | 18.61 | < .001 |
|  | OD6 | 0.750 | 0.0453 | 0.661 | 0.839 | 0.593 | 16.55 | < .001 |
| Cyber incivility | CI1 | 1.000 | 0.0000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 0.757 |  |  |
|  | CI2 | 0.834 | 0.0799 | 0.677 | 0.990 | 0.804 | 10.44 | < .001 |
| Moral disengagement | MD1 | 1.000 | 0.0000 | 1.000 | 1.000 | 0.571 |  |  |
|  | MD2 | 1.276 | 0.0835 | 1.113 | 1.440 | 0.709 | 15.29 | < .001 |
|  | MD3 | 1.160 | 0.0728 | 1.017 | 1.302 | 0.759 | 15.93 | < .001 |
|  | MD4 | 1.266 | 0.0884 | 1.093 | 1.439 | 0.641 | 14.32 | < .001 |
|  | MD5 | 0.968 | 0.0759 | 0.819 | 1.117 | 0.545 | 12.75 | < .001 |
|  | MD6 | 1.315 | 0.0822 | 1.154 | 1.477 | 0.766 | 16.00 | < .001 |
|  | MD7 | 1.268 | 0.0870 | 1.097 | 1.438 | 0.659 | 14.58 | < .001 |
|  | MD8 | 1.403 | 0.1045 | 1.199 | 1.608 | 0.585 | 13.43 | < .001 |

disinhibition and moral disengagement were 0.643 and 0.700, respectively. This aspect of our findings, which aligns with the research by Lam (2012), suggests that the slightly lower AVE for moral disengagement is compensated by its higher CR, thus validating the reliability and integrity of our measurement model.

Pearson correlation analysis showed moral disengagement was strongly associated with both online disinhibition and cyber incivility. This suggested individuals more prone to moral disengagement were also likely to exhibit online disinhibition and incivility. This result was consistent with previous investigations on the relationship between moral disengagement and online behavior.

The results generally highlighted the prevalence of moral disengagement, online disinhibition, and cyber incivility among young adults using social media. Also, there were significant implications for comprehending online behavior and could inform the development of interventions aimed at curbing harmful online conduct.

## Hypothesis Analysis Results

The tables and analysis above provided valuable insights into the relationship between moral disengagement, online disinhibition, and cyber incivility. Firstly, **Table 2** shows all three variables exhibit positive correlations with each other. The correlation coefficient between moral disengagement and online disinhibition was 0.368, which was statistically significant at p < 0.001. Also, the coefficient correlation was 0.332 between online disinhibition and cyber incivility, and 0.270 between moral disengagement and cyber incivility, both of which were significant at p < 0.001. This indicated that individuals with higher levels of online disinhibition and moral disengagement were more likely to engage in cyber incivility.

**Table 3** provides information about the measurement model, showing six observed indicators for latent variable of online disinhibition, two for cyber incivility, and eight for moral disengagement. The estimates for all indicators were positive and statistically significant (p < 0.001), indicating the reliability as measures of respective constructs.

The hypothesis analysis showed that online disinhibition had an indirect effect on cyber incivility through moral disengagement. This effect was significant (p < 0.001), with a total estimated indirect effect of -0.046. This indicated that individuals exhibiting higher levels of online disinhibition were more likely to engage in cyber incivility through moral disengagement. The model also showed a significant direct effect of online disinhibition on cyber incivility. The analysis generally suggested that moral disengagement played a partial mediating role in the relationship between online disinhibition and cyber incivility.
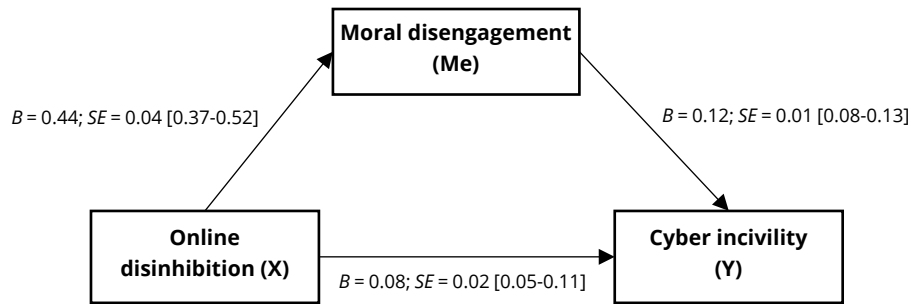
**Figure 1.** Hypothesis model result (Source: Authors)

**Table 4.** Moderation estimates table (95% confidence intervals)

|  | Estimate | SE | Lower | Upper | Z | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ODT | 0.08139 | 0.01531 | 0.0514 | 0.11140 | 5.32 | < .001 |
| MDT | 0.09433 | 0.01261 | 0.0696 | 0.11904 | 7.48 | < .001 |
| ODT * MDT | 0.00449 | 0.00227 | 3.33e-5 | 0.00895 | 1.97 | .048 |

Note: ODT: online disinhibition; MDT: moral disengagement.

The mediation analysis results reveal a nuanced relationship between the independent variable (IV) and the dependent variable (DV), with a significant mediating effect. The indirect effect, denoted as $a \times b$, has an estimate of 0.0468 and is statistically significant with a p-value of less than 0.001. This significance is further supported by a Z-value of 6.45 and a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.0326 to 0.0610. This result indicates that the mediator plays a substantial role in the relationship between the IV and DV, contributing to approximately 36.7% of the total effect.

In addition to the mediated pathway, the direct effect of the IV on the DV, labeled as c, is also statistically significant, with an estimate of 0.0808 and a p-value of less than 0.001. The direct effect's significance is underscored by a Z-value of 4.95 and a 95% confidence interval between 0.0488 and 0.1127. This suggests that 63.3% of the total effect is due to the direct influence of the IV on the DV, independent of the mediator (**Figure 1**).

The total effect, represented as $c + a \times b$, combines both the direct and indirect effects, yielding an estimate of 0.1276. This total effect is statistically significant, as evidenced by a p-value of less than 0.001, a Z-value of 8.12, and a 95% confidence interval from 0.0968 to 0.1583. This comprehensive effect underscores the significant overall impact of the IV on the DV, mediated in part by the mediator but also exerting a substantial direct influence. In summary, the mediation analysis demonstrates that while the mediator significantly contributes to the relationship between the IV and DV, there remains a notable direct effect. This dual pathway highlights the complexity of the relationship, where the mediator accounts for a significant portion of the effect, but the IV also directly influences the DV to a considerable extent.

**Table 4** shows the results of the moderation analysis, which investigates whether the relationship between online disinhibition and cyber incivility is influenced by moral disengagement. The relationship between online disinhibition and moral disengagement was found to be statistically significant (estimate = 0.00449, SE = 0.00227, Z = 1.97, p = .048), indicating moral disengagement moderated the effect of online disinhibition on cyber incivility.

The relationship between online disinhibition and cyber incivility also varied based on the level of moral disengagement. When individuals exhibited high levels of moral disengagement, the effect of online disinhibition on cyber incivility was more pronounced compared to those with low levels.

In practical terms, this influence implied interventions aimed at reducing cyber incivility should not solely focus on online disinhibition but also on individual differences in moral disengagement. The interventions could be potentially more effective by designing strategies to address the specific needs and characteristics of individuals exhibiting high levels of moral disengagement.

The moderation analysis generally provided valuable insights into the intricate interplay between individual and contextual factors contributing to cyber incivility. By identifying moral disengagement as a

moderator variable, the analysis highlighted the necessity for a more nuanced and personalized approach to comprehending and addressing online incivility.

## DISCUSSION

The study's results provide a deep understanding of the relationship between online disinhibition, moral disengagement, and cyber incivility, especially among young adults in Indonesia, a group heavily involved in social media. This particular demographic is key to grasping the complex interaction of these elements in a digital environment where most interactions are virtual (Smith & Duggan, 2018).

The strength of the measurement model is evident through significant factor loadings and satisfactory AVE scores, adding credibility to the study's constructs. The minor variation in AVE for moral disengagement is compensated by its higher CR, indicating a more sophisticated approach to assessing construct validity (Lam, 2012).

Pearson correlation analysis shows a strong link between moral disengagement and both online disinhibition and cyber incivility, supporting Wright et al.'s (2017) findings. This suggests that those who tend to disengage morally are more likely to show disinhibited and uncivil behavior online.

The mediation analysis reveals that moral disengagement significantly mediates the relationship between online disinhibition and cyber incivility. This partial mediation highlights the complexity of online behavior, where direct actions and psychological underpinnings merge (van Dijck, 2013).

The mediation model shows a significant indirect effect ($a \times b$) and a notable direct effect ($c$), emphasizing the complex influence of online disinhibition on cyber incivility, in line with Gubrium's (2019) research on the layered nature of online interactions.

The moderation analysis adds another layer of complexity. The significant interaction between online disinhibition and moral disengagement in predicting cyber incivility indicates that the effect of disinhibition on incivility depends on the level of moral disengagement. This aligns with Haidt's (2013) theory on moral reasoning, suggesting that individual differences in moral reasoning significantly shape behavior.

Studies showed that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unprecedented surge in global internet usage, yielding both favorable and unfavorable outcomes. Existing literature provided evidence of the beneficial effects of internet use during the pandemic, such as its ability to facilitate remote work and education (Morgan, 2020). This situation may also increase the likelihood of personal involvement in unethical internet conduct (Lowry et al., 2016). Although individuals exposed to unethical internet content often experience online disinhibition effects (Scott et al., 2022), not all exhibit greater amounts of unethical behavior or cyber incivility (Wang et al., 2022). Even though Indonesia has one of the fastest-growing internet user populations, no prior study investigated potential mediators or moderators affecting the relationship between online disinhibition and cyber incivility (Ilies et al., 2020). As a result, this current study aimed to test moral disengagement as a potential mediator of the relationship between both variables. This consideration was particularly relevant in Indonesia, a collectivistic society where individuals were strongly tied to social norms and standards (Wang et al., 2021). Also, moral comprehension emerged as a more accurate predictor of unethical behavior on the Internet.

In line with Kosmidis and Theocharis (2020) and Wang et al. (2022), this study highlighted moral disengagement partially mediated the relationship between online disinhibition and incivility. It also emphasized the complexity of humans in the digital world, where minimal interpersonal interaction and anonymity could foster unfavorable psychological states, including hostility and disinhibition effect (Green et al., 2016; Volkova & Bachrach, 2015). Some other studies indicated that the relationship between online disinhibition and incivility might be tied to the internalization of moral standards (Samnani et al., 2014; Saunders & Chester, 2008). The inability of individuals to uphold moral standards according to existing norms or rules can be inferred as an act of moral disengagement. This concept entails the decision to act outside moral/ethical standards and rationalize such actions. The internet, being a vast area with nearly no rules, allows people to behave without ethical boundaries, with countless tweets and content being posted every second. Studies aimed to understand the thoughts and motivations behind such behavior, with (Volkova & Bachrach, 2015) emphasizing a high chance of behaving differently when online compared to real life.

Anonymity further explains the reason for negative behavior on the internet. When individuals are unbound by societal norms, they perceive themselves as free from constraints. The lack of face-to-face interaction in online settings may further promote unfavorable psychological states, such as hostility and disinhibition effect. This can make regulation based on moral standards difficult, facilitating the likelihood of cyber incivility.

The inability to differentiate between right and wrong in online behavior can be indicative of moral disengagement. This refers to the process by which individuals justify engaging in unethical behavior (Bandura, 2016). To prevent thoughts of self-condemnation, individuals may abstain from behaviors infringing their moral standards. Those tempted to act unethically often rationalize their choices, dismissing self-imposed moral constraints. This can lead to justifying behavior as acceptable online, even when it is deemed unacceptable in real-life contexts. The subjectivity and self-bias can foster uncivil behavior, as individuals are confined by their perceptions of right and wrong. Wang et al. (2022) highlighted that this moral compass was crucial for predicting whether people would adhere to moral standards, even in anonymous online settings.

The relationship between moral disengagement, online disinhibition, and cyber incivility holds significant value. To the best of understanding, this study is the first in Indonesia to show a strong relationship between online disinhibition and individual cyber incivility. In line with the hypothesis, those who are more expressive on the internet compared to real life are more likely to exhibit a high level of cyber incivility. This supported previous studies that proposed the notion of anonymity in the internet world as a consequence of the growing interplay between individuals and the external social environment (Kim & Lee, 2009). This study held cultural significance within the Indonesian context and specifically contributed to previous investigations through emphasis on how the interplay between self and social norms were perceived as an important predictor of online behavior. As a country with a substantial population and a robust collectivist culture that values communal and social perspectives, individual engagement with moral standards is of paramount importance. Ultimately, these results extended and bolstered prevailing investigations on the roles of moral disengagement in predicting the effect of individual online disinhibition on cyber incivility. Also, the results offered valuable insights for interventions and prevention of unethical online behavior.

The topic of online disinhibition and its potential impact on cyber incivility has gained increasing relevance in recent years (Frischlich, 2021), particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While scholars have noted the positive impact of internet use during this period, it is also important to consider the potential negative consequences, including individual unethical internet perpetration. This phenomenon can be particularly problematic in collectivistic societies such as Indonesia, where individuals may be strongly bound to social norms and rules. However, not all those experiencing online disinhibition exhibit greater amounts of unethical behavior on the internet, suggesting the presence of potential mediators or moderators that could influence this relationship.

One potential mediator of the relationship between online disinhibition and cyber incivility is moral disengagement. As a strong predictor of individual unethical behavior on the internet, moral understanding plays a crucial role in shaping online conduct. This is particularly important in collectivistic societies where moral standards and social norms hold high value. Recent studies in Indonesia showed moral disengagement partially mediated the relationship between online disinhibition and cyber incivility. This indicated those struggling to uphold moral standards according to existing norms or rules might be more inclined to engage in unethical behavior.

Studies showed that the concept of internet anonymity emerges due to the intricate interplay between individuals and the external social environment. Accordingly, interventions aimed at curbing online disinhibition and preventing cyber incivility should focus on addressing the underlying social factors contributing to these behaviors. For instance, fostering a culture of moral accountability and emphasizing the importance of adhering to social norms and regulations in online settings might reduce the likelihood of unethical conduct. It is worth noting that the relationship between moral disengagement, online disinhibition, and cyber incivility can differ across various cultural contexts. Collectivistic societies, such as Indonesia, lay greater emphasis on social norms and rules, making it more difficult to engage in unethical behavior without facing social consequences. In contrast, less emphasis placed on such norms may potentially increase the likelihood of online disinhibition and cyber incivility.

The exploration of this phenomenon still has several limitations despite the growing interest in online disinhibition and cyber incivility. For instance, most existing studies focused on correlational relationships rather than causation, making it difficult to establish definitive causal pathways between both variables. In addition, previous investigations focused on Western cultures, making it difficult to generalize findings to other cultural contexts. It is crucial to note several limitations when considering the implications of this study. Firstly, the results were solely based on female recruited from urban areas, potentially constraining the applicability of the results to broader populations. This could also be influenced by shared method variance. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between online disinhibition, moral disengagement, and cyber incivility, subsequent study endeavors should strive to replicate these results using more diverse samples and varying contexts. Secondly, a cross-sectional design was employed, which precluded establishing causal relationships. A more in-depth compression of this relationship could be attained using experimental or longitudinal approaches. This study specifically emphasized moral disengagement mediated the relationship between online disinhibition and cyber incivility within the Indonesian context. It also underscored the importance of promoting moral understanding and ethical behavior in the digital world, while endorsing social norms discouraging cyber incivility and unethical conduct. Further investigations were imperative to fully understand the nature of this relationship and devise effective interventions or preventive strategies.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study highlighted the prevalence of moral disengagement, online disinhibition, and cyber incivility among young adults engaging with social media. The descriptive analysis showed that the majority of participants were young adults with a high school degree or equivalent, and most reported spending 4 to 7 hours per day on social media. In addition, measurement analysis showed a well-fitting model with all indicators of latent variables fit, and AVE scores within acceptable ranges, indicating achieved convergent validity for all scales.

A strong relationship was identified between moral disengagement and both disinhibition and cyber incivility. This implied individuals more prone to moral disengagement were also likely to exhibit online disinhibition and cyber incivility. This was consistent with previous investigations on the relationship between moral disengagement and online behavior.

The results had crucial implications for comprehending online behavior and developing interventions that mitigated harmful online conduct. For instance, these interventions could concurrently decrease online disinhibition and cyber incivility. The importance of promoting ethical behavior and responsible use of social media, particularly among young adults, was clarified.

This study significantly contributed to the growing literature exploring the relationship between these three variables. It was important to acknowledge the limitations, including reliance on self-reported data and the generalizability of results to other demographic groups. Therefore, further investigations were needed to replicate and expand the scope to diverse populations and contexts.

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**Ethics declaration:** The authors declared that the study was approved by the Institution Review Board of Universitas Negeri Jakarta and complied with the grant requirement (Number: 59/7. FPPsi/PP/III/2024). The authors further declared that the participants provided informed consent before beginning the survey, and their responses were kept confidential and anonymous. The data collected from the survey was used solely for research purposes and will not be shared with any third parties.

**Declaration of interest:** The authors declare no competing interest.

**Data availability:** The data collected or examined in this study did not contain any personally identifiable details of the participants. The authors could provide raw and anonymized data upon request.

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