EMPATHY AND AUTHENTICITY ONLINE

THE ROLES OF MORAL IDENTITY AND MORAL DISENGAGEMENT IN ENCOURAGING OR DISCOURAGING EMPATHY AND AUTHENTICITY ONLINE

RESEARCH PAPER

BLAIRE MORGAN
BLAINE FOWERS
KRISTJÁN KRISTJÁNSSON

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

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Empathy and Authenticity Online

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> '**I THINK WE ALL HAVE EMPATHY.**
> **WE MAY NOT HAVE ENOUGH COURAGE**
> **TO DISPLAY IT.**'
>
> **Maya Angelou**

Abstract

This research paper explores the psychological constructs that encourage and discourage empathy and authenticity in the online environment. The first psychological construct, *moral identity*, refers to having moral traits as an important part of one's sense of self. This construct functions to retain consistency between one's thoughts and feelings and one's actions and is positively related to prosocial behaviours such as charitable giving and civic engagement. Conversely, the second psychological construct, *moral disengagement*, allows individuals to 'disengage' from their moral selves without feeling guilt or shame and is positively related to immoral behaviours such as rule breaking and dishonesty. This study examined whether moral identity and/or moral disengagement would be able to predict adolescents' levels of 'online empathy' and 'online authenticity'. It was hypothesised that having a stronger moral identity would be related to higher levels of online empathy and authenticity. Conversely, it was hypothesised that higher levels of moral disengagement would be related to lower levels of online empathy and authenticity.

Regression analysis revealed that moral identity was positively related to empathy and authenticity and could predict 8.7% of the variance in online empathy and 12% of the variance in online authenticity in this dataset. Moral disengagement was negatively related to online empathy and authenticity and could predict 1.9% of the variance in online empathy and 1.4% of variance in online authenticity within this sample.

These findings indicate that moral identity is more strongly related to moral traits online and that by encouraging the development and accessibility of moral identity (through parental strategies, educational programmes, and priming accessibility, for instance) it may be possible to promote moral thoughts, feelings and behaviours when interacting in the online environment.

1 Purpose and Background

1.1 EMPATHY AND AUTHENTICITY 'ONLINE'

Adolescents are avid users of social media sites; more than 74% of 12–15-year-olds in the UK have a social media profile and spend an average of 19 hours a week online (Ofcom, 2015). Recent research has begun to indicate some negative effects of social media use on young people, including reductions in empathy (Saculla, 2010) and increments in narcissism (Ryan and Xenos, 2011). Similarly, certain properties of the internet (such as lack of face-to-face interaction) have been implicated in immoral thoughts and behaviours online (James, 2014). For instance, it has been noted that 'cyber-aggression', in contrast to traditional aggression, requires less rationalisation and justification on the part of the perpetrator (Pornari and Wood, 2010), indicating there is something about the online environment that facilitates such immoral behaviours. Suggested enablers for these behaviours include the physical distance between users and the asynchronicity of interactions which enables perpetrators to act without having to see the reactions of the target (Kyriacou and Zuin, 2016).

Other possible contributors to immoral behaviours online could include different expectations of what behaviours are appropriate on the internet. These cultural expectations around appropriate behaviours, especially on social media sites, could mean that users do not always present an honest or authentic reflection of themselves (see Reinecke and Trepte, 2014). The properties of the internet and social media platforms allow users to control the image that they present to the world and it therefore follows that, if users selectively choose what information they post and when, there may be times when they are not being completely authentic or honest with others. Vallor (2010), for example, proposes that online interaction could hinder virtuous behaviours such as honesty. Honesty has been viewed as 'a willingness to put one's authentic self in play' and it is argued that online communication could hinder this authenticity through imposing self-presentation effects in its users and offering an increased ability to fake or exaggerate about oneself online (see Vallor, 2010: 166).

Concerns about immoral behaviours on social media have recently been reflected in a poll of UK parents conducted by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (see Morgan, 2016a; 2016b). This 2016 poll revealed that 55% of the 1,738 respondents agreed that social media hinders/undermines a young person's character or moral development. Of these respondents, 21% identified honesty as lacking on social media and 14% deemed kindness as lacking. These concerns seem to be warranted given the findings documented in a report by Demos which found that 26% of the 668 16–18-year-olds that they questioned admitted to bullying or insulting someone online (Harrison-Evans and Krasodomski-Jones, 2017).

Together, such research and theoretical thinking suggests that the online environment offers various moral challenges to internet users, including cultural expectations and internet properties that might discourage moral behaviours.

The story is never one-sided, however, and much research has demonstrated the positive effects that online interactions have on young people; including noting that the internet might help young people to develop and practice moral thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Vallor (2010), for instance, has also suggested that the internet could function to increase honesty; she highlights that, for some individuals, online communication could foster honesty as individuals may become more disinhibited to taking the risk of putting themselves out there. In terms of empathy, Harrison (2014) demonstrated that whilst a proportion of respondents (aged 11–14 years) did engage in uncompassionate acts (i.e., a third of the sample admitted writing unkind words online), they also treated the internet as a venue for compassionate behaviour. Therefore, the idea that the online environment discourages moral behaviours may not always ring true.

Following the observations above, this research paper explores psychological constructs that might encourage *and* discourage moral behaviours online, with a particular focus on empathy and authenticity.

> 'IF I AM BEING DISHONEST, AS LONG AS I AM NOT BEING DISHONEST ABOUT SOMETHING TOO BIG THEN IT'S FINE.'
>
> **Adolescent**

1.2 MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT THAT DISCOURAGES MORAL THOUGHTS, FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOURS

One psychological construct that might shed light on why people behave differently online is *moral disengagement* (Bandura, 1986; 1999; Bandura *et al.*, 2001). Moral disengagement allows an individual to act in immoral ways but retain a view of himself or herself as a 'moral person'; this enables immoral actions without any sense of guilt or shame on behalf of the perpetrator. Moral disengagement has been put forward as a key component of cyberbullying, where moral disengagement reduces empathy for others and encourages hurtful behaviours online (Ang and Goh, 2010; Gini, 2006; Kyriacou and Zuin, 2016). Situations may be more or less encouraging of moral disengagement. For instance, priming morality (e.g., through reading honour codes) can reduce the likelihood of moral disengagement (Aquino *et al.*, 2009). The online environment, on the other hand, may be conducive to moral disengagement as it places a physical and psychological distance between individuals and enables responsibility for behaviour to be diffused amongst its many users.

1.3 MORAL DISENGAGEMENT, EMPATHY AND AUTHENTICITY

Detert, Treviño and Sweitzer (2008) explored the antecedents of moral disengagement by testing the impact of a number of factors, which they consider as individual differences, upon moral disengagement (as measured using an adapted version of Bandura *et al.'s* (2001) moral disengagement scale). The factors tested included empathy, trait cynicism, three distinct loci of control (internal, chance, and power), and moral identity. This study demonstrated a negative relationship between (offline) empathy (as measured by the IPIP, Goldberg, 2001) and moral disengagement.

However, empathy is not the only moral value that has been associated with, or tested alongside, moral disengagement. For instance,

recent research has also linked moral disengagement to honesty, or more accurately dishonesty. In a set of studies (with college and graduate students) that included hypothetical scenarios and experimental tasks, Shu, Gino and Bazerman (2011) demonstrated how dishonest behaviour (both hypothesised and observed) was justified through moral disengagement. In accordance with Aquino *et al.* (2009) these studies also demonstrated how a moral prime, in the form of reading/ signing honour codes, reduced unethical behaviour and prevented moral disengagement later on. Furthermore, in terms of situational variability and moral disengagement, the results also indicate that more permissive environments for acting dishonestly will lead to greater moral disengagement than less permissive environments. The authors postulate that 'it is important not to underestimate the role of situational cues in encouraging ethical behavior. If a situation permits dishonesty, then one should expect to observe dishonesty' (Shu, Gino and Bazerman, 2011: 344).

These findings are once again pertinent to the online world, which might well be considered an environment that is permissive of immoral behaviours. The aforementioned survey of parents of 11–17-year-olds in the UK highlighted a series of vices observed on social media sites, the most prevalent being anger/ hostility (mentioned by 60% of the 1598 participants); arrogance (51%); ignorance (43%); bad judgement (41%) and hatred (36%). This suggests at least a perception of vicious behaviours on social media (Morgan, 2016a; 2016b). Moral disengagement online might be key to why these vicious behaviours arise.

In terms of the specific facets of moral disengagement that might be most relevant to the online environment, diffusion of responsibility might be particularly crucial. Social media sites consist of, at their core, large networks of users; this may encourage individuals to view themselves as part of a wider collective where the responsibility behind actions or norms on social media is divided out

between the members of that network. Similarly, being online might encourage the dehumanisation of other users; because individuals are not interacting face-to-face, it is easier to forget that the person you are communicating with has feelings and might be affected by your posts. This cognitive distortion has been referenced in relation to cyberbullying online: 'It is exactly because there is no face-to-face interaction with the victim that cyberbullies are much less likely to develop empathy towards their target' (Kyriacou and Zuin, 2016: 35).

In light of the empirical evidence discussed above, it would be expected that individuals who morally disengage will be less likely to act in empathic and authentic ways when online, which leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Moral disengagement will negatively predict variance in online empathy.

Hypothesis 1b: Moral disengagement will negatively predict variance in online authenticity.

1.4 MORAL IDENTITY AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT THAT ENCOURAGES MORAL THOUGHTS, FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOURS

The link between online interactions and moral disengagement is not likely to be true for everyone. Instead, it is probable that some individuals are more likely to experience moral disengagement than others. One key component in this individual difference is thought to be *moral identity* (Detert, Treviño and Sweitzer, 2008). When morality or moral traits such as honesty and empathy are an important part of one's self-concept, individuals are considered to have a 'moral identity'. When morality is an important part of who a person is (part of their identity), moral identity functions as a self-regulatory mechanism to ensure that the individual acts in accordance with their sense of self. Therefore, individuals with a strong sense of moral identity should be less

likely to engage in immoral or antisocial behaviours. This has been evidenced in much recent research over the past two decades; a strong moral identity positively predicts altruism, helping others, concern for others, and moral values such as empathy and honesty (Hardy *et al.*, 2010; Hardy *et al.*, 2012; Hardy *et al.*, 2014; Mulder and Aquino, 2013). Indeed, moral identity has emerged as an explanation of the link (or gap) between moral knowledge and moral action (Blasi, 1980). On the other hand, moral identity is negatively associated with antisocial behaviours such as aggression and rule breaking (Hardy, Bean and Olsen, 2015).

1.5 VARIABILITY IN MORAL IDENTITY

Situational influences on the accessibility of moral identity have been used to explain why, more often than not, moral individuals are not virtuous all of the time, nor are immoral individuals vicious all of the time. Individuals with a strong moral compass, who see doing the right thing as an important part of their identity, may nonetheless sometimes act dishonestly or ungratefully. Aquino *et al.* (2009) evidenced the influence of situational factors and moral identity on behaviour in a series of studies. In one such study they demonstrated how a moral prime can activate an individual's moral self-schema and enhance their intention to behave prosocially. In a second study, the researchers evidenced how priming self-interest (in the form of financial incentives) decreased the accessibility of moral identity.

One environment where situational factors might decrease the accessibility of moral identity is the internet, and social media sites in particular. These sites are known for the promotion of self-interest, for example, through promoting self-disclosure (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Indeed, research has demonstrated a positive relationship between social media use and narcissism (Ryan and Xenos, 2011), as well as a negative association between social media use and empathy (Saculla, 2010).

As suggested in Aquino *et al.* (2009: 126), 'Situational factors that activate (or prime) a self-interested facet of identity should increase the accessibility of this type of identity, thereby decreasing the accessibility of the moral self-schema'; this might go some way to explaining the apparent high levels of self-promotion and low levels of empathy on social media sites. Worryingly, if it is the case that 'neurons that fire together, wire together' then these schemas might become regularly (or even automatically) activated when the same situation or environment is encountered again.

The degree that morality is central to an individual's self-concept may influence how likely they are to engage in immoral (or conversely moral) behaviours on social media sites. Moral identity is largely considered as an individual difference variable; individuals differ in the degree to which morality is an important part of their sense of self. Indeed, research has demonstrated how people may differ in the degree to which they identify with moral characteristics; for example, in interviews with 16–84-year-old Canadian citizens, Walker *et al.* (1995) illustrated how 'morality had differing degrees of centrality in people's identities: For some, moral considerations and issues were pervasive in their experience because morality was rooted in the heart of their being; for others, moral issues seemed remote and the maintenance of moral values and standards was not basic to their self-concept and self-esteem' (Walker *et al.*, 1995: 398).

Following this thinking, individuals with a stronger moral identity will work to retain consistency between their self-concept and their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. That is, individuals for whom moral traits are an important part of who they are should feel, think and act in ways that uphold these moral commitments. This consistency should also hold true in the online world. In particular, if the translation of moral identity into moral cognition, affect and action holds true, moral identity should function to encourage moral thoughts, feelings and behaviours when online. It is also possible that for those individuals whom being

'kind' 'empathetic' and 'honest' are central to their self-concept, the cultural expectations and situational factors on social media might have a reduced impact.

It would thereby be expected that individuals with a strong moral identity will be more likely to act in empathic and authentic ways online:

Hypothesis 2a: Moral identity will be a positive predictor of variance in online empathy.

Hypothesis 2b: Moral identity will be a positive predictor of variance in online authenticity.

It should also follow that individuals with a strong moral identity are more resistant to situational factors that enable or encourage immoral behaviours online. It should not be surprising, therefore, that researchers have previously observed a negative relationship between moral disengagement and moral identity. To be sure, the former construct is considered to discourage moral feelings, attitudes and behaviours whilst the latter is thought to encourage them.

Detert, Treviño and Sweitzer (2008) for example, described a negative association between moral identity (measured using the internalisation subscale from Aquino and Reed, 2002) and moral disengagement. This same relationship was noted in Hardy, Bean and Olsen's (2015) study which explored the interaction between moral identity and moral disengagement in predicting adolescents' prosocial and antisocial behaviours, such as civic engagement and aggression.

It is therefore expected that a negative relationship between these two constructs will be replicated within this study:

Hypothesis 3: Moral identity will be negatively related to moral disengagement

1.6 OVERVIEW

This study explored the relationship between moral identity and moral disengagement in relation to two moral values online: empathy and authenticity. As indicated above, a lack of empathy online has been implicated in immoral behaviours such as cyberbullying. Furthermore, the online environment, where interactions are blind and asynchronistic and individuals are faced with certain cultural expectations (such as the need to present a positive self, Reinecke and Trepte, 2014) might encourage individuals to lie, cheat or exaggerate and thereby think or act in ways that are inauthentic.

The key developmental period for the emergence of moral identity appears to be adolescence, where moral understanding tends to become more ideological, interpersonal and prosocial and, during the same period, adolescents explore their possible identities and what this means for social interaction and social groups (see Hardy and Carlo, 2005; 2011). Therefore, this research focussed on young people aged between 11 and 18 years where identity development and the formation of moral identity are particularly significant.

It was hoped that through learning more about the processes that lead to immoral thinking and behaviour online a better understanding of how to reduce such behaviours and promote moral thoughts and behaviours in their place could be gained. For example, the lack of empathy online and its relative association with cyberbullying has drastic effects on young people's mental health and wellbeing, with the most extreme consequences including suicide (Kyriacou and Zuin, 2016); understanding how these sorts of behaviours might be reduced is therefore of great importance.

2 **Methodology**

This research employed online questionnaires which were comprised of a series of psychological scales. The questionnaire first gauged participants' social media use and demographic information before guiding participants through scales that tapped the constructs of interest: moral identity, moral disengagement, empathy and authenticity[1]. The scales are described in detail below and all contain self-report items. The majority of scales were taken from pre-existing and validated measures, however some scales were adapted to explore the online context and one new item was specifically created and piloted as part of this study.

2.1 CONCEPTUALISATION OF CONSTRUCTS

In this study, moral identity was conceptualised as a general disposition or trait such that individuals can possess differing levels of moral identity. Following this conceptualisation, those with stronger moral identities can be considered to be individuals who perceive moral values (such as honesty and empathy) as an important part of who they are as a person. As compared to individuals with weaker moral identities, those with a stronger moral identity should be more likely to consistently think, feel and act in moral ways that align with their self-views. In this study it was expected that these individuals should also be more likely to carry these moral values across to the online environment.

Moral disengagement was also considered in this study as a general disposition, whereby some individuals would be more likely to morally disengage than others. This follows from the conceptualisations originally offered by Bandura *et al.* (1996). Therefore, individuals would exhibit differing levels of moral disengagement, just as they would exhibit differing levels of moral identity. In this study it was expected that those individuals with higher levels of moral disengagement would be more likely to morally disengage in the online environment and, in turn, exhibit lower levels of online empathy and online authenticity.

Empathy has been conceptualised in many different ways in the literature, however, there is much consensus in empathy being comprised of both cognitive and affective components (Davis, 1980; 1983). This study similarly considered empathy as encompassing the cognitive ability to take others' perspectives and the affective component of being able to feel as the other feels. 'Online empathy', therefore, refers to the ability to take the perspective of other internet users as well as the ability to recognise how other users are feeling – even when they are not able to observe these other users directly. Empathy can be considered at both the trait and the state level; here, the goal was to explore participants' general tendencies to think, feel and act in empathic ways online.

Authenticity has been described as being true to oneself. According to Joseph (2016), 'to be authentic, we need to be able to face up to the truth about ourselves no matter how unpleasant we may find that'. Joseph (2016) explicitly highlights, as did Shannon Vallor (2010), that authenticity is strongly linked to honesty – it is about being honest with and about ourselves. In this study, we conceptualise authenticity with reference to Wood *et al.'s* (2008) description of authentic living, where authenticity is marked by congruency between behaviours and expressions and one's inner states, thoughts and beliefs. 'Online authenticity' is considered to reflect consistency between one's behaviours and expressions online and their experiences, thoughts, feelings and actions offline. It is similarly thought that online authenticity is linked to being honest about oneself, such that individuals who exhibit high levels of online authenticity are presenting an honest and true reflection of themselves.

2.2 MEASURES

Moral identity was assessed using two well-validated scales and a single-item measure. The first scale was an adapted version of the Moral Self-Relevance Scale (α = .83, Patrick and Gibbs, 2008; 2012). This scale includes the 8 Likert scale items that examine the importance of various moral traits to one's self-concept[2]. Each item addressed a different moral trait and asked participants to rate the importance on a scale ranging from 1 = *not important to me* to 5 = *extremely important to me*. Alongside this, participants were presented with a list of 32 traits, where 8 were moral traits (such as honest, fair and generous) and 24 were personality traits (such as organised, funny and independent). In response to this list, participants were asked to 'pick the 8 qualities that you think are MOST extremely important to you as a person'. For the purposes of this study, an average from the Likert responses were added to the 'Pick 8 score' to give a Moral Self-Relevance score.

The second measure of moral identity was a five-item Moral Contingencies of Self-Worth scale[3] (α = .83, Crocker *et al.*, 2003). These items gauge the importance of virtuous living for one's self-esteem and are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; for example, 'My self-esteem depends on whether or not I follow my moral/ethical principles'. An average score for items (ranging from 1 – 7) was calculated for this scale.

The final gauge of moral identity was a single item measuring the importance of values and moral standards to one's identity, taken from the Moral Aspects of Identity scale (Cheek, Smith and Tropp, 2002). The item is answered using a scale ranging from 1 = *not at all important to my sense of who I am* to 5 = *extremely important to my sense of who I am*. The average moral self-relevance item score and average item score for the contingencies scale were later summed with the single identity item to form one overall variable of moral identity.

Moral disengagement was measured using Bandura *et al.'s* (1996) Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement scale. This 32-item measure (α = .95) measures moral disengagement as a trait and is comprised of eight subscales each assessing a different facet of moral

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[1] Please note that additional scales were included alongside those described here, such as a measure of parental style and wellbeing scales. For reasons of brevity and to ease understanding, only those scales referenced in the analysis and discussion are described here.

[2] The original scale also includes a number of additional Likert items to explore personality traits which were not included in this study.

[3] The five moral contingencies of self-worth items comprise one subscale of the original measure of self-worth by Crocker *et al.* (2003).

disengagement: moral justification, euphemistic language, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, advantageous comparison, attribution of blame, distorting of consequences, and dehumanisation. Participants were presented with four statements[4] per facet of moral disengagement (for instance, 'It is alright to lie to keep your friends out of trouble' (Moral Justification item)) and rated the degree to which they agreed with these statements on a scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The average scores from the eight facets were later combined to give an overall variable of moral disengagement.

'Online empathy' was measured by adapting two 7-item subscales from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI, Davis, 1983). The first subscale was 'Empathic Concern', which gauged participants' focus on and concern for others (to assess the affective component of empathy). The second subscale, 'Perspective-taking', assessed participants' tendency to take another person's viewpoint (the cognitive component of empathy). These items were adapted so that participants responded with regards to the online environment: 'Sometimes, *online*, I don't feel sorry for other people when they are having problems' (Reverse scored empathic concern item); 'Before criticizing somebody *online*, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place' (Perspective-taking item). All items were answered using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *does not describe me well* to 5 = *describes me very well*. The scores for both subscales of the IRI were summed to create one 'online empathy' variable.

'Online authenticity' was measured using three distinct measures. The first was the 4-item 'Authentic Living' subscale of Wood *et al.'s* (2008) Authenticity Scale (α = .70 − . 82). Again, these items were adapted so that participants responded with regards to the online environment: 'When *online*, I am true to myself in most situations'. Items were answered using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *does*

not describe me well at all and 7 = *describes me very well.* For this study, an average of these four items was calculated to create an Authentic Living score.

The second measure of authenticity online was taken from Reinecke and Trepte (2014). This measure (α =.70 - .71) explores participants' 'authentic online profile' and was originally adapted from the Integrated Self-Discrepancy Index (Hardin and Lakin, 2009). Participants considered their online profile and listed five adjectives that 'describe the person you represent in your online profile'. For this adolescent sample additional instructions were added for clarity: 'If someone, were to describe you after looking at your online profile, what five words would they use?' After supplying each of the five adjectives/descriptors, participants were asked to rate the extent to which the adjective describes 'the person you really are' on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *does not describe me at all* to 5 = *describes me very well*. Following the original measure, an overall score was created by calculating an average across the five items.

Finally, one new item was specifically created for this study. This was a pictorial item that addressed the degree of overlap between who the participant is *as a person* (represented by a blue circle) and who the participant is *online* (represented by an orange circle). Participants were presented with six pictures that differed in the degree of overlap between the blue and orange circles, where Picture A depicted completely separate circles and Picture F depicted completely overlapping circles. Participants chose which of the six pictures best represented the overlap of their online and 'real world or offline' selves and scores were converted to a numerical score ranging from 0 (no overlap) to 5 (complete overlap).

An item average of the Authentic Living scale and average item score from the measure of authentic online profiles were summed with the single pictorial item to give one overall variable of 'online authenticity'.

2.3 PARTICIPANTS AND RECRUITMENT

The online questionnaire was completed by 834 secondary school students. Of these respondents, 788 passed integrity checks[5] and were included in the analysis. Participants were aged between 11 and 18 years (mean age = 14 years) and came from five schools across the UK: School A was a grammar school for boys in Warwickshire (N = 102); School B was a boys grammar school in Buckinghamshire (N = 116); School C was a co-educational secondary school in Suffolk (N = 242); School D was a co-educational comprehensive in South-East England (N = 43); School E was a co-educational secondary school in Devon (N = 282).

Of respondents, 64% were male; 84% were White British and 3.2% were Asian British Indian; 20% identified as Christian and 43% as atheists, 19% answered 'don't know' when asked about their religion. Of those who identified as having a religion, only 9% reported practising their religion regularly.

Schools participated on a voluntary basis and, therefore, these schools likely already had an interest in this research area. Further to this, this sample includes two boys-only schools, which created an unbalanced distribution across genders.

2.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study received full ethical approval from the University of Birmingham's Ethics Committee. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research and given the opportunity to withdraw at any point during completion of the online questionnaire. As respondents were under the age of 18, informed (opt-out) consent was sought from parents/caregivers[6]. Given the potential sensitivity of this topic (with questions around moral disengagement and empathy online), participants were provided with links to advice and support on cyberbullying.

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[4]   Please note that some statements in this particular measure contained Americanisms, therefore, slight adjustments were made to reflect the language of respondents (for instance, the term 'jerk' was changed to 'idiot'). All changes were minimal and did not change the overall premise of the statement.

[5]   Integrity checks consisted of two questions spaced at different junctures in the questionnaire. To check participants were reading the questions carefully, they were asked to respond to the questions using a set response (e.g., select strongly disagree from the choices below).

[6]   22 students were opted out from having their data analysed for this research study.

3 Findings

3.1 SOCIAL MEDIA USE

When asked which site they used most frequently, 37% of the sample said YouTube, 34% Snapchat, 21% Instagram, and 4% Facebook. On average, participants reported checking/visiting social media sites *between 10 and 20 times a day*. The equivalent average scores for the duration of time spent on social media per day was *between 3 and 4 hours*.

3.2 MEASURES

All mean scores for the scales tested in this study can be seen in Table 1, alongside standard deviations and reliability scores.

3.3 CORRELATIONS

An overall variable for each construct of interest was calculated by summing scores for each indicator; for example, a variable of 'moral identity' was calculated from item means of the moral self-relevance scores, contingencies of self-worth score, and the moral aspects of identity score. This procedure produced four key variables; moral identity, moral disengagement, online empathy and online authenticity. These key variables were then entered into a bivariate correlation; the correlations between these variables can be seen in Table 2.

As can be seen in Table 2, the direction of relationships support the hypotheses outlined earlier. As anticipated in hypothesis 3, there was a moderate-to-large negative correlation between moral identity and moral disengagement. This relationship describes how lower moral identity scores are associated with higher moral disengagement scores (and vice versa). Conversely, moral identity was positively related to both online empathy and online authenticity, offering initial support for the link between having a moral identity and behaving in empathic and authentic ways when online. Also in support of the evidence outlined in Section 1, moral disengagement was negatively related to both online empathy and online authenticity; higher levels of moral disengagement (as indicated by higher moral

disengagement scores) were associated with lower self-reported levels of empathy and authenticity in the online environment.

3.4 DEMOGRAPHIC COMPARISONS

The next stage of analysis explored whether there were any gender or age-related differences in moral identity, moral disengagement, online empathy and online authenticity. Given the unbalanced distribution across genders and the potential cultural differences in single gendered schools, the two boys-only schools were excluded from this demographic comparison. Subsequently, when exploring the age of participants, this refined sample contained only one 16-year-old and one 17-year-old; therefore, the sample was further refined to include 11–15-year-olds only. The refined sample contained 281 males and 284 females. Of these, 31 were 11-years-old; 173 were 12-years-old; 121 were 13 years of age; 79 were 14-years-old; and 161 were 15-years-old. The variables of ethnicity and religion were not compared as the majority of participants were White British and atheist (see Section 2.3).

A multivariate between-subject ANOVA was conducted with gender and age as fixed factors and moral identity, moral disengagement, online identity and online authenticity as dependent variables. This analysis revealed a significant difference between male and female respondents across all four dependent variables (see Table 3 for all means). Males reported significantly higher levels of moral disengagement compared to females ($p < .001$). However, females reported significantly higher levels of moral identity ($p < .001$), online authenticity ($p < .05$) and online empathy ($p < .01$) in comparison to males.

In terms of age-related differences, the ANOVA revealed a significant difference between ages for moral disengagement ($p < .05$) and online empathy ($p < .001$) but not for moral identity ($p = .06$) or online authenticity ($p = .32$). Further exploration of the means revealed that moral disengagement scores increased with age, whereby 11-year-olds (overall) reported

a mean score of 18.87 (SD = 3.69) and 15-year-olds (overall) reported a higher mean of 20.60 (SD = 4.35, see also Table 3). Unsurprisingly, given the negative relationship between moral disengagement and online empathy, a pattern of responding in the opposite direction for online empathy can be seen. Here, online empathy scores decreased with age; 11-year-olds (overall) reported an average online empathy score of 60.48 (SD = 12.08) which was considerably higher than the average score reported by 15-year-olds (M = 44.65, SD = 8.46).

The next stage of analysis began to explore hypotheses 1a and 1b (whether moral disengagement can predict variance in (a) online empathy and (b) online authenticity in this dataset), and hypotheses 2a and 2b (whether moral identity can predict variance in (a) online empathy and (b) online authenticity in this dataset).

Two separate linear regressions were conducted, the first with online empathy as the outcome variable, and a second with online authenticity as the outcome. There were two steps involved in both of these regressions; the first involved entering the demographic variables of gender and age (given the differences that were noted in the demographic comparisons), and the second step involved entering moral identity and moral disengagement scores. For both regressions, Forward method was used to enter age and gender variables and Stepwise method was used to explore moral identity and moral disengagement. This approach allowed a comparison of the strength of moral identity and moral disengagement relationships to empathy and authenticity.

3.5 PREDICTING ONLINE EMPATHY

The first hierarchical linear regression explored whether moral identity and/or moral disengagement scores could predict variance in self-reported levels of online empathy. Four predictors were entered into the regression model: age, gender, moral identity and moral disengagement. All four variables were

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Tests for All (Sub)Scales (N = 788).

Variables	Range	Mean Score	SD	Reliability (α)
Moral Identity Indicators				
Moral Self-Relevance	1–13	6.04	2.12	.86
Contingencies of Self-Worth	1–5	4.51	1.20	.83
Moral Aspects of Identity	1–5	3.45	.97	-
Moral Disengagement				
Moral Justification	1–5	3.03	.77	.71
Euphemistic Language	1–5	2.50	.76	.70
Displacement of Responsibility	1–5	2.76	.72	.61
Diffusion of Responsibility	1–5	2.91	.70	.51
Advantageous Comparison	1–5	2.06	.73	.73
Attribution of Blame	1–5	2.70	.64	.53
Distortion of Consequences	1–5	2.20	.69	.69
Dehumanisation	1–5	2.19	.77	.74
Online Empathy				
Empathic Concern (online)	7–35	28.41	11.64	.74
Perspective-Taking (online)	7–35	22.34	4.64	.71
Online Authenticity				
Authentic Living (online)	1–7	4.67	1.21	.58
Authentic Profile (online)	1–5	3.64	.82	.69
Pictorial item	0–5	4.22	1.73	-

Table 2: Correlations between Constructs of interest. Note: Pearson Correlation; ** = p < .001.

	Moral Identity	Moral Disengagement	Online Empathy	Online Authenticity
Moral Identity	1	-.414**	.375**	.235**
Moral Disengagement		1	-.335**	-.190**
Online Empathy			1	.129**
Online Authenticity				1

statistically significant predictors of variance in online empathy and thus retained in the model. In the first step, age and gender accounted for 25% of the variance in online empathy (Model A (age and gender): $R^2 = .245$; $p < .001$). In support of hypothesis 2a, moral identity positively predicted variance in online empathy (Model B (age, gender and moral identity): $R^2 = .332$, R^2 change = .087, $p < .001$) whereby higher moral identity scores predicted higher online empathy scores. Moral identity was a statistically significant predictor of variance in online empathy and moral identity scores were able to account for 8.7% of the variance in online empathy.

In support of hypothesis 1a, moral disengagement was a 'negative predictor' of online empathy (Model C (age, gender, moral identity, moral disengagement): $R^2 = .351$, R^2 change = .019, $p < .001$), whereby increases in moral disengagement could predict decreases in online empathy. Moral disengagement was a statistically significant predictor of variance in online empathy in this study and was able to account for 1.9% of the variance in online empathy.

3.6 PREDICTING ONLINE AUTHENTICITY

The standardised variables were entered into a second hierarchical regression to explore whether moral identity and/or moral disengagement could predict online authenticity. To recap, the four predictors entered into the regression model were age, gender, moral identity and moral disengagement. All four variables were statistically significant predictors of online authenticity and, therefore, retained in the model. In the first step, age and gender accounted for 1.2% of the variance in online authenticity (Model A: $R^2 = .012$, $p < .01$).

In support of hypothesis 2b, moral identity positively predicted variance in online authenticity (Model B: $R^2 = .072$, R^2 change = .060, $p < .001$), whereby higher moral identity scores predicted higher online authenticity scores. Moral identity was a statistically significant predictor of variance in online authenticity and moral identity scores were able to account for 6% of the variance in online authenticity.

In support of hypothesis 1b, moral disengagement negatively predicted online authenticity (Model C: $R^2 = .086$, R^2 change = .014, $p < .01$), whereby increases in moral disengagement here were associated with lower online authenticity. Moral disengagement was a statistically significant predictor of variance in online authenticity and was able to account for 1.4% of the variance in online authenticity.
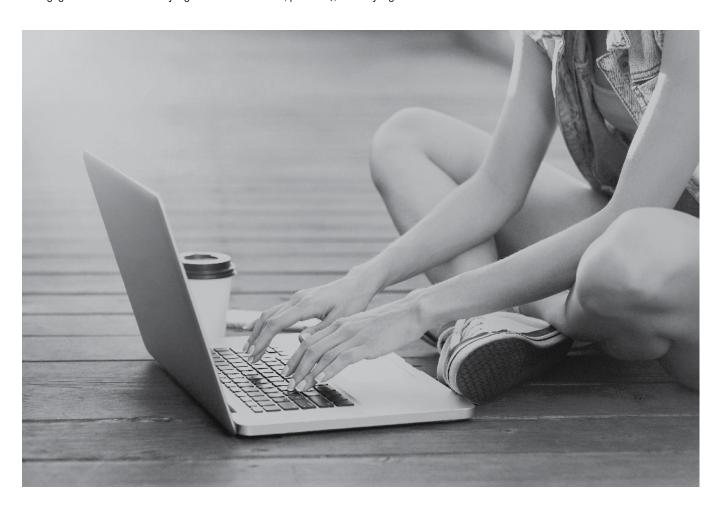
Table 3: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the Four Latent Variables Across Genders and Ages from the Multivariate ANOVA.

	Moral Disengagement		Moral Identity		Online Empathy		Online Authenticity	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Male								
11 years old	19.29	5.03	14.35	3.70	63.08	12.49	12.67	3.02
12 years old	20.24	5.14	13.26	3.35	57.04	14.81	12.08	3.36
13 years old	19.83	3.65	13.85	2.90	55.41	14.61	11.37	2.32
14 years old	21.88	3.44	12.23	2.77	42.26	4.76	11.14	1.92
15 years old	21.77	4.80	12.86	3.61	42.15	8.65	12.43	2.40
All males	20.79	4.59	13.18	3.31	50.52	14.11	11.93	2.93
Female								
11 years old	18.57	2.43	15.14	2.89	58.61	11.77	12.91	3.03
12 years old	18.79	3.23	15.33	2.79	62.15	14.46	12.24	3.18
13 years old	19.66	4.31	15.02	2.91	62.93	15.95	12.60	2.74
14 years old	19.71	3.57	14.92	2.43	48.10	5.52	13.00	2.17
15 years old	19.32	3.38	14.49	2.55	47.38	7.39	12.72	2.51
All females	19.24	3.53	14.96	2.71	56.06	14.01	12.60	2.77

['BE KIND, FOR EVERYONE YOU MEET
IS FIGHTING A HARDER BATTLE.'
Plato]

4 Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

The introduction described the prospective conceptual and empirical relationship between two psychological constructs (moral identity and moral disengagement) and two moral virtues (empathy and authenticity). Previous theoretical and empirical evidence in this domain has demonstrated that moral identity is positively related to empathic feelings and behaviours such as charitable giving and civic engagement (Hardy *et al.*, 2014). This study explored whether the link between moral identity and moral feelings and actions translated to the online environment such that those individuals with a strong moral identity are more likely to be empathic and honest in the online world.

Conversely, moral disengagement is considered to reduce moral thoughts and behaviours; for instance, it has been shown to be positively related to dishonesty and negatively related to empathy (Shu, Gino and Bazerman, 2011; Detert, Treviño and Sweitzer, 2008). This study explored whether the link between this psychological construct and immoral behaviours translated to the online environment and whether moral disengagement was negatively associated with empathy and authenticity online.

This study used regression analysis to test these hypothesised relationships. In support of hypotheses 1a and 1b, moral disengagement, as studied here, was able to predict 1.9% of the variance in online empathy and 1.4% of variance in online authenticity. The relationship between moral disengagement and empathy, as well as moral disengagement and honesty, had been mapped out in previous research (Detert, Treviño and Sweitzer, 2008; Shu, Gino and Bazerman, 2011). However, this study describes these same relationships occurring online with authenticity. The results suggest that stronger levels of moral disengagement (as signalled by higher moral disengagement scores) are predictive of lower levels of both empathy and authenticity online in this sample.

It should be noted, however, that moral disengagement predicted fairly small levels of variance in both empathy and authenticity here. Given the strong theoretical and empirical links between moral disengagement and cyberbullying (Ang and Goh, 2010), combined with the suggestion that cyberbullying involves a lack of empathy (Kyriacou and Zuin, 2016), the finding that moral disengagement only accounts for 1.9% of the variance in online empathy is surprisingly low. One possible explanation for this is the inclusion of moral identity as a second predictor in the model which might have accounted for some shared variance between these two constructs (recall that moral identity and moral disengagement are (negatively) correlated with one another).

Furthermore, moral identity has been shown to function as a moderator of moral disengagement, such that, for those with higher levels of moral identity, the relationship between moral disengagement and empathy, for instance, is weaker (Detert, Treviño and Sweitzer, 2008; Hardy, Bean and Olsen, 2015). This could suggest that an individual's level of moral identity could also be conceptualised as a moderator of moral disengagement.

In support of hypotheses 2a and 2b, moral identity was able to predict 8.7% of the variance in online empathy and 6% of the variance in online authenticity. These results indicate that a stronger moral identity (as signalled by higher moral identity scores) is predictive of higher levels of empathic concern and perspective taking when online (as measured by the adapted IRI scales). Furthermore, individuals with a stronger moral identity report higher levels of

authenticity online, including a larger degree of overlap between their online and offline selves (as gauged by the authenticity pictorial item).

The conceptualisation of moral identity as a general disposition here, rather than a process, allowed for an exploration of whether moral identity offline (or in 'real life') translates to actions in the online world. The results of this study indicate that individuals for whom being empathic and honest are an important part of their sense of self are more likely to think and behave in empathic and honest ways online.

Whilst this might seem unsurprising to some, this is an important relationship to observe empirically as it provides evidence for the role of moral identity in encouraging moral behaviours online (or, equally perhaps, in discouraging immoral behaviours). Given that moral identity is considered, itself, to be something that can be promoted and encouraged (Hardy, Padilla-Walker and Carlo, 2008), this indicates a possible route for the promotion of moral thoughts and behaviours online.

Parents, for instance, are a vital source for moral growth and serve as a crucial influence on their child's internalisation and acceptance of moral values (Hardy, Padilla-Walker and Carlo, 2008) and their development of a moral identity (Patrick and Gibbs, 2012). Patrick and Gibbs (2012), for instance, examined the influence of parental inductions on moral identity formation in adolescents. Importantly, however, they were also interested in how adolescents' evaluations of their parents' discipline styles would impact on moral identity. Using Perceived Parental Discipline (PPD) and

Moral Self-Relevance (MSR) questionnaires, Patrick and Gibbs noted how parents' use of inductions were positively related to moral identity (particularly in older adolescents where moral traits are used more often in self-descriptions, see Hardy and Carlo, 2005).

By also exploring adolescents' evaluations of parenting techniques, Patrick and Gibbs demonstrate how adolescents tended to rate inductive techniques as more fair and appropriate in comparison to power assertion and love withdrawal. In relation to moral identity formation, adolescents' perceptions of their parents' disciplinary technique was positively related to scores on the MSR questionnaire. The authors highlight the importance of not just examining parenting styles or techniques, but also gauging adolescents' perceptions of these techniques; when parenting behaviours are deemed fair and appropriate, they are more likely to attend to the intended message and internalise this message so that it becomes part of their sense of self (see also Padilla-Walker and Carlo, 2004). Indeed, children are not passive in the internalisation process; they do not simply accept their parents' values, rather they reflect and evaluate parental messages and can negotiate, reject or accept

them (Hastings, Miller and Troxel, 2015; Killen and Smetana, 2015).

Clearly, therefore, children play an active role in the internalisation of values, which in turn can inform their moral self-concept. This is also true in the educational context. The term 'character education' describes a movement towards teaching character, both implicitly and explicitly in educational institutions. As set out in the Jubilee Centre's *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*, moral values, such as empathy and honesty, can be both caught and taught (Jubilee Centre, 2017). Educational programmes that encourage reflection and development of virtues have been shown to increase virtue literacy and even improve students' behaviours (Arthur *et al.*, 2014). In terms of teaching moral values online, Harrison (2016) has suggested an Aristotelian framework for helping young people to develop as virtuous digital citizens by mastering what he terms *cyberphronesis*. This entails being able to invoke practical wisdom when online in order to make good judgements and wise decisions and develop moral virtues. Particular strategies that might be used to develop *cyberphronesis* could include morally salient social media scenarios, for instance, which require

participants to reflect on how their behaviours impact others (see Morgan and Kristjánsson, 2017).

Importantly in the development of moral identity, it should be noted that children (and equally adults) may not receive consistent messages; rather they are likely presented with conflicting value messages depending on context and relationship (i.e., parent-child; teacher-child; peer group etc.). As discussed in this research paper, there may be properties of the internet that encourage immoral behaviours or enable moral identity to become less salient. It is also worth noting that online platforms, and in particular social media platforms, might present users with many different viewpoints and an array of different behaviours; some of these may conflict with value messages that they receive in other domains. It has already been noted that the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue's poll (Morgan, 2016a; 2016b) revealed that social media was a concern for many parents with particular reference to their children's moral development. These respondents highlighted an array of vices that deemed to be regularly encountered on social media sites, including anger/hostility, arrogance and ignorance (see Morgan 2016a; 2016b).

Given such concerns about the influence of the media, it is not surprising that many parents attempt to regulate their child's media consumption. This could be considered another technique in which moral identity could be actively encouraged online and various strategies for maintaining consistency in value messages have been identified in previous research (Padilla-Walker and Thompson, 2005). Morgan and Kristjánsson (2017) explored parental regulation strategies in situations where moral values could be considered compromised. The authors created social media scenarios where empathy and honesty could be deemed lacking and gauged adolescents' perceptions of the regulation strategies that their parents were most likely to adopt in response to them. Following Patrick and Gibbs' (2012) suggestion above, the authors also examined adolescents' perceptions of the 'fairness' of these possible regulation techniques.

According to the adolescent respondents, strategies that aimed to prevent moral transgressions from arising are most commonly adopted by parents. Interestingly, parents are thought to use more controlling strategies in response to morally salient scenarios. Perhaps unsurprisingly, regulation strategies that were less controlling were deemed to be fairer by

their children. Of particular importance here, parental regulation strategies were able to account for significant levels of variance in both the frequency and duration of adolescents' social media use, thereby indicating that regulation techniques can influence adolescents' social media use.

It appears, therefore, that there are ways in which the formation and maintenance of moral identity might be encouraged in offline contexts within family and school life, through the use of parenting strategies, educational programmes and regulation of social media, for example. However, this promotion of moral identity need not be limited to offline scenarios; there might be ways in which moral identity could be encouraged online, for instance, via promoting or encouraging moral identity on social media platforms.

As discussed earlier, the online environment could be considered to decrease the accessibility of moral identity through cultural norms on social media platforms or via the properties of the internet itself. Equally, it has been suggested that situational factors can prime moral identity (Aquino and Reed, 2009), for instance, a reminder of moral codes can activate one's moral identity and act as a reminder for individuals to think, feel and act in accordance with one's internalised moral values. Given this, it should therefore follow that reminders of moral identity and nods to moral values on online platforms should similarly function to activate one's moral identity. Indeed, many moral values can be seen online; the aforementioned poll of UK parents,

for instance, highlighted that various strengths of character are perceived on social media sites, including humour, creativity, love, courage and kindness (Morgan 2016a; 2016b). One avenue for further research, therefore, could be to examine how regulatory users are reminded of their moral identity when online and whether this differs depending on the functionality of platforms used, or the motivations for using them. Platforms where the users' identities are closely linked to their offline identities may be more encouraging of moral thoughts, feelings and behaviours online. For example, Facebook profiles can act as an extension of your offline identity and encourage individuals to act as they would in 'real life' – in this way, social network sites might impose some of the same (moral) expectations as face-to-face interactions do. This notion is supported by James (2014), who proposed that the close tie between online and offline identity by (non-anonymous, genuine) internet users can weaken any inclination to disengage from one's moral self and, instead, make individuals more morally sensitive.

Further to this, the findings of this study indicate that moral identity is negatively related to moral disengagement; in support of hypothesis 3, higher levels of moral identity are related to lower levels of moral disengagement. In real terms, if moral identity does indeed moderate moral disengagement, this offers further support for the promotion of moral identity (both offline and online), as described above.

One limitation that is important to highlight here, however, is the likelihood of socially desirable responding. Many of the scales included in this sample measure socially desirable constructs; including all four key variables of interest here, moral identity, moral disengagement, empathy, and authenticity. Whilst participants were regularly reminded of their anonymity and the importance of responding honestly, it is possible that responses were not always reflective of participants' views or behaviours. This might be especially true of younger participants in this sample who report higher endorsements of both moral identity and empathy. Future research could explore the relationship between these variables in an experimental design using behavioural measures to examine whether these correlational links can be directly observed in behaviour.

It should also be noted here that adolescents' understanding of authenticity was not directly tested. Whilst definitions of authenticity were offered to aid with conceptualisation of this construct, it is not clear as to whether participants would have understood what it is to 'be true to oneself' (especially during a time where their identity is still being explored and developed). This issue raises questions about the validity and reliability of the Authentic Living subscale with this particular cohort, which seems to be reflected in a lower reliability score than that observed by the original authors of the scale (Wood et al., 2008). Conversely, the two remaining measures utilised here (the adapted Integrated Self-Discrepancy Index to explore authentic profiles and the single pictorial item) were applied directly to the

authenticity of one's *online self* and are likely to offer a more accurate picture of adolescents' self-perceptions on presenting an honest reflection of who they are when online. This question of validity should be borne in mind in future endeavours to measure authenticity within adolescent samples.

The prevalence of moral virtues, like empathy and honesty, in the online environment also has implications for young people's mental health and wellbeing. A lack of empathy online, for example, is considered to account for the high rates of cyberbullying that are reported; a 2017 survey by Public Health England revealed that 17.9% of their sample of 5,335 11–15-year-olds reported being cyberbullied within the two months prior to data collection (Public Health England, 2017). In turn, cyberbullying can lead to the internalising and externalising of problems including depressive symptoms and drug misuse (Elgar *et al.*, 2014). Conversely, authenticity is positively related to wellbeing (see, for example, Goldman and Kernis, 2002) which suggests that encouraging authentic representations of oneself online could increase levels of subjective wellbeing.

Another possible avenue for future research would be to explore the situational variability in moral identity online. For example, individuals might be more or less susceptible to the cultural influences that encourage inauthentic behaviours such as exaggeration and faking of content. This might be directly related to levels of moral identity or could interact with other dispositions and qualities such as autonomy and obedience. Relatedly, certain internet sites might provide weaker or stronger situational influence; for instance, different social media sites are likely to promote different cultural expectations based on what functions are available and the behaviours that are typically exhibited by other users. Those sites that are more permissive of dishonest or 'unempathic' content and behaviour will likely lead to greater levels of moral disengagement. A comparison of the relationship between moral disengagement and empathy/authenticity across different social media sites might shed light on the platforms where young people are more likely to encounter unkind and dishonest content.

Conclusions

This research paper explored the relationships between two psychological constructs (moral identity and moral disengagement) and two moral values in the online environment ('online empathy' and 'online authenticity'). Moral identity, where moral traits become a crucial part of one's sense of self, is considered to encourage individuals to think, feel and act in ways that align with this moral sense of self. In this study, it was revealed that moral identity was positively related to both online empathy and online authenticity (as measured by a self-report questionnaire).

Moral disengagement, on the other hand, allows individuals to disengage from their moral selves, and to engage in immoral thoughts, feelings, and behaviours without feeling guilt or shame. In this study, moral disengagement was negatively related to both online empathy and online authenticity. Moral disengagement was also negatively related to moral identity, supporting previous conceptual and empirical arguments that whilst moral identity encourages moral thoughts, feelings and behaviours, moral disengagement functions to discourage them. Importantly, this research demonstrates this relationship in the context of two moral values in the online environment.

Notably, the formation and accessibility of one's moral identity can be promoted; for instance, through parental strategies, educational interventions and priming techniques (Patrick and Gibbs, 2012; Aquino and Reed, 2009). This indicates that moral identity in the online environment could be fostered by encouraging the development of moral identity, making moral values more salient online, or emphasising the overlap between one's online and offline self. This adds to previous suggestions that young people would benefit from mastering *cyberphronesis* in order to become virtuous digital citizens (Harrison, 2016).

This field would benefit from future research into whether and/or how moral identity might be promoted via online platforms, such as social media sites as well as an exploration into possible individual differences in the situational variability in moral identity online.

> 'SOMETIMES OPINIONS AND PERCEPTIONS ONLINE STRONGLY DIFFER TO THE REAL OPINIONS OF PEOPLE BECAUSE OF ANONYMITY. THIS CAN CREATE A FALSE PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD IF CHILDREN ARE QUITE SUSCEPTIBLE'
>
> **Charles Finch**

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Research Team

BLAIRE MORGAN
RESEARCH FELLOW

Dr. Blaire Morgan was a Research Fellow in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues from September 2012–February 2017. Blaire is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Worcester. Blaire has a PhD in Psychology from the University of Birmingham.

BLAINE FOWERS
PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Professor Blaine Fowers is Professor of Counseling Psychology at the University of Miami. He studies virtue and flourishing and has authored five books, most recently *Frailty, Suffering and Vice: Flourishing in the Face of Human Limitations*. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and a recipient of the Joseph B. Gittler Award for contributions to the philosophical foundations of psychology.

KRISTJÁN KRISTJÁNSSON
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Professor Kristján Kristjánsson is the Deputy Director of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham and Professor of Character Education and Virtue Ethics. He is also the editor of the *Journal of Moral Education*.

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FOUNDATION

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues
12th Floor (West) Muirhead Tower
Edgbaston, Birmingham
B15 2TT, United Kingdom
www.birmingham.ac.uk

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