



Antecedents of Moral disengagement among youth: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

This systematic literature review explores the main antecedents of moral disengagement with special emphasis on emotional styles and achievement-oriented pressures. The empirical studies analyzed were published in 2000-2025 and analyzed using PRISMA guidelines. The results show that emotional factors, in particular, emotional suppression along with the hustle culture adoption contributes significantly to the moral disengagement through debilitating internal regulators of morality, like empathy and guilt, and providing a protective factor in the form of emotional engagement. The review also indicates that these antecedents are working within a self-reinforcing process such that repeated disengagement has the effect of reducing moral sensitivity over time.

Keywords: *Moral disengagement, Emotional styles, Achievement oriented pressure, Emotion regulation, Unethical behavior*

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Introduction

Modern youth are becoming immersed in performance-driven spaces, which are highly competitive in terms of academic performance, social comparison, and productivity-related expectations. Such contexts encourage an ongoing quest to be successful and in many cases, to equate personal value with success and productivity. Although such environments can increase the performance, there are issues concerning their effects on ethical decision-making and psychology as a whole. Specifically, the fact that flexible or situational ethics are becoming more normalized among the youths is a phenomenon that requires closer analysis of the underlying psychological processes that facilitate such changes.

Moral disengagement is one major construct that can be used to explain this phenomenon in terms of the explanation of the phenomenon within the framework of social cognitive theory by Albert Bandura. Moral disengagement can be described as a group of cognitive processes by which people can justify unethical conduct, thus disengaging themselves with internal moral norms (Bandura et al., 1996). The mechanisms enable individuals to redefine harmful behavior, minimize self-blame or distort the effects of behavior in ways that reduce self-blame. This leads to people being able to exhibit unethical behavior whilst still having a positive self-image. Moral disengagement has been largely linked with different types of misconduct including misconduct in academics, deviance in the workplace, and aggression.

Emotional functioning plays a crucial role in regulating ethical behavior with cognitive processes. There are many emotions such as empathy, guilt, and shame that act as internal moral regulators and that inhibit harmful actions and promote prosocial behavior. The concept of emotional styles refers to the characteristic patterns through which individuals experience, express, and regulate emotions (Davidson & Begley, 2012). These styles have an influence on how individuals respond to stress, interpret social situations, and make decisions in morally relevant contexts.

Empirical evidence suggests that moral disengagement is mostly connected to emotional functioning and emotional suppression. Individuals who habitually suppress or manipulate their emotions may weaken their sensitivity to moral cues, this may lead to increasing the likelihood of ethical disengagement (Aftab & Malik, 2021; Maftai & Nițu, 2022). In contrast, higher levels of empathy and emotional awareness are associated with lower levels of moral disengagement, highlighting the protective role of emotional engagement (Cabrera et al., 2020; Ouvrein et al., 2018). These findings indicate that emotional processes are not merely peripheral but central to the functioning of moral self-regulation.

In addition to emotional factors, contemporary youth are influenced by broader socio-cultural dynamics that emphasize constant productivity and success. Although often referred to as “hustle culture,” this phenomenon is more precisely reflected in constructs such as workaholicism, achievement pressure, and externally controlled motivation. These constructs capture environments in which individuals experience continuous pressure to perform, compete, and achieve externally defined standards of success.

Research indicates that these achievement-focused pressures are important in the development of ethical behavior. As an example, workaholic behavior has been associated with greater moral

disengagement as people are more concerned about productivity rather than morality. Likewise, a high degree of motivation to achieve financial success and external rewards has been indicated to reduce the degree of emotional sensitivity to moral issues, thus enabling unethical decision-making. Notably, these findings indicate that the achievement-oriented pressures do not directly result in unethical behavior, but they create the conditions under which emotional regulation is weakened, and we become more dependent on mental justifications. Under these conditions, a person can also feel a certain level of internal conflict between his moral values and performance requirements. Moral disengagement is a psychological process that helps to resolve this conflict as it enables people to justify their actions without feeling guilty or self-condemned. Although the research on emotional processes and moral disengagement, studies on work-related pressures and unethical behavior have been mostly studied independently. The existing literature offers great insight into the individual factors of this process, but there is a lack of integrative frameworks explaining what comes before moral disengagement, in particular, among the youth population.

It is important to address this gap as youth represent a developmental stage that involves identity development and heightened sensitivity to social assessment and exposure to competitive environments. The knowledge of how emotional and contextual factors interact with each other to produce the moral disengagement effect can be useful in promoting ethical conduct and mental health. Thus, the current systematic literature review will be intended to synthesize the empirical data on precursors of moral disengagement, especially the emotional styles and achievement pressures among the youth.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) design following PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. The search included combinations of keywords such as: “moral disengagement,” “unethical behavior” AND “youth,” “adolescents,” “young adults”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed empirical studies
- Published between 2000 and 2025
- Studies measuring moral disengagement or unethical outcomes

Exclusion criteria:

- Review articles, editorials, and theoretical papers
- Non-English publications
- Clinical-only populations without relevance to general youth behavior

Study Selection

The study selection process involved identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. After removing duplicates and applying inclusion criteria, a total of 21 studies were included in the final synthesis .

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data were extracted into structured tables capturing study characteristics, variables, and key findings. A thematic synthesis approach was employed to identify patterns across studies.

Results

The review included 21 studies employing diverse methodologies, including cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal designs, experimental studies, and qualitative interviews. The findings revealed consistent patterns linking emotional processes, achievement-related pressures, and moral disengagement. Studies have been classified based on six themes as tabled below.

Table. 1 Emotional Antecedents of Moral Disengagement

Author (Year)	Sample	Variable	Key Finding
Aftab & Malik (2021)	542 Young Adults	Emotional suppression, manipulation	Emotional masking weakens ethical barriers and predicts moral disengagement
Maftai & Nițu (2022)	178 Young Adults	Expressive suppression	Suppression mediates the relationship with sustained moral disengagement
Cabrera et al. (2020)	1,041 Adolescents	Empathy, guilt	Emotional awareness prevents moral disengagement
Ouvrein et al. (2018)	1,257 Adolescents	Affective vs cognitive empathy	Affective empathy strongly reduces moral disengagement
Haddock & Jimerson (2017)	702 Students	Cognitive & affective empathy	Higher moral disengagement linked to lower empathy

Francisco et al. (2024)	208 Participants	Empathic responsiveness	Decline in empathy precedes moral disengagement
Roos & Hodges (2015)	307 Children	Guilt, shame, emotion regulation	Moral emotions regulate disengagement and aggression

A central finding across studies in Table.1 is the significant role of emotional processes in predicting moral disengagement. Emotional suppression, particularly expressive suppression, emerged as a strong predictor of disengagement. Individuals who habitually suppress emotions tend to weaken their internal moral controls, thereby facilitating unethical justification.

In contrast, empathy and guilt were consistently identified as protective factors. Affective empathy, in particular, demonstrated a stronger negative association with moral disengagement than cognitive empathy. These findings indicate that emotional engagement acts as a critical buffer against unethical behavior.

Table. 2 Moral Emotions as Regulatory Mechanisms

Author (Year)	Sample	Focus	Key Finding
Mazzone et al. (2019)	245 Participants	Guilt, shame	Moral disengagement reduces moral emotions over time
Tillman et al. (2018)	182 Participants	Emotional coping	Moral disengagement used to numb guilt and shame
Francisco et al. (2024)	208 Participants	Empathy decline	Emotional “dimming” enables disengagement
Cabrera et al. (2020)	1,041 Adolescents	Emotional regulation	Emotional signals act as moral alarms

Moral emotions such as guilt, shame, and empathy function as internal regulatory systems that inhibit unethical conduct. Longitudinal evidence from Table. 2 indicates a reciprocal relationship between moral disengagement and moral emotions. Specifically, disengagement reduces emotional sensitivity over time, which further facilitates unethical behavior.

Experimental findings also suggest that individuals use moral disengagement as a strategy to alleviate emotional distress, particularly guilt and shame. Thus, moral disengagement is not purely cognitive but deeply rooted in emotional processes.

Table. 3 Achievement-Oriented Pressures as Antecedents

Author (Year)	Sample	Constructs	Key Finding
Knoll et al. (2025)	613 Employees	Workaholism	Drives moral disengagement and ethical silence
Zhang et al. (2024)	512 Participants	Wealth orientation	Reduces emotional moral sensitivity
Alivernini et al. (2021)	347 Adolescents	Controlled motivation	External pressure increases disengagement
Baron et al. (2015)	106 Entrepreneurs	Financial motives	Leads to unethical decisions via disengagement
Shepherd et al. (2024)	Entrepreneurs	Work demands	Creates emotional detachment (“regulatory tax”)

Table 3 explains that constructs such as workaholism, financial motivation, and external pressure were found to indirectly contribute to moral disengagement by weakening emotional regulation. For example, workaholic tendencies were associated with prioritizing productivity over ethical considerations. Similarly, externally controlled motivation increased disengagement, whereas autonomous motivation reduced it. These findings suggest that achievement-oriented pressures create environments conducive to ethical compromise.

Table. 4 Moral Disengagement as a Coping Mechanism

Author (Year)	Sample	Mechanism	Key Finding
Tillman et al. (2018)	182 Participants	Emotional coping	Disengagement reduces guilt and emotional discomfort

Fida et al. (2018)	855 Nurses	Fear response	Fear triggers disengagement leading to harmful outcomes
Shepherd et al. (2024)	High-pressure settings	Stress response	Leads to mechanical detachment from moral reasoning
Aftab & Malik (2021)	542 Young Adults	Emotional masking	Used to meet performance expectations

As per Table. 4, Several studies conceptualize moral disengagement as a coping mechanism that helps individuals manage internal conflict between moral values and external demands. Under conditions of stress or fear, individuals may disengage morally to reduce emotional discomfort. This process often involves cognitive justifications that allow individuals to reinterpret unethical actions as acceptable. Over time, repeated use of such mechanisms can lead to emotional detachment and normalization of unethical behavior.

Table. 5. Reciprocal and Longitudinal Dynamics

Author (Year)	Sample	Design	Key Finding
Mazzone et al. (2019)	245 Participants	Longitudinal	Moral disengagement reduces guilt, reinforcing itself
Falla et al. (2021)	1,810 Students	Longitudinal	Aggression ↔ disengagement ↔ empathy decline cycle
Detert et al. (2008)	~307 Participants	Longitudinal	Disengagement predicts unethical behavior over time
Francisco et al. (2024)	208 Participants	Longitudinal	Empathy decline accelerates disengagement

From Table. 5, Longitudinal studies indicate that moral disengagement operates in a self-reinforcing cycle. Engagement in unethical behavior reduces moral emotions, which in turn increases the likelihood of future disengagement. Additionally, aggression and disengagement were found to mutually reinforce each other, accompanied by a decline in empathy. These findings highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of moral disengagement.

Table. 6 Social and Contextual Influences

Author (Year)	Method	Contextual Factor	Key Finding
Dang et al. (2017)	Experimental	Leadership influence	Moral disengagement language normalizes unethical acts
Barsky (2011)	Multi-method	Participation	Active engagement reduces disengagement
Bosaia et al. (2025)	Moderated-Mediation	Gender differences	Stronger disengagement effects in males
Nordhall et al. (2025)	Semi-Structured Interview	Organizational change	Identity conflict influences disengagement

As shown in Table 6, Moral disengagement is also influenced by social and contextual factors. Leadership behaviors, organizational norms, and peer influence play a significant role in shaping ethical perceptions.

For instance, exposure to morally disengaged language by authority figures can normalize unethical behavior. Conversely, environments that promote accountability and participation can reduce disengagement tendencies.

Discussion

The current systematic literature review was aimed at determining major antecedents of moral disengagement in youth. The results give a logical structure of moral disengagement as a multi-layered psychological process that occurs as a result of the interplay between emotional functioning and performance-driven environments. Instead of manifesting as a solitary cognitive dysfunction, moral disengagement seems to be integrated in more comprehensive emotional and contextual processes.

One of the main findings of this review is the pivotal impact of emotional styles on the development of moral disengagement. Specifically, emotional suppression always turned out to be one of the main antecedents of disengagement. Those who systematically block or control their emotional experiences in a constraining fashion are also less sensitive to moral promptings. Empirical evidence shows that emotional suppression and manipulation are strong predictors of moral disengagement, indicating that people may disengage their emotional experiences to meet the demands of performance or social expectations (Aftab and Malik, 2021; Maftai and Niitzu, 2022). This is consistent with conceptualization of emotions as part of moral self-regulation where the dampening of emotional responses undermines the inner processes that are used to deter the occurrence of immoral activities.

On the other hand, the results demonstrate how moral emotions, in particular empathy and guilt, can be protective. Research has shown that the higher the level of affective empathy, the lower the level of moral disengagement, and stress the process of emotional responsiveness in keeping ethical behavior (Ouvrein et al., 2018). On the same note, empathy and guilt serve as internal alarm systems that remind a person when his or her actions are incompatible with moral principles (Cabrera et al., 2020). The longitudinal evidence also shows that the decrease in empathic responsiveness can predetermine and support the moral disengagement in the long run (Francisco

et al., 2024). These findings all indicate that the decline in empathic responsiveness can precondition and facilitate the moral disengagement in the long run.

Besides the functions of emotional processes, the review highlights the role of achievement oriented pressure as contextual factors that may cause moral disengagement. Workaholism, externally controlled motivation, and financial orientation are constructs which can be used to understand how performance-driven environments influence ethical decision making. Indicatively, workaholic propensities have been linked with a high degree of moral disengagement (Knoll et al., 2025), where workaholics focus on productivity and performance rather than on moral considerations. Likewise, externally regulated motivation, when it is characterized by the pressure to meet external expectations, has been found to further enhance disengagement, as opposed to autonomous motivation which seems to alleviate it (Alivernini et al., 2021). Moreover, a heavy focus on wealth and external achievement has also been associated with decreased emotional sensitivity to ethical issues, hence enabling utilitarian and morally adaptable decision-making (Baron et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2024).

Notably, these results indicate that achievement-oriented influences do not necessarily result in immoral conduct. Rather, they develop mental states that undermine emotional regulation and dependence on cognitive justifications. In these settings, people can feel the strain between their own moral values and the demands placed on them by their performance. Moral disengagement is a process that dissolves this tension by helping individuals to redefine or rationalize their actions without feeling self-condemnation.

A key contribution of this review is the identification of moral disengagement as a coping mechanism. Evidence indicates that individuals use disengagement strategies to manage negative emotional states, particularly guilt, shame, and stress associated with high-pressure contexts. For example, individuals may cognitively reframe their actions to reduce emotional discomfort, thereby maintaining psychological equilibrium (Tillman et al., 2018). Similarly, exposure to stressful or threatening environments has been shown to trigger moral disengagement, which subsequently leads to harmful behaviors and adverse outcomes (Fida et al., 2018). These findings suggest that moral disengagement serves an adaptive function in the short term by alleviating psychological strain, even though it may lead to ethical compromises.

The review also highlights the dynamic and self-reinforcing nature of moral disengagement. Longitudinal studies demonstrate that disengagement not only predicts unethical behavior but also contributes to a gradual erosion of moral emotions. For instance, moral disengagement has been found to reduce feelings of guilt and shame over time, which in turn increases the likelihood of future disengagement (Mazzone et al., 2019). Similarly, reciprocal relationships between disengagement and aggression have been observed, accompanied by declines in both affective and cognitive empathy (Falla et al., 2021). These findings indicate the presence of a feedback loop, where repeated disengagement leads to emotional desensitization and normalization of unethical behavior.

In addition to individual-level processes, moral disengagement is influenced by social and contextual factors. The review suggests that ethical perceptions are shaped by environmental cues, including leadership practices and group norms. For example, exposure to morally disengaged

language or behavior by authority figures can normalize unethical actions and reduce perceived moral responsibility (Dang et al., 2017). Conversely, environments that promote accountability and active participation can mitigate disengagement tendencies (Barsky, 2011). These findings highlight the role of social learning processes in shaping moral disengagement, emphasizing that it is not solely an individual phenomenon but also a contextually embedded process.

Taken together, the findings support a multi-level framework in which emotional styles, achievement oriented pressure, and contextual influences interact to shape moral disengagement among youth. Emotional suppression weakens internal moral regulation, achievement pressures intensify psychological strain, and moral disengagement emerges as a coping mechanism that resolves this tension. Over time, this process becomes self-reinforcing, leading to emotional desensitization and ethical erosion.

This integrated perspective has important implications. It suggests that interventions aimed at promoting ethical behavior should extend beyond cognitive moral education to include emotional awareness, empathy development, and the regulation of performance-related pressures. Addressing only the cognitive aspects of morality without considering emotional and contextual factors may limit the effectiveness of such interventions.

Implications

The findings extend existing theories of moral disengagement by integrating emotional and motivational dimensions, emphasizing that disengagement is both a cognitive and affective process. Interventions should focus on enhancing emotional awareness, empathy, and ethical reasoning among youth. Educational systems should also address unhealthy performance pressures and promote balanced achievement orientations.

Limitations & Future Directions

This review has several limitations. Variations in study designs, measures, and sample characteristics may limit comparability and generalizability. The predominance of cross-sectional studies restricts causal interpretations of the identified antecedents of moral disengagement. Additionally, while the review focuses on key antecedents such as emotional styles and achievement-oriented pressures, other relevant factors (e.g., personality and cultural influences) were not extensively examined. The inclusion of only English-language, peer-reviewed studies may also introduce selection bias.

Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to establish causal relationships and explore a broader range of antecedents, including personality, social, and cultural factors. Cross-cultural studies and intervention-based research targeting emotional regulation and moral awareness are also recommended.

Conclusion

This systematic review highlights that moral disengagement among youth is influenced by key antecedents, particularly emotional styles and achievement-oriented pressures. Emotional suppression weakens internal moral regulators such as empathy and guilt, increasing susceptibility to ethical disengagement, while emotional engagement acts as a protective factor. At the same time, performance-driven environments characterized by external pressure and competition create conditions that intensify this process. Rather than directly causing unethical behavior, these

pressures promote reliance on moral disengagement as a coping mechanism to manage the conflict between personal values and performance demands. Over time, this process may become self-reinforcing, leading to reduced moral sensitivity and normalization of unethical behavior. Overall, the findings emphasize that moral disengagement is not merely cognitive but is deeply influenced by emotional and contextual factors. Addressing ethical behavior among youth therefore requires a combined focus on emotional regulation and the broader performance-oriented environments shaping their experiences.

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