

The Effect of Perceived Anonymity on Online Transgressions: The Moderating Role of Moral Excuses

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With the development of science and technology, the use of the Internet is becoming more and more widespread. However, with the popularity of the Internet, some problems have gradually surfaced. The anonymity of Internet use has become a breeding ground for many acts that are contrary to public decency, and this study is conducted against this background. This study explored the impact of perceived anonymity on online transgressions and investigated the moderating effect of moral excuses. A total of 414 subjects, 210 males and 204 females, participated in this experimental survey. The SPSS data analysis concluded that perceived anonymity played a significant positive predictive role on online deviance ($p < 0.01$), and the moderating role of moral excuses was not significant. This study will be conducive to the better implementation of the action of clearing cyberspace and to the regulation of public behaviour in cyberspace.

Keywords: anonymity, online socialization, online transgressions, moral excuses, moderating effects

Introduction

With the development of the times, the Internet has become an indispensable part of the public's life. According to the statistical report of China Internet Network Information Centre, by the end of June 2015, the number of Internet users in China reached 668 million, with an Internet penetration rate of 48.8%; among them, students are still the main force of Internet users in China, and they are very active in Internet usage. However, with the increasing popularity of the Internet, the negative effects of Internet use, such as the proliferation of undesirable information and excessive use of the Internet, have also become increasingly apparent. In addition, the Internet had also made some of the problems that already existed more acute, with many offline problematic behaviours extending into the Internet and creating new social problems. Because of its anonymity and openness, cyberspace is a breeding ground for behaviour that is contrary to public decency, such as online transgressions. The generation of online transgressive behaviour is more complex. For example, Ding Qian, Liu Yilin, Zhang Yongxin, and Zhou Zongkui (2020) studied the relationship between online deviant behaviour and psychological privilege among university students in 2020, and Jin Cancan and Zou Hong (2013) studied the relationship between adolescent online deviant behaviour and parenting style in 2013. However, no research has yet been conducted on perceived anonymity and moral excuses for online deviance. Therefore, this study chooses to investigate the causes of online deviant behaviour through a questionnaire to enrich the research in this area.

This study not only contributes to enriching the literature on online transgressions and the research on perceived anonymity and moral excuses in the field of psychology, but also uses micro-individual psychological data to support macro-social phenomena; in addition, this study explores the social and psychological factors behind online transgressions and provides a basis for responding to the national cyber-clearance initiative and establishing a safe cyberspace.

Literature Review

With the rapid changes in science and technology since the reform and opening up, the Internet has provided more and more convenience for people's lives, and more and more people have started to choose online socializing. But because of the largely anonymous nature of cyberspace, this has led to a plethora of online transgressions. Some studies have shown that perceived anonymity positively predicts online transgressions for individuals who have suffered anger experiences in reality (Jang, Song, & Kim, 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2011). Online transgression, also called online deviant behaviour, is behaviour that goes against social norms and expectations in the process of interpersonal communication established through the medium of the Internet (Denegri-Knott & Taylor, 2005). There are 11 classifications in total, and some researchers believe that the deviant behaviour of young people in virtual communities can be divided into six categories: online deception, online excesses, online violence, online pornography, online hacking, and online dating and online chatting (He, 2003). Li Dongmei, Lei Li, and Zou Hong (2006) summarised that the most significant manifestations of online transgressions are online excesses, online deceptions, and online pornography, and therefore these three aspects were taken as the main research objectives in this study.

Online excess, the most talked about manifestation of online transgression, originally referred to spoken language on the Internet that could provoke people, and later to anti-social behaviour on the Internet (Joinson, 2005). However, there is still no definitive definition of what exactly constitutes online excess, the clearest being the operational definition proposed by Kiesler in 1985 (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). He argued that online excesses include using impolite words, swearing freely online, flirting with others, making a fuss all the time, over-expressing one's private feelings to others, and using extreme language (Kiesler et al., 1984). Online deception is similar to real-life deception in that it is an act of covering up the truth and concealing facts. Online deception is an important form of online deviant behaviour. Due to its anonymity, the Internet is an environment where people can experiment with different identities, and some of the reasons why people engage in online deception are to cheat others out of their property. However, Li Dongmei et al. (2006) argued that the majority of online deception is to create a "cyber persona" of oneself, creating a false impression or misrepresenting one's true identity by concealing certain information, such as changing gender or fabricating experiences. The scope of online deception is very wide, not only in online chatting, but also in online forums, postings, and online dating scenarios. With the increasing popularity and low age of the Internet, online pornography is a more recent area of concern. Williams in 2006 divided online pornography into two main categories, including child pornography and mainstream pornography. Some scholars have made a more nuanced division, classifying the experience of online pornography into six categories: excessive use, family conflict due to excessive use of online pornographic resources, depression due to not wanting to expose, developing a misguided sexual interest, using illegal pornography, and inappropriate exposure. The ease of access to pornographic material on the Internet and the increasing popularity of its use have led to many young children being drawn into it with negative consequences.

There has been much research into the causes of online deviant behaviour. Previous research has found that factors that influence the development of online deviant behaviour include the personality type of the adolescent and parenting style (Jin & Zou, 2013). The higher the level of morality, the less likely it is that online deviance will occur. However, nowadays, it is often the case that the “Internet spammer” is behind a good student from a good family, so this study introduces the concept of moral excuses, which is used to try to explain this behaviour. Moral excuses are new explanations for an individual’s behaviour to avoid cognitive dissonance, increasing their own approval of the behaviour and reducing the amount of responsibility they have to bear. Furthermore, according to Cue Filtering Theory, in cyberspace, individuals have a natural vestige of anonymity, which lowers their threshold of self-restraint and makes them more likely to engage in online transgressions. Therefore, in order to avoid the guilt of violating one’s own moral standards after an act has been committed, individuals can re-establish cognitive balance by means of moral excuses. Scholar Bandura (1999) found that moral excuses act as a switch that controls whether individuals activate their moral self-regulatory functions and can explain why individuals do immoral things without feeling guilty. Moral excuses increase an individual’s moral acceptability through eight excuses mechanisms: moral justification, euphemistic labelling, favourable comparison, blame shifting, blame diffusion, ignoring or distorting outcomes, dehumanisation, and blame attribution (Bandura, 1999). Of these, the first three are for cognitive reconstruction; moral justification is the process by which individuals reinterpret unethical behaviour after it occurs; euphemistic labelling is the process by which individuals self-persuade themselves through neutral language to make behaviour acceptable and even seem beneficial; favourable comparison is the process by which individuals compare their behaviour with more unethical behaviour to make their behaviour acceptable; blame shifting, blame distraction, and ignoring or distorting the outcome is the process by which individuals seek to conceal the truth or distort the effects of harmful behaviour; and dehumanisation and blame attribution are two mechanisms that reduce moral blame by lowering identification with the victim and thus reducing the victim to a lower level, devaluing the victim and thus de-activating their own internal moral standards (Bandura, 1986).

Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study.

H1: There is a significant positive correlation between perceived anonymity and online deviant behaviour.

H2: The correlation between perceived anonymity and online transgressions is positively moderated by moral excuses; people with high levels of moral excuses will engage in more online transgressions.

Research Methods

Research Hypothesis

The hypothetical model for this experiment is shown in Figure 1.

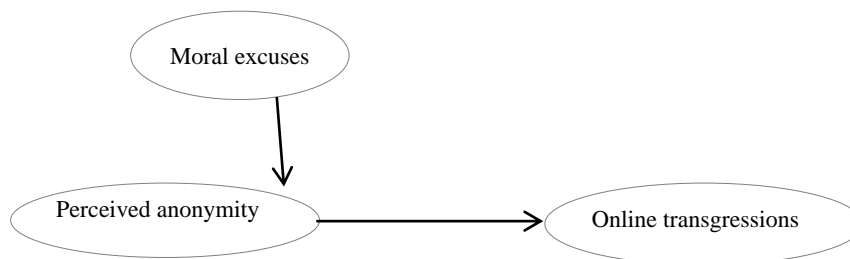


Figure 1. Framework of research hypothesis.

This study proposes the following hypothesis: Perceived anonymity significantly influences online transgressions, in which moral excuses play a moderating role.

Subjects

A total of 450 subjects aged 15-35 years were recruited through the Internet and 414 valid questionnaires were obtained after screening out all questionnaires with the same answer and those with a response time of less than 30s. A total of 210 males and 204 females, without intellectual disability, gave informed consent to the experiment.

Research Materials

For the measurement of perceived anonymity, this experiment used the Chinese version of the Perceived Anonymity Scale developed by Jung et al. and revised through translation by Niu Gengfeng and other scholars. Previous studies have tested that the model fit well and had good reliability. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale for this experiment is 0.68, and it consists of four items on a seven-point scale (one being completely disagree and seven being completely agree), with items including “People cannot know the real me from what I reveal online”, etc., measuring the extent to which subjects assess anonymity in cyberspace. Higher scores indicate a higher degree of anonymity perceived by the subjects in cyberspace (Niu et al., 2015).

For the measurement of online transgressions, this experiment used the Internet Online Transgressions Questionnaire developed by Li Dongmei and Lei Lei in 2006, revised by Zou Hong in 2009. The internal consistency coefficient of the total scale was 0.92 and the reliability was tested to be good. The questionnaire consists of 14 questions and is scored on a five-point scale (one being very non-conforming and five being very conforming), with higher scores indicating more serious online transgressions. This questionnaire consists of three dimensions, namely, online excesses (consistency coefficient of 0.89), online pornography (consistency coefficient of 0.91), and online deception (consistency coefficient of 0.67) (Li et al., 2008).

For the measurement of moral excuses, the Chinese version of the Moral Excuses Questionnaire revised by Wang Xingchao and Yang Jiping in 2010 was used in this experiment, with an internal consistency coefficient of 0.87. The questionnaire consists of 32 questions with a five-point scale (one being totally disagree and five being totally agree), including questions such as “It is OK to fight to protect friends”, and the higher the score, the more serious the moral excuse tendency of the participants (Yang, Wang, & Gao, 2010).

Research Tools

SPSS 23.0 was used for data analysis in this experiment.

Research Results

After data analysis, the following results were obtained from this study. The first is a descriptive statistical analysis, the results of which are shown in Table 1.

The above results show that there is no correlation between age and perceived anonymity, online deviance and moral excuses, all with p greater than 0.05; therefore, it can be concluded that age has no effect on the results of this experiment, and this result is also consistent with everyday experience. As can be seen from the table above, there was a significant correlation between perceived anonymity and online deviance ($r = 0.84, p = 0.001 < 0.01$), a significant correlation between perceived anonymity and moral excuses ($r = 0.86, p = 0.001 < 0.01$), and a significant correlation between online deviance and moral excuses ($r = 0.95, p = 0.001 < 0.01$).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics (N = 201)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Sex	Age	Perceived anonymity	Online transgressions	Moral excuses
Sex	1.49	0.50	1				
Age	23.89	5.89	-0.08	1			
Perceived anonymity	19.11	4.81	-0.04	0.04	1		
Online transgressions	47.77	12.00	-0.04	0.03	0.84**	1	
Moral excuses	109.35	26.87	-0.04	0.06	0.86**	0.95**	1

Notes. ** $p < 0.01$.

The moderating effects were next examined. Before conducting the test, the data were first decentered, standardised as new variables and then analysed, with the results shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Analysis of Data on the Moderating Effect of Moral Excuses (N = 414)

Steps and variables	Online transgressions					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Independent variables						
Perceived anonymity	0.83	0.03	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.06
Moral excuses			0.89	0.03	0.86	0.05
Interactive items						
Perceived anonymity \times moral excuses					0.06	0.09

To test the experimental hypothesis, the dependent variable online transgressions was added (i.e., Model 1), then the independent variables perceived anonymity score and the moderating variable moral excuses score were added (i.e., Model 2), and finally the interaction term between the independent and moderating variables was added, as shown in Model 3. The results of the data analysis were that the moderating effect of moral excuses between perceived anonymity and online transgressions was not significant ($\beta = 0.06$, $p = 0.5 > 0.05$) and Hypothesis 2 was not tested.

Discussion

After data analysis, H1 of this experiment was validated by a significant positive correlation between perceived anonymity and online transgressions, while H2 of this experiment was not validated by a positive moderating effect of moral excuses on the correlation between perceived anonymity and online transgressions.

There are several explanations for this.

Moral excuses as a personality variable does not change as a result of changes in perceived anonymity, so individuals with high levels of moral excuses do not need high levels of anonymity as a “cloak of invisibility” for their online transgressions, and will establish a new cognitive balance from moral deference to reprehensible behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Conversely, individuals with lower levels of moral excuses may require high levels of perceived anonymity to engage in online transgressions, and thus the hypothesized moderating relationship does not occur. Furthermore, it has been found that environmental information also significantly influences individuals’ levels of moral excuses (Pelton, Gound, Forehand, & Brody, 2004). The inherent anonymity of

cyberspace creates a natural barrier that does not require individuals to activate a moral excuses switch, and therefore could also explain the results of this experiment.

In addition, there are many factors that influence online transgressions and moral excuses, such as self-control (Wang, Niu, Sun, & Deng, 2001). Self-control refers to an individual's control over the violation of social and moral standards. Individuals with high self-control are less aggressive, and those with low self-control are unable to hold firm to their beliefs and are more likely to engage in online transgressions (Sun & Xue, 2008). In addition, Xu (2005) suggested that self-control is a manifestation of an individual's ability to adjust to and control unexpected situations. People with low self-control tend to be able to get satisfaction easily, are impulsive in situations, are not good at expressing themselves verbally, and are self-centred, so such people are easily induced by even satisfaction to act beyond morality or even to commit crimes (Qu, Zou, & Duan, 2006). Therefore, the results of this experiment may also be influenced by self-control, thus leading to a non-significant moderating effect of moral excuses.

This study not only helps to enrich the literature on perceived anonymity, online transgressions, and moral excuses, but also the research in the field of psychology on the phenomenon of adolescents' Internet use, and uses questionnaires to obtain micro-individual psychological data to support macro-social phenomena. In addition, this study explores the social and psychological factors behind online transgressions, which is conducive to young people learning to use the Internet properly, and can also provide a basis for responding to the national cyber-clear action and establishing a safe cyberspace.

The current limitation of this study is that only questionnaires were taken for online distribution, but the online data are not very reliable and therefore may have an impact on the results of the experiment. In addition, this experiment mainly measured subjects aged 15-35 years old and did not explore whether subjects in other age groups would be different, which is one of the directions that the experiment could be continued in the next step.

Conclusions

This experiment explored the influence of perceived anonymity on online transgressions and the moderating effect of moral excuses. After collecting data from the questionnaire and using SPSS to analyse the data, it was concluded that perceived anonymity showed a positive relationship with online transgressions, with higher perceived anonymity being more likely to engage in online transgressions; perceived anonymity was a significant positive predictor of online transgressions, with moral excuses playing a negative moderating role. The shortcomings of this study include the lack of systematic separation of online transgressions into separate measures, and the lack of behavioural experiments as an aid to draw more informative conclusions. A follow-up experiment could use a combination of behavioural and questionnaires and add other variables (such as self-control) for more detailed measurement. This experiment will enrich the research on online transgressions by complementing the research on moral excuses and online transgressions, providing value for subsequent in-depth research on the different classifications in online transgressions.

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