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Online celebrity aggression: A combination of low empathy and high moral disengagement?

The relationship between empathy and moral disengagement and adolescents' online
celebrity aggression

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Online celebrity aggression: A combination of low empathy and high moral disengagement?**The relationship between empathy and moral disengagement and adolescents' online celebrity aggression****Abstract**

Adolescents regularly become involved in online aggression. While existing research mainly concentrated on online peer aggression, some studies pointed to adolescents' aggression toward other targets, such as celebrities. It is known that socio-cognitive characteristics such as empathy and moral disengagement are associated with adolescents' aggression toward peers, but so far it remains unexplored if these traits can also explain celebrity aggression. The current study investigated the relationship between affective and cognitive empathy, moral disengagement and online celebrity aggression. The sample consisted of 1,255 adolescents with a mean age of 14.17 years ($SD = .47$). Participants completed the Moral Disengagement Scale adapted to a celebrity context, the Emotional Quotient and a scale measuring mild and severe online celebrity aggression. Structural equation analysis in Mplus indicated that, when controlling for gender and celebrity media consumption, affective empathy was associated with severe and not with mild online celebrity aggression. The cognitive component of empathy was unrelated with online aggression toward celebrities. Moral disengagement was related with mild and severe online celebrity aggression and also mediated the relationship between affective empathy and both mild and severe celebrity aggression. Following these results, strategies aiming at reducing celebrity aggression may benefit from a focus on socio-cognitive characteristics.

Keywords: celebrity bashing, cyberbullying, online aggression, moral disengagement, empathy

Introduction

A large amount of research shows that adolescents are involved in online aggression (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder & Lattanner, 2014). Especially peer-related forms of aggression, such as cyberbullying, peak during adolescence (Kowalski et al., 2014). Preliminary findings indicate that adolescents also engage in online aggression aimed at other types of victims, such as celebrities (Pyżalski, 2012). This type of aggression might closely resemble what has been described as “celebrity bashing”, a term that originally referred to journalists’ derogatory and mean comments about celebrities (Johansson, 2008). However, nowadays, the interactive nature of the Internet, easily allows the audience to engage in similar behaviors (e.g. insulting celebrities) on online platforms that are publicly visible (Claessens & Van den Bulck, 2014; Pyżalski, 2012; Pyżalski, 2013). In some instances, they even allow people to target the celebrity him- or herself directly, e.g. via their social media accounts (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Adolescents are not only clearly present on these platforms, they also display a high interest in celebrities, who function as role models (Giles & Maltby, 2004). Being highly active within this interactive celebrity culture, adolescents have lots of opportunities to express their adorations for celebrities (Chia & Poo, 2009; Giles & Maltby, 2004), but also so experiment with celebrity bashing (Pyżalski, 2012). This study raises the question of how this negative behavior toward celebrities can be explained.

Given the high importance of socio-cognitive processes underlying antisocial behavior among peers (Almeida, Correia, & Marinho, 2009; Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2017; Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2010; Pornari & Wood, 2010), this study will investigate online aggression toward celebrities on the basis of two socio-cognitive characteristics: empathy and moral disengagement. Previous studies already suggested that celebrities’ special position as high status and distant persons (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001), might increase moral disengagement attitudes and decrease empathy (compared with non-celebrity peers) (Pornari & Wood, 2010; Peng, Li, Wang, Mo & Chen, 2015).

Strengthening our insights into adolescents' online aggression toward celebrities, and its potential precursors, is important, because research indicates that being attacked online is also experienced as distressing by celebrities (Ouvrein, Vandebosch, De Backer, 2018; Rojek, 2001), which contradicts with popular beliefs underlying moral disengagement attitudes, such as: "it won't hurt them, because it's part of being famous" (Bandura, 1999; Ouvrein, Vandebosch & De Backer, 2017). Moreover, aggressive online behaviors toward celebrities might also facilitate similar online behaviors toward peers (e.g. through processes of cultivation (Gerbner, 1990)); and it might also influence bystanders' perceptions of online social norms and encourage desensitization (Pabian, Vandebosch, Poels, Van Cleemput, & Bastiaensens, 2016). In what follows, a current state of knowledge with regard to online aggression toward peers and celebrities, and the role of empathy and moral disengagement is presented along with new hypotheses. These are then tested in a survey study among adolescents.

Adolescents' involvement in online aggression toward peers and celebrities

During adolescence, teenagers undergo different developmental changes, which form the basis of their own identity development (Kroger, 2000; Furman & Collins, 2008). While looking for their own identity, they often try out different identities based on attractive exemplary figures who function as their reference group (Kroger, 2000; Furman & Collins, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). A reference group can be defined as "a group of people that significantly influences an individual's behavior" (Bearden & Etzel, 1982, p. 184). According to Erikson's (1892) theory of psychosocial development people experience eight stages of social-conflict and each stage is accompanied with a switch in who become the primary social agents. When entering adolescence, which is one of these stages, parents often become less important reference persons, while peers gain prominence (Erickson, 1982; Bachmann, Roedder, & Rao, 1993; Furman & Collins, 2008). Driven by their wishes to fit in a certain peer group, adolescents sometimes participate in behaviors in order to enhance their image with the reference group and/or to express their liking of it (Bachmann et al., 1993; Bearden,

Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989). Staying in touch with the peers from that group then becomes very important for adolescents, and technology and social media easily help them to maintain these contacts 24/7. However, these online tools are also used to participate in negative behavior toward peers, who oftentimes act against the norms of the group (Frisén, Jonsson, & Persson, 2007). Participation in negative behaviors toward those peers then also functions as a way to increase group cohesion (Gini, 2006). Most research on online aggression among peers focuses on the specific subform of cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2014). Cyberbullying refers to “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time, against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Smith et al. 2008, p. 376). Meta-analyses on cyberbullying indicate that prevalence rates differ widely based on the measurement and population, with an average of 24 percent of adolescents being involved as a victim (Tokunaga, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2014), between 3 and 44 percent as a perpetrator (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2014) and around one third as a bystander (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). Cyberbullying rates typically increase during adolescence (Kowalski et al., 2014) and can again be motivated by the wish to fit in (Bachmann et al., 1993; Boarden et al., 1989).

Not only peers, but also celebrities partly take over the exemplary role of parents in adolescents' lives (Giles & Maltby, 2004). Although these are more distant figures, they are considered to be the second most important reference group for adolescents (Shaffer, 1988). Celebrity interest peaks during adolescence (Chia & Poo, 2009), and often translates into high celebrity news consumption, extensive talking about celebrities among peers, developing celebrity adorations and even trying to get in touch with their favorite celebrities through social media (Chia & Poo, 2009; Giles & Maltby, 2004; Leets, De Becker & Giles, 1995). Indeed, social media technologies have changed the relationships between celebrities and fans. Nowadays, celebrities are expected to invest in maintaining their own network of connections with fans, instead of letting their agents taking care of it (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Higher levels of intimacy are also reached through new forms of interactions between celebrities and their audiences. Due to numerous celebrity fan sites,

Facebook pages and blogs, the circulation and creation of celebrity news increasingly involves the audience and invites them to participate in the creation of content (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Meyers, 2010). In contrast to interactions through listening to music or watching television, social media networks bring parasocial interactions to a next level, allowing the fan to actually respond to the media figure as if he/she is someone they know in person (Giles, 2002; Marwick & boyd, 2011). John Thompson (1995, p. 98) referred to this as “mediated quasi-interaction”. However, these interaction opportunities are not always used to express adoration. Next to adolescents’ positive actions toward celebrities, a couple of studies indicated that adolescents also participate in online aggression toward celebrities (Pyżalski, 2012; Claessens & Van den Bulck, 2014). Pyżalski (2012), for instance, found that among a sample of adolescents, 11.1% had participated in some form of online aggression toward well-known people (e.g. singers, sport stars) in the past year. Although most of these forms of online aggression toward celebrities have an indirect character (Pyżalski, 2012), people increasingly use the new opportunities for interaction to directly attack celebrities online by contacting them through their personal social media accounts (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

The previous findings illustrate that not only peers, but also celebrities are the target of online aggression by adolescents. However, both types of victims differ significantly. In the case of peer aggression, victims are often low-status persons whom the perpetrator knows in real life (Smith et al., 2008). Victimized celebrities, on the other hand, have a clear visibility (and thus popularity) in society and are not known in person by the largest part of the audience. Consequently, the perceived distance toward a celebrity-victim feels higher than toward a peer-victim (Pornari & Wood, 2010). In line with this, spreading negative comments about celebrities is often considered safer than about peers, as the chances for a backfire effect are basically nihil (Feasey, 2008; Gamson, 1994). The combination of these two elements seems to feed the perception of online celebrity aggression as an acceptable online behavior. In a focus-group study amongst adolescent girls (Ouvrein et al., 2017), participants indicated that celebrities who are attacked should be able to deal with it, as it part of being famous. Whittaker and Kowalski (2015) also found that aggressive comments directed at

celebrities were considered more morally justified compared with aggression toward peers. These more lenient attitudes toward online aggression aimed at celebrities may be expressions of different (socio-)cognitive processes (e.g. lower empathic feelings and higher moral disengagement) that are activated when the victims are distant and famous compared to known victims (Peng et al., 2015). This suggests that it may be worthwhile to further study the potential role of these characteristics in the context of online aggression toward celebrities, and research in the domain of socio-cognitive factors in online aggression toward peers seems to further support this.

Individual differences in online aggression

Several socio-cognitive processes facilitate or buffer the perpetration of online aggression toward peers (e.g. Almeida et al., 2009; Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2017). Meta-analyses especially highlighted the protective effects of empathy, and the negative effects of moral disengagement (Lazuras, Pyzalski, Barkoukis & Tsorbatzoudis, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2014).

Empathy is a multidimensional construct consisting of at least an affective and a cognitive component (Wakabayashi et al., 2006). Affective empathy is described as the ability to *respond emotionally* to others' feelings, and is known to buffer online aggression toward peers (Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2010; Renati, Berrone & Zanetti, 2012; Sest & March, 2017). Different studies investigated and confirmed the protective impact of affective empathy in the context of cyberbullying (e.g., Topcu & Endur-Baker, 2012; Renati et al., 2012; Sest & March, 2017) and successfully targeted this variable in intervention programs aimed to reduce online aggression (Bustamante & Chaux, 2014). Comparing affective empathic levels among adolescents in four possible roles of involvement in cyberbullying (not involved, cybervictim, cyberbully, cyberbully-victims), Renati and colleagues (2012) found the lowest levels for cyberbullies. These lower levels of empathy might even further decrease when the victim is a celebrity instead of a peer, because affective feelings might be reduced due to the higher perceived distance toward the victim (Pornari & Wood, 2010). We therefore hypothesize for empathy that, among adolescents:

H1: There is a direct negative relationship between affective empathy and online celebrity aggression

Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, refers to the tendency to *understand* others' feelings. The relationship between cognitive empathy and (online) aggression seems to vary according to the measurement of empathy (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Whereas a couple of studies were unable to find a relationship between this component and online peer aggression (Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2010; Renati et al., 2012; Ang & Goh, 2010), some other studies found a negative association with cyberbullying perpetration (Topcu & Endur-Baker, 2012; Steffgen & König, 2009; Del Rey et al., 2015a) and negative bystander behavior of cyberbullying (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013). The study of Caravita and colleagues (2008) even found a positive relationship between cognitive empathy and bullying. The latter authors explained this positive relationship by referring to the concept of "competent bullies" (Sutton, 2003; Caravita et al., 2008). Competent bullies are very effective bullies because of their high ability to understand other's feelings (Sutton, 2003). Moreover, these bullies usually also score high on Machiavellianism (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999; Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco & Vernon, 2012). The latter concept refers to the ability to understand that each person has a personal perspective on reality (Renouf et al., 2010). Being able to easily predict and explain behaviors of others (Wellman, Cross & Watson, 2001) and having a strong ability to manipulate others in social situations (cfr. Machiavellianism) offer these bully lots of capacities that can help them to effectively hurt other people (Baughman et al, 2012). Given the inconsistency in existing research, we formulate the following research question:

RQ1: Is there is significant relationship between cognitive empathy and online celebrity aggression?

It seems necessary to also explore potential gender differences in the relationship between online celebrity aggression and empathy, as Ang and Goh (2010) found gender differences in the impact of affective and cognitive empathy on cyberbullying. More specifically, they found that at low

levels of affective empathy, both boys and girls with low cognitive empathy cyberbully more than boys and girls with high cognitive empathy. At high affective empathy, low or high levels of cognitive empathy did not matter for girls' behavior. For boys with high affective empathy, however, cyberbullying was more likely with low cognitive empathy compared to high cognitive empathy (Ang & Goh, 2010). These gender effects might even be stronger in the context of celebrity aggression, as celebrity media consumption is also characterized by gender differences, with women having a considerably higher celebrity media consumption compared to men, both offline (McDonnell, 2015) and online (Meyers, 2010). The gender differences for empathy might then develop in two different directions: either women's regular exposure to online celebrity aggression activates desensitization processes, bringing their empathic feelings to the background (Funk, Elliott, Urman, Flores, & Mock, 1999; Pabian et al., 2016) or their regular exposure to those celebrities might generate feelings of connection, increasing their levels of empathy (Wakabayashi et al., 2006). Given that research on potential gender differences in the context of socio-cognitive variables and online aggression is very limited and inexistent for online celebrity aggression, we formulate a second research question:

RQ2: Are there gender differences in the suggested relationships between cognitive/affective empathy and online celebrity aggression?

Next, whereas empathy can buffer online peer aggression, moral disengagement can amplify it. Moral disengagement refers to the socio-cognitive processes of deactivating moral controls and justifying one's negative behavior (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement is an important predictor of online aggression toward peers. Those who aggress online score higher on moral disengagement (Pornari & Wood, 2010; Renati et al., 2012; Wang, Lei, Liu & Hu, 2016). More specifically, it appears that perpetrators more often blame the victim for the aggression, compared to victims and potential bystanders, since this method helps them to keep up their own self-image and protects them from receiving criticism on their behavior (Bandura, 1999; Hara, 2002). When this victim becomes a celebrity, moral disengagement may even be higher because both perpetrators and bystanders are more tolerant for online aggression toward celebrities than toward other targets (Ouvrein et al.,

2017; Vares & Jackson, 2015). To illustrate this; research from Vares & Jackson (2015) showed that insulting Miley Cyrus is easily justified by the audience, because this star is responsible for creating her bad image herself. For moral disengagement, it can thus be expected that, among adolescents:

H2: Moral disengagement has a direct positive relationship with online celebrity aggression

One's behavior is the result of a complex combination of a range of determinants. Several authors therefore recommended to extend existing research with studies investigating the simultaneous impact of several socio-cognitive factors and to include their complex interrelationships (Gini, Pozzoli & Hymel, 2014; Skues, Williams & Wise, 2012). This is especially important for the combination of empathy and moral disengagement, as research recognized that moral disengagement is not a stable characteristic, but fluctuates based on psychological processes and social traits, such as empathy (Bandura, 2002). This explains why different studies not only found strong relationships between empathy and moral disengagement (Eisenberg, Valiente & Champion, 2004), but also that empathy is a predictor of moral disengagement (Hyde, Shaw & Moilanen, 2010). Trying to explain the underlying mechanisms for the relationship between empathy and behavioral intentions, Detert and colleagues (2008) were the first to test moral disengagement as a mediating variable between empathy and unethical decision making, an idea that was later also confirmed in different studies in the context of aggressive behavior (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014; Wang, Lei, Yang, Gao & Zhao, 2017) and also specifically for bullying (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2017). The authors argued that high empathic people can more easily imagine themselves into the situations of others, which makes them refrain from moral disengagement processes (Detert et al., 2008). Kokkinos and Kipritsi (2017) found significant indirect effects for relational aggression for both affective and cognitive empathy, which is why it can be expected that cognitive empathy will have an indirect effect in this study, although we are unable to formulate a hypothesis on the direct effect.

H3a: There is an indirect relationship between affective empathy and online celebrity aggression through moral disengagement.

H3b: There is an indirect relationship between cognitive empathy and online celebrity aggression through moral disengagement.

Methodology

Sample and procedure

A cross-sectional paper-and-pencil survey was conducted among adolescents of the 8th grade. We decided to focus on this age group for two reasons: (1) research on cyberbullying, a behavior that has some overlap with online celebrity aggression, peaks among this age group (Tokunaga, 2010), and (2) adolescents of this age group show high interest in celebrities and oftentimes use them as role models for their own identity development (Chia & Poo, 2009; Giles & Maltby, 2004). Consequently, adolescents also consume lots of celebrity news (Chia & Poo, 2009), which means that they are regularly exposed to celebrity bashing practices, but also have many opportunities to experiment with this behavior themselves. A total of $N= 1,255$ adolescents with a mean age of $M = 14.17$ years ($SD= .47$) old participated in the study (52.4% female). This study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Social and Humanities research of the University [blinded for review] and is part of a larger research project on adolescents' online aggression toward celebrities. A pilot study was conducted among a convenience sample of seven girls and two boys ($M= 14.20$, $SD= 2.44$) in order to test whether all questions and words were clear. No issues appeared. Participants were recruited through a direct contact with their schools. Before participation in the study, parental permission was obtained and all adolescents were allowed to participate in the study. No incentives were provided. Data collection took place at the schools.

Measures

Online aggression toward celebrities was measured using a list of mild (e.g. negative commenting on celebrities' physical appearance) and severe types of online celebrity aggression (e.g. adapting videos of celebrities in an embarrassing way). This scale was inspired by Del Rey and

colleagues' (2015b) European Cyberbullying Intervention Project Questionnaire and adapted to a celebrity context. Although this scale is originally referred to as a cyberbullying scale, Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009) indicated that not all types of negative online behavior are perceived as cyberbullying among adolescents. As the scale does not provide adolescents with a definition of "cyberbullying", we considered it as a measure of online aggression in general. Participants indicated on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*almost every day*) how often they had participated in these actions in the past six months. Two items were left out for the further analyses, because the participation rates were too low (< 2%). Consistent with earlier studies using this scale, confirmatory factor analysis distinguished between mild online aggression toward celebrities consisting of 6 items ($\alpha = .813$) and severe online aggression toward celebrities consisting of three items ($\alpha = .663$). An overview of the items and factor loadings can be found in Table 1. Due to the skewed distributions of our dependent variables, severe types of celebrity aggression in particular, we decided to treat these variables as categorical for the further analyses.

Table 1
Mild and severe online aggression toward celebrities

	α
Mild online aggression toward celebrities	.813
1. Saying mean things to a celebrity on social media (Facebook, Twitter...) ^b	.786
2. Criticizing the physical appearance of a celebrity online ^a	.858
3. Insulting a celebrity online by using a curse word ^a	.848
4. Criticizing the acting/singing/dancing performance of a celebrity online ^a	.850
5. Sharing a negative news article about a celebrity ^a	.714
6. Insulting a celebrity or making a fool of him/her online ^a	.911
Severe online aggression toward celebrities	.663
1. Threatening a celebrity on social media (Facebook, Twitter, ...) ^b	.896
2. Copying an online account of a celebrity and pretending to be that person ^b	.911
3. Adapting online videos or photos of celebrity in a negative or embarrassing way ^b	.825

^a Newly developed items

^b Items from the European Cyberbullying Intervention Project (Del Rey et al., 2015b), adapted to a celebrity context

Empathy was measured with the Short Emotional Quotient (Wakabayashi et al., 2006).

Consistent with the original scale (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004), two subfactors were distinguished: cognitive empathy ($\alpha = .874$), which refers to the ability to predict others feelings and behaviors, and affective empathy ($\alpha = .644$), which describes the ability to show emotional reactions to the feelings of others.

Moral disengagement was measured using the Moral Disengagement Scale of Almeida et al. (2009), which is an adapted version of the original moral disengagement scale of Bandura (1999). All items were adapted to a celebrity context. Three items were excluded for the analyses because the factor loading was too low ($<.400$). The other 12 items loaded on one factor with a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .837$).

We also included a measurement for adolescents' *celebrity media consumption*, in order to include this variable as a control variable in our model. Different off- and online media platforms were taken into account, including celebrity magazines, television channels extensively broadcasting celebrity news, the "showbizz" section of news websites, personal celebrity profiles and celebrity fan pages on social media, celebrity gossip blogs and talking about celebrities among peers. For each of these channels, the participants indicated how often they used them for keeping themselves up-to-date on celebrity news on a seven-point scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*several times a day*). A mean score was calculated across these different platforms. The internal consistency of this scale was good ($\alpha = .726$).

Data analyses

The two-step approach of Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) was used to investigate the relationship between the socio-cognitive factors and online aggression toward celebrities using Mplus version 7.4. (Muthén & Muthén, 2016). First, a measurement model was calculated using exploratory factor analysis. The model, which consists of the two latent constructs (mild negative and severe negative online behavior toward celebrities) had an acceptable fit: The comparative fit index

(CFI) was 0.941, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was .080 (90% confidence interval [CI], 0.070–0.089), $\chi^2(26)$ was 232.222, and the p value was less than .001. The factor loadings of the items were substantial and varied between .52 and .76. Second, structural equation modeling was applied to investigate the (hypothesized) relationships using Mplus. Cognitive empathy and affective empathy were entered as independent variables, mild and severe online aggression toward celebrities as dependent variables and moral disengagement was added as a mediator. Mild online aggression toward celebrities and severe online aggression toward celebrities were treated as categorical variables. In order to control for gender and celebrity media consumption, both variables were regressed on both types of empathy, on moral disengagement and on the latent variables. Bootstrapping tests for indirect effects were used, as was recommended by Zhao, Lynch & Chen (2010). The model fit was evaluated using four criteria: the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA), a comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and the chi-square test. Firstly, the model was tested for the whole sample. Both gender and celebrity media consumption were entered as a control variables. Secondly, a multi-group model was performed to explore gender differences. For this estimation, the same model was tested for boys and girls. The fit of a model in which all paths were allowed to vary based on gender was compared with the fit of a fully constrained model (all paths equal for boys and girls). To compare both models, a chi-square difference test was conducted. Additionally, gender differences were analyzed for each of the relationships separately. Therefore, we compared the fit of a model in which one path was allowed to vary and the other paths were constrained.

Results

Descriptive results

The overall celebrity media consumption was quite low ($M= 2.61$; $SD= .98$) on a scale from never (1) to several times a day (7). Nevertheless, only 1.8% ($n= 22$) indicated to never consume celebrity news. Adolescents' participation in online celebrity aggression was also generally low, as

almost three quarters of the participants ($n = 894$; 73%) did not report engaging in negative online behavior directed at celebrities within the previous six months. Of the participants who reported negative online behavior directed at celebrities, more than nine out of ten ($n = 318$; 96.1%) participated in mild forms of this behavior, and about one out of five ($n = 73$; 22.1%) stated they had engaged in severe forms. Sharing a negative post about a celebrity ($n = 166$, 13.2%) and commenting negatively on an acting or singing performance ($n = 156$, 12.4%) were the most frequently reported mild activities, whereas adapting videos of celebrities in an embarrassing way ($n = 53$, 4.2%) was the most frequently reported severe activity.

Structural Equation modelling

A structural equation model was estimated to study the aforementioned hypotheses and research questions, using WLSMV estimation, as this method is most suitable for non-normal categorical data (Barendse, Oort, & Timmerman, 2015). The model including the standardized regression coefficients can be found in figure 1. In this model, all individual variables were also regressed on gender and celebrity media consumption, but in order to increase the clarity of the model, these variables and the error terms of the observed variables were not included in the presentation. Several goodness-of-fit indices indicated that the fit of our model was good, RMSEA = .027 (C.I. 90%: .020 - .035); CFI = .990; TLI = .985; $\chi^2(90) = 5649.330$, $p < .001$.

Following our first hypothesis, affective empathy was significantly related with severe online aggression toward celebrities ($\beta = -.15$; $p < .05$), but not with mild online aggression toward celebrities. Cognitive empathy was unrelated with both mild and severe forms of online celebrity aggression (RQ1).

In order to further explore potential differences in the relationships based on gender (RQ 2: Are there gender differences in the suggested relationships between cognitive/affective empathy and online celebrity aggression?), a multi-group analysis was performed. As we were mostly interested in how the paths develop for boys and girls, we used paths models. The fit of a

constrained path model (all parameters equal across groups) and the fit of a model with free parameters were compared. The model with free parameters across both groups did produce a significant improvement in the model fit compared with the constrained model ($\Delta X^2(15) = 182.021, p < .001$), indicating that there are gender differences in the associations. By calculating Chi-square difference tests, we compared the fully constrained model with the models in which one path was free to vary based on gender. In that way, it was found that only two paths produced significant differences between boys and girls. The first difference was found for the relationship between cognitive and affective empathy ($\Delta X^2(1) = 8.16, p < .01$). The data show that the association between cognitive empathy and affective empathy is stronger for boys ($\beta = .21, p < .001$) than for girls ($\beta = .15; p < .01$). The second difference was found for the association between participation in mild and severe online aggression toward celebrities ($\Delta X^2(1) = 158.33, p < .001$). Girls who participated in mild online celebrity aggression had significantly higher chances for also participating in severe types of aggression ($\beta = .55; p < .001$) than boys ($\beta = .34, p < .05$).

As we predicted in hypothesis 2, moral disengagement had a significant positive relationship with both mild ($\beta = .40; p < .001$) and severe online aggression toward celebrities ($\beta = .31; p < .001$). The direct effects of moral disengagement were stronger than the direct effects of empathy, which were quite low.

Concerning the indirect effect of empathy through moral disengagement, it was found that affective empathy significantly predicted moral disengagement ($\beta = .12, p < .001$) and that the two indirect paths of affective empathy were significant ($\beta_{mild} = .05, p < .001, C.I. 95\%: .02 \text{ till } .07; \beta_{severe} = .04, p < .01, C.I. 95\%: .02 \text{ till } .06$), meaning that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between affective empathy and both mild and severe online aggression toward celebrities, which confirms H3a. The total effect of affective empathy was not significant for both mild and severe online celebrity aggression. The opposite direction of both effects might be the reason for the insignificant total effects, as the positive indirect effect and negative direct effect neutralize each

other (Kenny, 2018). These results refer to an inconsistent mediation (Mackinnon, Fairchild & Fritz, 2007). The indirect effects of cognitive empathy were not significant, which rejects H3b.

For celebrity media consumption, a positive association was found with moral disengagement ($\beta = .07, p < .05$) and with mild online celebrity aggression ($\beta = .25, p < .001$). An overview of the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations can be found in Table 2.

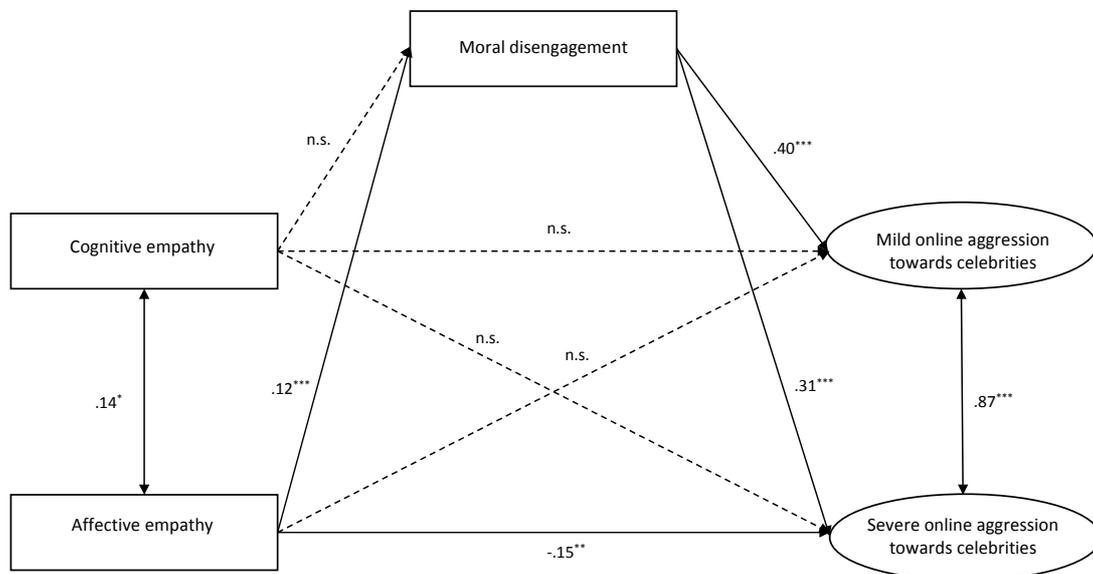
Table 2
Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender ^a							
2. Celebrity media consumption	-.33***						
3. Cognitive empathy	-.23***	.22***					
4. Affective empathy	-.07*	.12***	.22***				
5. Moral disengagement	.27***	-.01	-.01	.11***			
6. Mild online aggression toward celebrities	.10**	.14***	-.02	.01	.29***		
7. Severe online aggression toward celebrities	.11***	-.01	-.06	-.05	.15***	.54***	
<i>M</i>		2.89	3.36	3.06	2.39	1.14	1.05
<i>SD</i>		1.06	.58	.59	.59	.36	.25
Range		1-7	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-6	1-6

^a girls = 0, boys = 1

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Figure 1. Structural equation model



Note: $*** p < .001$; $** p < .01$; $* p < .05$; RMSEA= .027 (C.I. 90%: .020 - .035); CFI= .990; TLI= .985; $\chi^2(90) = 5649.330$, $p < .001$. Values reflect standardized coefficients. Ellipses represent latent variables. For clarity, the measurement details (such as the error terms and the measurement model of the latent variables) are not shown.

Discussion

This study was the first to investigate the relationship between socio-cognitive factors (empathy and moral disengagement) and online aggression toward celebrities. Results show that only affective empathy was associated with adolescents' severe online celebrity aggression, confirming H1 (There is a negative relationship between affective empathy and online celebrity aggression) and answering RQ1 (Is there a significant relationship between cognitive empathy and online celebrity aggression?) with 'no'. Affective empathy seems to decrease the chances for participation in severe online aggression toward celebrities. Our findings on the protective role of affective empathy, corroborate the findings of earlier research on the role of affective empathy in cyberbullying aimed at peers (Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2010; Kowalski et al., 2014). For cognitive empathy, there was no consistency in existing research on (cyber)bullying. Our results are in line with earlier studies finding a no association with cyberbullying perpetration (Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2010; Renati et al., 2012; Ang & Goh, 2010). The insignificant relationships

between both types of empathy and mild forms of online celebrity aggression, seem to suggest that the effect of empathy depends on the seriousness of the aggression. When considering to participate in mild negative behaviors, people might experience less difficulties to “turn off” their empathy than when they consider to participate in severe forms. This idea seems to be supported by research in the medical context that found evidence for people’s ability to actually switch empathy off to a certain extent (Michelbrink, 2015).

In contrast with existing research indicating gender differences in the effects of empathy on online aggression (Ang & Goh, 2010), the relationships between both types of empathy and online aggression towards celebrities were the same for boys and girls in this study. Gender differences were only found for the relationship between affective and cognitive empathy and between mild and severe online aggression towards celebrities with the former of these relationships being stronger for boys and the latter for girls. The latter finding extends existing research indicating an association between mild (e.g., teasing) and severe (e.g., harassment) forms of bullying (Pyżalski, 2012; Macklem, 2003) and thus suggests that once adolescents, and especially girls, start participating in mild (innocent) forms of online aggression, the chances for trying out more severe forms significantly increase.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a significant positive relationship between moral disengagement and online celebrity aggression. Our results confirmed this hypothesis, indicating that moral disengagement had a quite strong positive association with both mild and severe types of online celebrity aggression.

Moreover, as was predicted in H3a, moral disengagement also mediated the relationship between affective empathy and online celebrity aggression. The latter finding is in line with previous studies exploring the mediating role of moral disengagement when explaining negative behavior (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014; Wang et al., 2016; Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2017). However, this indirect effect did not go in the expected direction. Whereas the direct effect of affective empathy on online celebrity aggression was negative, the indirect effect was positive. In both cases (mild and severe

online aggression), it can be concluded that the mediation reduces the protective power of empathy on online celebrity aggression and that the positive and negative effect neutralize each other (Kenny, 2018). The different direction of a direct and indirect effect is also known as an 'inconsistent mediation' (MacKinnon, et al., 2007).

Most remarkable within this mediation effect is the positive relationship between affective empathy and moral disengagement. Although this finding contradicts with the majority of earlier quantitative studies (e.g., Hyde et al., 2010), the qualitative study of DeSmet and colleagues (2014) on the determinants of bystander behavior suggests that such a positive relationship is possible. Given the interrelatedness between empathy and feelings of guilt (Leith & Baumeister, 1998), the authors argue that when people with high empathy participate in negative behavior (i.e. due to peer pressure) (Gini, 2006; Bachmann et al., 1993; Boarden, et al. 1989)), their high empathy might give them feelings of guilt, which is why they need more moral disengagement strategies compared with people with low empathy, in order to justify their negative behavior (DeSmet et al., 2014). Recent research of Tillman and colleagues (2018) further supported this idea. With their experimental study, they found that moral disengagement strategies can be activated in two possible stages of the process: as a managing mechanism of emotions prior to the participation in negative behavior and as a coping mechanism after the participation in negative behavior (i.e., post-moral disengagement) (Tillman, Gonzalez, Whitman, Crawford, & Hood, 2018). The authors explain the double function of moral disengagement by the fact that people use these strategies to be able to justify their negative behavior and to reduce the negative feelings associated with it, but are unable to suppress all negative emotions. People still experience negative emotions as a result of the discrepancy between their behavior and their own values. Post-moral disengagement might then help to deal with these feelings (Tillman et al., 2018).

A second potential explanation for the positive relationship between affective empathy and moral disengagement, which is very specific for this context and also supports the idea that a celebrity victim is different from a peer as victim, deals with the concept of empathy itself. Empathy

increases by similarity (Krebs, 1975; Eklund, Andersson-Stråberg, & Hansen, 2009). This means that in the context of online aggression toward celebrities, our general measurement of empathy might not be a measurement of empathy for the victim (i.e., the celebrity), but rather a measurement of empathy for the perpetrators (i.e., other peers). In other words, adolescents high in affective empathy might find it easy to imagine what drives peers when they “bash” celebrities. This might then resonate in their answers to the moral disengagement scale. A measurement of parochial empathy could help to overcome this problem in future research, as this variable measures the difference between empathy for the ingroup and empathy for the outgroup (Bruneau, Cikara & Saxe, 2015). Research indicates that parochial empathy is a more meaningful predictor of intergroup attitudes and behavior compared to the general trait empathy (Bruneau et al., 2017). Measuring parochial empathy for celebrities versus peers might be especially interesting because research already indicated differences in tolerance between both types of behavior (Ouvrein et al, 2017; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). Not only do adolescents interpret celebrity aggression as a more tolerant form of aggression, they also think it is funny and amusing when someone (i.e., peers) participates in this type of behavior (Ouvrein et al., 2017; Meyers, 2010).

Overall, we want to emphasize that the effect sizes and especially the ones of the direct relationship between empathy and online celebrity aggression was small whereas the direct relationships with moral disengagement and online celebrity aggression were quite strong. This is in contrast to the considerable role dedicated to empathy in research on online peer aggression (Renati et al., 2012) and the restricted role of moral disengagement in an online setting (Pornari & Wood, 2010). One explanation for the low contribution of empathy can be found in the study of Pornari and Wood (2010). These authors compared the role of some characteristics in traditional bullying versus cyberbullying and indicated that the empathic feelings toward the victims of cyberbullying decrease in an online setting due to the combination of anonymity of the perpetrator, distance toward the victim and the lack of observing negative consequences. Contrary to most peer aggression incidents, in online aggression toward celebrities, perpetrators are mostly unknown (anonym) to the celebrity-

victim, maintain a high distance toward the celebrity and are unable to observe negative consequences. It might then be that there is less empathy toward the celebrity compared to a situation in which the perpetrator knows the victim personally. These effects might further be strengthened by the fact that online attacking of celebrities has a general entertainment function. Schadenfreude refers to the amusement of reading about celebrities' misfortunes (Cross & Littler, 2010). Indeed, one study indicated that whereas cyberbullying peers is perceived as the result of negative intentions, celebrity bashing is interpreted as a fun and harmless behavior (Ouvrein et al., 2017). Given these general feelings of acceptance and amusement the audience experience when observing online celebrity aggression, empathic feelings can become even more suppressed.

The combination of lower empathy due to the distant perpetrator-victim relationship and the decrease in empathy due to the online setting and the fact that celebrities are considered a safe and 'funny' group to target for online aggression, can explain the low contribution of this variable in this study. For moral disengagement, Pornari and Wood (2010) found that when these criteria are met (anonymity, distance toward the victim and no observation of consequences), the contribution of moral disengagement was lower compared with its role in traditional bullying. In our study, moral disengagement had quite strong direct effects. This suggests that the impact of moral disengagement might not only differ based on the characteristics of the setting, but also based on the victim of the online aggression (peers versus celebrities). Research found that aggression toward celebrities is more easily morally justified, compared to aggression toward peers (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015; Ouvrein et al., 2017). This may have to do with the "celebrification" of celebrities in the media (Rojek, 2001). "Celebrification" refers to the process of the construction of a celebrity as the result of a negotiation between the celebrity, the audience and the media (Rojek, 2001). In that way, the image that the media bring of a celebrity is just a construction, which meets the needs of the media and the audience and thus differs from how the celebrity really is (Meyers, 2009). Research indicates some awareness of this discrepancy among the audience (Van den Bulck, Cleassens & Bels, 2014). This might stimulate them to more extreme scores for moral disengagement toward celebrities'

image (and not toward the celebrity him/herself) and thus a stronger impact of this variable. Future research is necessary to compare the concept of moral disengagement in the context of online aggression toward peers versus toward celebrities and the potential impact of both factors in explaining adolescents' online aggression toward respectively peers and celebrities.

This study has some limitations. A first limitation is the reliance on self-reported measures. Although adolescents completed the survey anonymously, self-reports may be the subject of bias and should therefore be interpreted with caution, especially for the reporting of negative behavior. Secondly, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow us to draw firm conclusions about the causality of the association between socio-cognitive factors and online aggression toward celebrities. Testing the suggested model by means of an experiment is recommended for future research. Thirdly, our mean scores for participation in online celebrity aggression were quite low, especially for severe types of aggression. Although we observed quite some variance within the group of adolescents who did participate in online aggression toward celebrities, future research might benefit from investigating these relationships among a group of adolescents with higher scores on online aggression toward celebrities and across a longer period than six months.

This study has practical implications for the prevention and intervention of online aggression toward celebrities. Existing research indicates that aggression toward celebrities is more easily morally justified, compared to aggression toward peers (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015; Ouvrein et al., 2017) and that these attitudes of acceptance might translate into other types of aggression due to desensitization processes (Funk et al., 1999). Teachers and parents should thus learn adolescents that online aggression toward celebrities is unacceptable and can generate serious consequences. Interventions focusing on specific socio-cognitive factors, such as moral disengagement and empathy, have already proven to be successful to reduce online aggression targeted at peers (Bustamante & Chaux, 2014). Given that affective empathy and moral disengagement are also related with online aggression toward celebrities, practitioners should develop practices that specifically tap on these two factors. Setting up these interventions, practitioners should take the

differences in how empathic feelings and moral disengagement processes develop based on the target of the aggression (a celebrity versus a peer) into account.

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Highlights

- Adolescents also aggress toward other targets, such as celebrities.
- Affective empathy is negatively associated with severe online celebrity aggression.
- Empathy is not associated with mild online celebrity aggression.
- Moral disengagement is a mediator between empathy and celebrity aggression.