Adolescents' Empathy and Authenticity Online
The roles of moral identity, moral disengagement and parenting

Dr Blaire Morgan
Senior Lecturer in Psychology
University of Worcester
b.morgan@worc.ac.uk
@DrBlaire_Morgan

Online Empathy

Empathy

- Cognitive side of empathy: taking others' perspectives
- Affective side of empathy: the ability to viscerally experience another's emotions
- Considered a moral trait/moral emotion linked to benevolence and prosocial behaviour

'Online empathy'

- "the ability to take the perspective of other internet users as well as the ability to recognise how other users are feeling - even when they are not able to observe these other users directly" (Morgan, Fowers & Kristjansson, 2017).
- A disposition to think, feel and act in empathic ways online (Morgan & Fowers, in press)

Online Empathy – Background literature

Conflicting findings regarding internet/social media use and empathy:

- Empathy as the 'obvious variable' linked to cyberbullying (Kowalksi et al., 2014)

- Internet addiction disorder (IAD) associated with impaired empathic processing (Jiao et al., 2017)

- Longitudinal data has signalled a positive link between social media use and empathy (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016)

- The internet can enable exposure to broader perspectives and social groups and facilitate empathic experiences (Khang & Jeong, 2016)

Online Authenticity

Authenticity

- ''The degree to which one is true to his or her own personality, spirit, or character, despite external pressures" (Gil-Or et al., 2015, p.4)
- Requires being <u>honest</u> with and about oneself (Harter, 2002)

'Online Authenticity'

- Congruency between one's thoughts, beliefs, behaviours and expressions across the online and offline world
- Linked to honesty: exhibiting online authenticity is a matter of presenting an honest and true reflection of oneself that does not mislead others (e.g., in posts, profiles, comments) (Morgan & Fowers, in press)

Online Authenticity – Background literature

(More) Contrasting findings in the literature:

- Individual's self-representations on SNS's considered accurate when rated by friends (Gosling et al., 2007)

- Posts can be used to accurately predict users' personalities (Back et al., 2010)

- Benign disinhibition: some individuals are more honest and open online and 'put themselves out there'

- There are general tendencies/ expectations around what to post online (e.g., positive over negative emotional disclosures, Qui et al., 2012)

- Properties of the internet can lead individuals to fake, exaggerate or strategically self-present (e.g., those with a 'need for popularity', Utz et al., 2012)

The Current Study

- Examined the psychological processes that encourage or discourage empathy and authenticity online

- Focused on recognised sources of moral behaviour that have been linked to empathy and honesty offline (where honesty is a key element of online authenticity)
  - Moral Identity
  - Moral Disengagement
  - Authoritative Parenting

- Aimed to offer insights into how empathy and authenticity can be facilitated in the online world

Key influences on moral behaviour

Moral Disengagement: allows an individual to act in immoral ways but retain a view of himself or herself as a 'moral person'
- Enables immoral actions (e.g., dishonest or unkind behaviours) without the perpetrator experiencing guilt or shame
- Negatively related to empathy offline (Detert et al., 2008)
- Positively related to dishonesty offline (Shu et al., 2011) and cyberbullying (Ang & Goh, 2010)

Moral Identity: when moral traits are an important part of one's self-concept, then one is considered to have a strong 'moral identity'
- Related to empathy and honesty offline (e.g., Hardy et al., 2012)
- Few studies looking at moral identity in online contexts

Authoritative Parenting: demanding, responsive and autonomy granting
- Encourages the development of a moral identity in adolescence (Hardy et al., 2008)
- Discourages moral disengagement processes (Detert et al., 2008)

Hypotheses

H1: Adolescents' moral disengagement will be negatively associated with online empathy and online authenticity

H2: Adolescent moral identity will be positively associated with online empathy and authenticity

H3: Adolescent moral identity will also be indirectly linked to online empathy and authenticity through dampening the effects of moral disengagement

H4: Authoritative parenting will be associated with online empathy and online authenticity through moral identity and moral disengagement

The Hypothesised Model
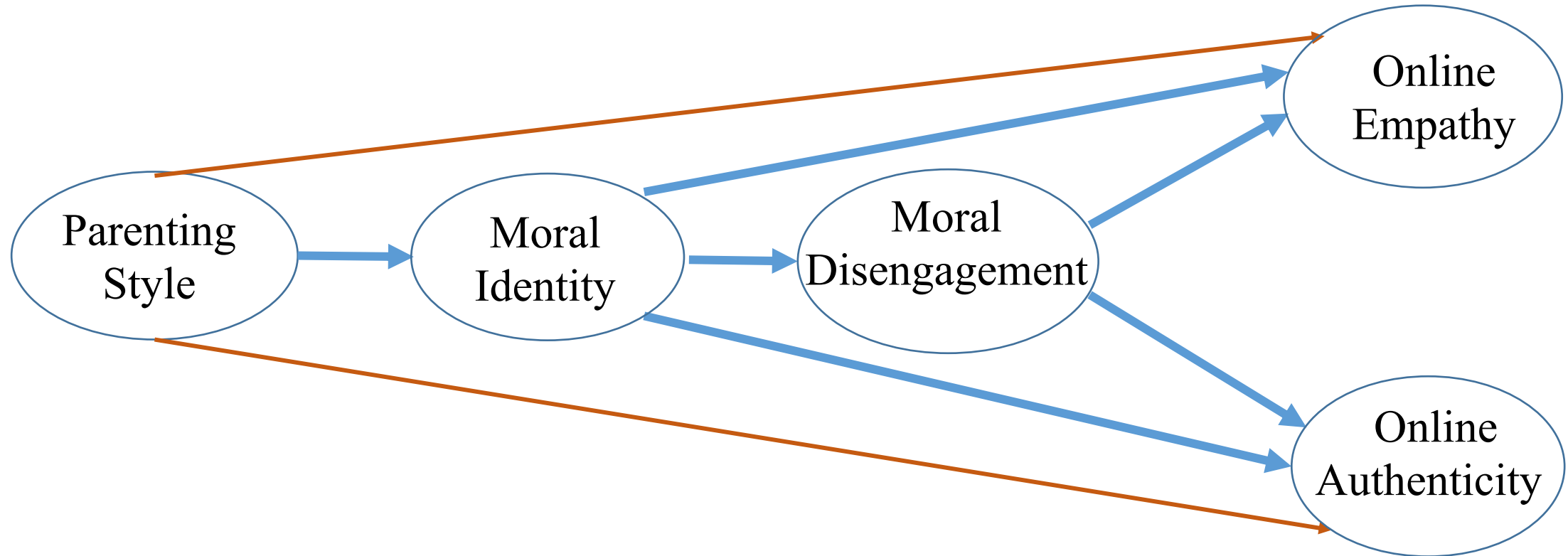
Methods
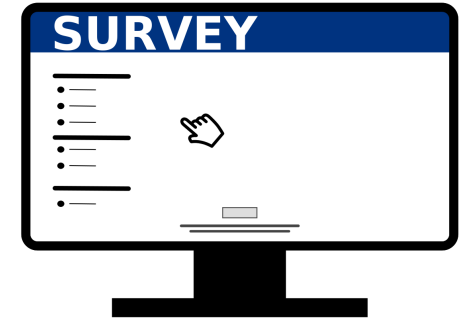
- Participants: 834 younger and older UK adolescents, aged 11-18 (M = 14), 60% male, regular (daily) users of social media

- Method: Online survey administered through secondary schools and sixth forms
  - Moral identity: measured via scales of moral self-relevance, moral contingencies of self-worth, and moral aspects of identity
  - Moral Disengagement: measured via 8 sub-scales of MD: "It is alright to lie to keep your friends out of trouble" (moral justification item)
  - Authoritative parenting: Parenting Stule Inventory II (Darling et al., 2005)
  - Online Empathy: measured via an adapted version of the IRI (Davis, 1980; 1983): "Before criticizing somebody *online*, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place" (perspective-taking item)
  - Online Authenticity: Adapted version of Wood et al.'s (2008) authenticity scale; a measure of authentic online profiles (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014); adapted version of Real-Self Overlap scale (Thomaes et al., 2017)

Results

H1: Adolescents' moral disengagement will be negatively associated with online empathy and online authenticity

- Direct relationship between moral disengagement and online authenticity in females only, no direct link to online empathy in this sample

H2: Adolescent moral identity will correlate positively with online empathy and authenticity

- Significant direct (positive) relationship between moral identity and both online empathy and online authenticity

H3: Adolescent moral identity will also be indirectly linked to online empathy and authenticity through dampening the effects of moral disengagement

- No indirect relationship between moral identity and the two outcomes through moral disengagement observed

H4: Authoritative parenting will be associated with online empathy and online authenticity through moral identity and moral disengagement

- Partially supported: Indirect relationship between parenting and online empathy and authenticity through moral identity, but not through moral disengagement.

The Model

Parenting Style → Online Empathy: .06

Parenting Style → Moral Identity: .31***

Moral Identity → Online Empathy: .72***

Moral Identity → Moral Disengagement: -.65***

Moral Disengagement → Online Empathy: -.11

Moral Identity → Online Authenticity: .60***

Moral Disengagement → Online Authenticity: -.03

Parenting Style → Online Authenticity: .04
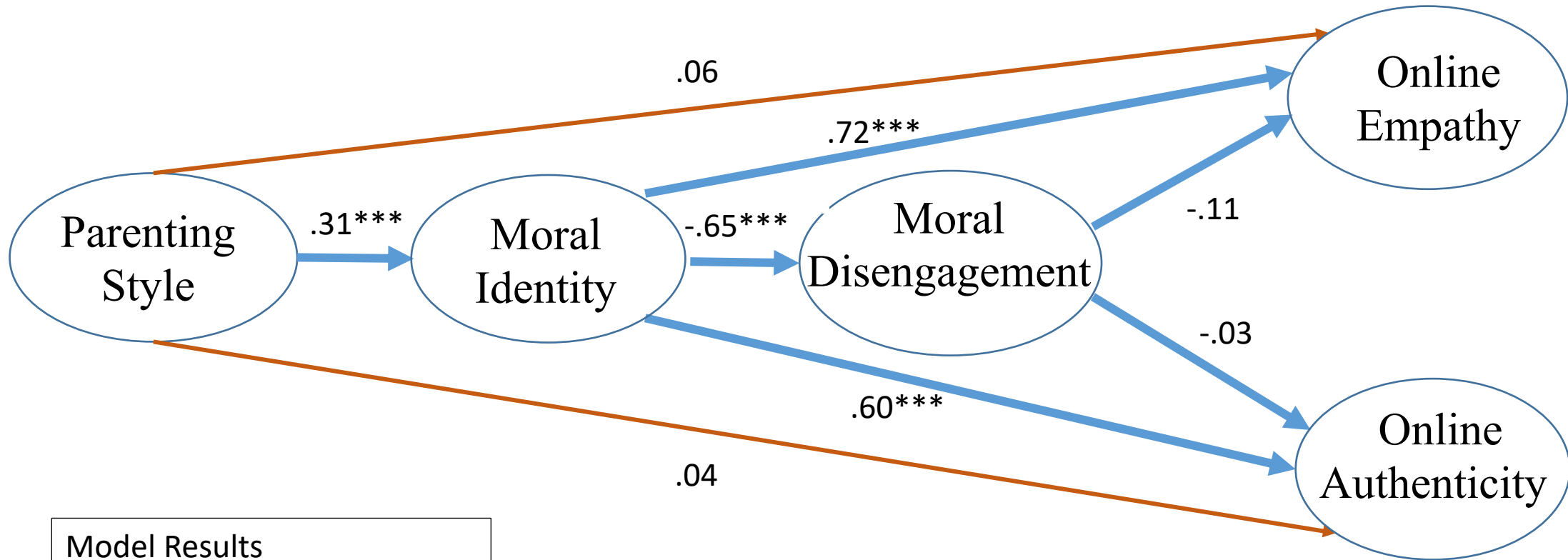
Model Results
χ² = 331.30, df = 78, p < .001
CFI = .95
RMSEA = .05
SRMR = .04

Note: *** *p* < .001; values are standardised regression coefficients

Implications

- Moral identity can encourage online empathy and online authenticity in adolescents
- Authoritative parenting may indirectly encourage online empathy and online authenticity through supporting the development of moral identity
- Moral identity can be primed and promoted: e.g., through reminders or primes of ethical codes (Aquino et al., 2009), and the employment of various parental behaviours (such as inductions, Hardy et al., 2008)
    - *This suggests possible avenues for promoting empathy and authenticity in online environments*
- Future research should consider the role of moral identity when examining moral traits in the online world

Thank you for listening!
Any questions?

Keep in touch:
b.morgan@worc.ac.uk
@DrBlaire_Morgan