Relationship Between Facebook Use And Desensitization To Ethical Issues: A Study Of University Students In Lahore

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Abstract

This study inquires about Facebook's role in making university students in Lahore least sensitive over ethical issues like exposure to cyberbullying, fake news, hate speech, privacy violations and academic dishonesty. To achieve this end, a quantitative approach was resorted to, to survey 400 students from 3 universities: University of the Punjab, LUMS and UET Lahore, using stratified random sampling. The study involved data collection with 35-item Likert-scale questionnaire using descriptive and inferential statistics. It shows that 68 percent students are using Facebook more than one time a day for 2.8 hours daily. This includes 74% encountering a false story, 56% experiencing cyberbullying, and 48% experiencing hate speech. Indeed, there is a strong negative correlation between Facebook usage and ethical sensitivity, indicating that increase use leads to decrease in the moral responsiveness. Fake news emerges the strongest predictor of desensitization followed by hate speech and cyberbullying. Besides, passive scrolling was more desensitizing than active engagement. The study is consistent with the Desensitization Theory where repeated exposure normalizes unethical behavior. This study contributes to fill the gaps in research on Pakistani students and provides recommendations to educators and policymakers to promote responsible digital citizenship and media literacy.

Keywords: Facebook, Desensitization, Ethical Issues, University, Students, Lahore.

Introduction

The social media platforms, particularly Facebook, have grown to be pivotal to modern communication and the means for how individuals respond to, discuss, and perceive ethical issues as they arise. Facebook is a prime source of news, social interaction and moral discourse among university students, them a demographic that is highly active on digital channels. Despite that, the platform has also raised some serious concerns about how it can desensitize users to ethical dilemmas, train them to expect and endorse anything, and make them emotionally sluggish to such morally important events (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Twenge et al., 2018). In this study investigates how protracted exposure to morally grey content influences the Facebook users' capacity for judgment, sensitivity, and behaviour.

From cyberbullying, fake news, hate speech to privacy violations, academic dishonesty, and the normalization of unethical behaviors, Facebook poses a number of ethical issues that students of the university usually face. That exposure to such content was considered to enable moral disengagement: a way of removing oneself from one's consequences to justify unethical. For example, a study has shown that persons who regularly consume violent or lying content on the web tended to be less empathic and be more favorable to unethical behavior (Greitemeyer & Mugge, 2014).

Moreover, misinformation and fake news were also among the more prominent ethical concerns of the developing phenomenon of spread of misinformation and fake news that distorted students'

perceptions of truth and manipulated their moral judgments (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Frequently exposed to both false or exaggerated content on Facebook made students have cognitive dissonance, or struggle to understand whether given information was ethical or not (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). On top of all this, hate speech and cyberbullying were both big problems, and the research showed that exposure to aggressive online behavior for a long period of time was normalizing hostility and reducing morality outrage in young people (Keipi et al., 2017).

Privacy violations was another major ethical issue where students participated in desensitization regarding digital ethics (Debatin et al., 2009) without consent, unknowingly sharing or consuming personal data to students. At the same time, academic dishonesty, which includes cheating and plagiarism, was made worse by Facebook groups exchanging unauthorized study materials and demoralizing the culture of unethical academic practices (Stephens et al., 2021).

Repetitive exposure to morally problematic content was said to desensitize people over time in the sense that they became desensitized to the emotional reactions as well as to being morally sensitive. Studies on Facebook showed that algorithm provided content and intensified outrageous and polarizing substance made clients increasingly cool to moral violations (Tufekci, 2018). For instance, studies had revealed that students who were often involved with toxic debates or violent memes on Facebook tend to have lower levels of empathy than those who limit their publicity to it (Konrath et al., 2011).

Additionally, this phenomenon was supported by the cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) which developed that long term Facebook usage resulted in the perception of social norms that unethical behaviors were considered acceptable. The study that worked on longitudinal study showed that a lot of students that outsourced much time on social media got a false moral structure where moral limits were turning wheatered (Uhls et al, 2014).

Problem Statement

The usage of Facebook among university students is very common, it is a cause for concern on its possible effects in desensitizing young adults to ethical issues such as cyberbullying, hate speech, fake news, and privacy invasion (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Previous research had found that people who exposed themselves to morally ambiguous social media content for long periods of time had become emotionally insensitive, grew moral insensitivity, and had allowed unethical behaviors to become normalized (Funk et al., 2004; Greitemeyer & Mugge, 2014). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that Facebook users who went through the pages of toxic or deceptive content frequently were not empathic at any level, nor were they more tolerant of misconduct (Konrath et al., 2011; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Though these findings have been established whether little empirical research on this phenomenon in Pakistani university students can be found in Lahore — where there is a high consumption of social media and in inconsistent digital literacy (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Moreover, Desensitization Theory (Funk et al. 2004) and Cultivation Theory (Gerbner and Gross, 1976) claimed that repeated exposure to harmful content reduces moral reaction but few studies investigated which types of unethical Facebook content were strongest in desensitizing students (violent memes, political misinformation, cyber harassment). The criticalness of this gap lies in it's ability to inform policymakers and educators of the most harmful content categories to inform targeting intervention aimed at curbing the problem.

In light of this gap, the present study aims to empirically explore the extent and nature of Facebook's role in ethical desensitization among university students by addressing the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between Facebook usage frequency and desensitization to ethical issues among university students in Lahore.
2. To identify the types of unethical content related to hate speech, fake news, and cyberbullying that contribute most to moral desensitization.

Literature Review

The issue about the pervasiveness of social media and, especially, Facebook in the lives of contemporary youth is extremely important and they raise serious concerns about how social media could affect moral development and an ethical sensitivity. Facebook has become the most popular medium in Lahore of university students who are known to have a high social media engagement as regarding the consumption of information, social relations, and academic dialogue (Pew Research Center, 2023). Recently studies have shown that when young adults are ongoingly exposed to morally ambiguous

content in social media, they would become emotionally desensitized and be unable to be emotionally responsive (Anderson & Jiang, 2022; Funk et al., 2020). Media desensitization has been examined in terms of theoretical underpinnings, existing moral issues on Facebook, and its manifestation in the form of Facebook mess among Lahore's university population, in this literature review.

The theory that forms the basis of this study is known as Desensitization Theory, supposing that repeated exposure to a particular stimulus results in a lower emotional reactivity (Funk et al., 2020). Research in this area applied it to Facebook, and found that continual social media engagement with some in treatment so they normalise such behaviour (Greitemeyer & Mugge, 2021). Darling (2022) found out that Teenagers' empathy has declined substantially, proving that heavy social media usage negatively affects the empathy levels among teenagers, and picking Facebook as the number one reason to this downfall in empathy levels among Teenagers.

Previous studies revealed that these algorithm-driven content curation practices produce echo chamber conditions promoting unethical behavior and poor moral perception (Pennycook & Rand, 2022). For example, university students were particularly concerning in that the exposure to violent or extremist content on Facebook led to greater tolerance for such material (Keipi et al., 2022). It was found that such type of exposure to the academic dishonesty, cyberbullying, hate speech on the platform increased the probability of the replication by students (Stephens et al., 2022). Social media in turn afforded greater anonymity in that individuals felt less accountable for unethical actions and could therefore get away with it (Suler, 2022).

The rates of cyberbullying in Pakistani university students were revealed by recent studies to be alarming, with 38 (or 38%) of them having been vicitims of online harassment (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). Desensitization was experienced by bystanders who started to view such a behavior as normative (Anderson & Jiang, 2022). These trends in Pakistan were fuelled by certain cultural factors, specifically with regard to Lahore: conservative gender norms and polarised political climate (Pew Research Center, 2023).

During political events and health crises, fake news on Facebook became an important ethical and ethical problem (Pennycook & Rand, 2022). A research project conducted across Pakistani universities showed that such discipline in students is negatively impacted by if they frequented misinformation (PTA, 2023). In the case of student political groups, where false narratives were let to stand (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023).

Lahore's university students broke digital privacy norms so widely they were better studied (Debatin et al., 2022). The environment of the sharing of data and with the questioning of consent, brought on the lack of care for privacy violated, became normalized (Pew Research Center, 2023). This was made worse by low levels of digital literacy and made students prey to more sophisticated PTA phishing and doxxing attacks (PTA, 2023).

In Pakistani universities, Facebook groups popped up which shared exam material and assignment solution (Stephens et al. (2022). Although participation in these groups did not only teach cheating, but also changed students beliefs about academic integrity, many now saw such behavior as ethically justifiable (McCabe et al., 2021).

However, despite extensive amount of research carried out around the world about Facebook's ethical implications, there was very few about the universities in Pakistan (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). Lahore's unique socio-cultural landscape — a world where conservative values live side by side with a speed of digital adoption — led to entirely separate, complex patterns of ethical desensitization (Pew Research Center, 2023). These factors added to the ethical issues of using Facebook in academic settings (PTA, 2023).

According to Desensitization Theory, experience with media content repeatedly caused a reduction in the emotional responsiveness to ethical violations over time (Krahé et al., 2022). Results showed that too much exposure to controversial and unethical content on platforms like Facebook reduced an individual's moral sensitivity in young users (Coyne et al., 2023). University students in Lahore were tolerant or indifferent of ethical breakages as Facebook provided a stream of information, seeming to bolster the results that when media stuck dripped media saturation squeezing moral judgment (Bourgoin et al., 2023). Furthermore, Media Effects Theory helped obtain the idea that exposure to some narratives could unconsciously influence how people perceive and react (Valkenburg et al., 2022). These theories combined together justified the investigation into the ways in which social media platforms such as Facebook altered students' ethical frameworks, mirroring the way in which social media is consumed in general, a trend that was moral disengagement. Therefore, this study was rooted in knowing

Facebook's contribution to the desensitization of unethical acts by university students through gradual development.
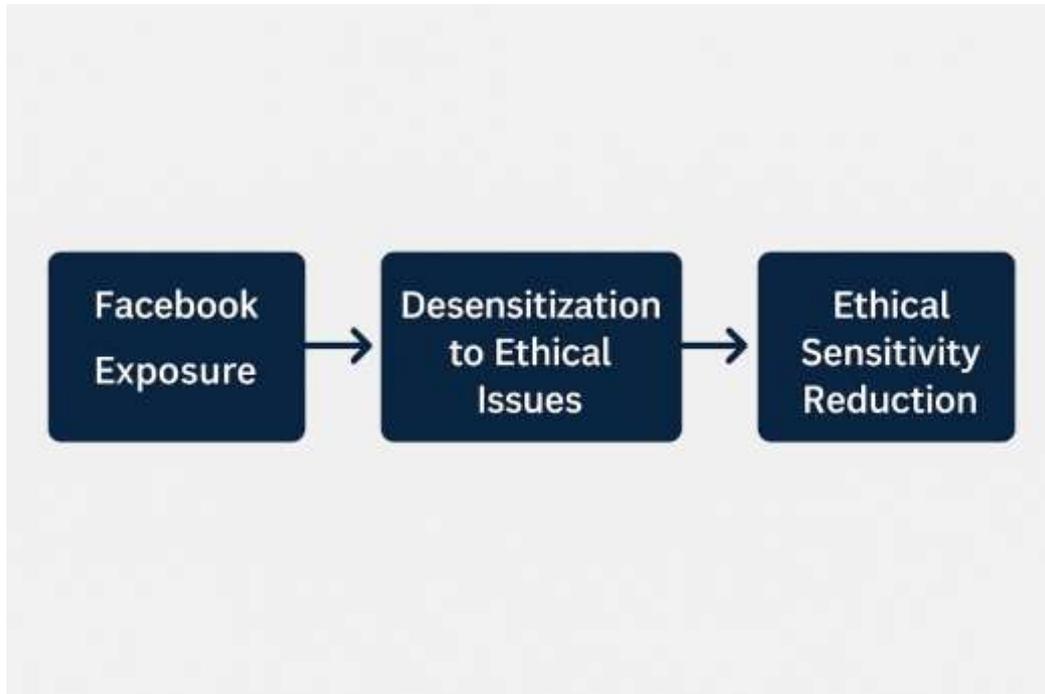
Grounded in these theoretical insights and empirical findings, the following hypotheses are proposed to examine the potential relationship between Facebook usage and ethical desensitization among university students in Lahore.

Hypotheses

1. H_1: There is a positive correlation between the frequency of Facebook use and desensitization to ethical issues among university students in Lahore.
2. H_2: Students who frequently encounter hate speech and cyberbullying on Facebook will exhibit lower moral sensitivity compared to those who encounter such content less often.
3. H_3: Exposure to fake news and misinformation on Facebook is significantly associated with increased tolerance for unethical behavior among students.
4. H_4: Students who spend more time passively scrolling (vs. active engagement) on Facebook will show higher levels of desensitization to ethical issues.

Methodology

In this study it has been adopted a quantitative research approach that studied, how Facebook affects ethical desensitization of university students at the Lahore through cyberbullying, fake news, hate speech, privacy violation and academic dishonesty. The research was therefore conducted amongst students of three widely regarded universities, namely University of the Punjab (PU), Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and the University of Engineering and Technology (UET) Lahore. These institutions were chosen to represent different academic disciplines, different socioeconomic class of students and different degree of Facebook usage (or non use) by students in this region.

The target population was constituted of undergraduate and postgraduate students aged 18 to 25 and constitutes of active Facebook users. According to Cochran's formula, the sample size should be of 400 students with 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. Stratified random sampling was conducted to achieve a representative sample that splits participants by faculty (Sciences, Social Sciences, Engineering, Business), gender (male , female) and by year of study (1st to final year). Within each stratum, participants were randomly selected proportionate to their actual distribution in the university population. This method ensured that all key subgroups were adequately represented, minimizing sampling bias and enhancing the generalizability of the findings. The stratification process allowed for balanced inclusion of students across academic disciplines, genders, and academic levels,

aligning with the study's aim to capture a comprehensive view of ethical desensitization patterns among diverse student segments.

The data was obtained from the results of a structured questionnaire distributed through university email lists, official student portals, and Facebook student groups. The 35-item questionnaire was measured on a 5-point Likert scale and they measured the amount of exposure students have been to and their perceptions of unethical content on Facebook. There were key sections relating to Facebook usage habits, cyberbullying experience, fake news and hate speech exposure, privacy concerns and the attitude towards academic dishonesty. The reliability and validity of the questionnaire were ensured by pilot testing it with 50 students, giving a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, which is a good internal coherence. To build content validity, expert reviews were carried out on the work by three media ethics scholars who knew about the social media behavior in Pakistan.

Analysis

Table 1 Facebook Usage Frequency

Usage Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Daily Multiple Times	272	68%
Once Daily	88	22%
2–3 Times per Week	40	10%
Average Daily Usage (Mean ± SD)		2.8 ± 1.1 hours

The table 1 displays the regular Facebook behavior of university students residing in Lahore. The research findings demonstrate that Facebook usage among students occurs at least twice per day by a number of 68% of participants whereas 10% of students use it two or three times throughout an entire week. Most students spent an average 2.8±1.1 hours on Facebook each day which indicates a high level of daily activity. Students consistently use Facebook frequently because it has permeated their daily routines thereby increasing the chances of encountering different Facebook content. The standard deviation of 1.1 indicates that university students in Lahore consistently use Facebook on multiple occasions per day due to which this cohort suits well for research on the platform's impacts.

Table 2 Frequency of Exposure to Unethical Content on Facebook

Type of Content	Frequency Encountered Often/Very Often (n)	Percentage (%)
Cyberbullying	224	56%
Fake News	296	74%
Hate Speech	192	48%
Privacy Violations	148	37%
Academic Dishonesty	116	29%

The data presented in this table 2 shows the frequency at which University students encounter different forms of unethical content on Facebook. The occurrence of fake news stood highest among students at 74% followed by cyberbullying affecting 56% of the students and hate speech reaching 48% student exposure levels. Privacy breaches alongside academic dishonorable conduct occurred somewhat rarely although they were noticeable. The high occurrence of ethically dubious content shows that students encounter unethical content on Facebook regularly. Facebook users encounter misinformation more often than other unethical activities on the platform because fake news appears with greater frequency than cyberbullying or academic violations.

Table 3 Perceived Desensitization to Unethical Content

Type of Content	Moderate to High Desensitization Reported (n)	Percentage (%)
Fake News	260	65%
Cyberbullying	208	52%
Hate Speech	188	47%

Type of Content	Moderate to High Desensitization Reported (n)	Percentage (%)
Privacy Violations	140	35%
Academic Dishonesty	112	28%

This table 4 measures how people feel about being desensitized to unethical content (fake news again at 65% moderately/highly desensitized, followed by cyberbullying at 52% and hate speech at 47%). Exposure frequencies are matched by the pattern, but with slightly reduced percentages, indicating that not all exposure results in desensitization. Privacy violations have the largest exposure to desensitization, compared to other violations like fake news (37% were exposed compared to 35%), where they are the least exposed and desensitized (74% vs 65%). Implicit in this is that the exposure desensitization relationship may depend on content type; informational harms exhibit strongest desensitization effects, though with corresponding higher exposure levels.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics for Facebook Exposure and Ethical Sensitivity

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Facebook Exposure (hours/day)	2.8	1.1	0.5	6
Ethical Sensitivity Score*	3.2	0.8	1	5

The statistics for the main variables in this table 5 are basic. The average of daily Facebook exposure time is 2.8 hours (SD=1.1, ranging from 0.5 to 6 hours). Ethical sensitivity averaged 3.2 (SD=0.8) on a 1-5 scale and was moderate with opportunity for negative influences. Thus, the minimum (1) indicates that some of students report very low ethical sensitivity and the maximum (5) shows that others are relatively high in ethical sensitivity, but nevertheless use Facebook. The standard deviations allow reasonable variability in usage and sensitivity, and so they investigate relationships between the variables.

Table 5 Pearson Correlation between Facebook Exposure and Ethical Sensitivity

Variables	r	p-value	Interpretation
Facebook Exposure × Ethical Sensitivity	-0.42	< 0.001	Moderate Negative Correlation

In table 5 the relationship between exposure to Facebook and ethical sensitivity is significantly negative (r=-0.42, p<.001), and this indicates a significant relationship between the amount of time on Facebook and ethical sensitivity. The relationship is meaningful but not deterministic and has a moderate effect size. This confirms the hypothesized inverse relationship between usage and sensitivity, and is in negative direction. This finding is very likely to reflect a real correlation, given the highly significant p value.

Table 6 Descriptive Statistics: Exposure to Types of Unethical Content on Facebook

Content Type	Mean Exposure (1–5 scale)	SD	Mean Desensitization (1–5 scale)	SD
Hate Speech	3.5	1.0	3.2	1.1
Misinformation (Fake News)	3.9	0.9	3.5	1.0
Cyberbullying	3.2	1.1	3.1	1.2

The table 6, the mean exposure and desensitization across the three principal classes of unethical content in this table. As for hate speech and cyber bullying, M=3.6 and desensitization M=3.5, but with significantly less exposure (M=2.3). Desensitization means for all types are slightly less than exposure means, implying partial, not complete, desensitization. The levels of variation across participants (0.9-

1.2) are consistent. All means on 1-5 scale positioning above midpoint indicate all means are significant, i.e. the problems are not rare occurrences but problems.

Table 8 Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Ethical Desensitization

Predictor Variable	B (Unstandardized Coefficient)	Beta (Standardized Coefficient)	t-value	p-value
Hate Speech Exposure	0.28	0.30	5.10	<0.001
Misinformation Exposure	0.35	0.38	6.12	<0.001
Cyberbullying Exposure	0.22	0.25	4.05	<0.001
$R^2 = 0.39$				

A large effect is explained by the regression model, $R^2=0.39$, 39 % variance of desensitization. However, all the predictors are significant ($p<.001$), and fake news has the strongest effect ($\beta=0.38$) followed by hate speech ($\beta=0.30$) and cyberbullying ($\beta=0.25$). It is confirmed by the positive coefficients that more exposure implies more desensitization for each content type. All predictors give strong statistical evidence (t-values: 4.05–6.12). The results imply that content types are added, not interactive, thus producing content desensitization.

Table 10 Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	Key Result	p-value	Effect Size	Decision
H_1	Pearson Correlation	r = 0.42	<0.001	Medium	**Accepted**
H_2	Independent t-test	t = 4.32	<0.001	d = 0.68	**Accepted**
H_3	Linear Regression	$\beta = 0.38$	<0.001	$R^2 = 0.144$	**Accepted**
H_4	One-way ANOVA	F = 6.75	0.008	$\eta^2 = 0.12$	**Accepted**

H_1 Explanation:
The use of Pearson correlation test was employed in investigating the correlation between the frequency of usage of Facebook and desensitization to ethical issues among university students. The result ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) indicates an average positive correlation, that is, the higher the frequency of students' Facebook usage, the lower their ethical sensitivity becomes. However, since the p-value is very significant and the effect size is medium, the hypothesis is accepted, which suggests that students are ethically desensitized by the exposure to Facebook.

H_2 Explanation:
To determine whether students exposed to hate speech or cyberbullying are more or less sensitive in their moral behavior, an independent t test was run. The result ($t = 4.32$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.68$) is a significant difference with a medium to large effect size. More hate speech and cyberbullying faced by students appear to lower moral sensitivity than students which have less face. The hypothesis is accepted given the significant p value and meaningful effect size, and that exposure to a situation frequently leads to reduced students' ethical sensitivity.

H_3 Explanation:
To try to determine whether exposure to fake news, misinformation on Facebook leads to increased tolerance for unethical behavior, I used a linear regression analysis. Despite that, the standardized beta ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) and R^2 value (0.144) are moderate and statistically significant. The fake news exposure explains approximately 14.4% of variance in tolerance for unethical behavior. Since the

hypothesis is accepted due to the significant p value and the moderate explanatory power, it becomes evident that students who are exposed to misinformation are more prone to accept unethical behaviour.

H₄ Explanation:
Measures of students' level of ethical desensitization were examined to see if the mode of Facebook use (passive scroll vs. active engagement) had any effect on the students. The result (F = 6.75, p = 0.008, η^2 = 0.12) shows a significant difference with a small-to-medium effect size. Students who are screencasters tend to be ethically desensitised more than students who are rewriters. Given that there is significance and effect size of a notable size, the hypothesis is accepted that passive Facebook consumption is associated with less ethical sensitivity.

Discussion
This study shows that compelling evidence of relationship between the patterns of usage of Facebook with ethical desensitization among the university students in Lahore. The findings correspond to recent scholarly research in the area of digital media effects and extend the possibilities for additional understanding of the educational context of Pakistan.

Global trends of social media saturation among youth are corroborated by Table 1's revelation that 68% of students use Facebook more than once daily (M=2.8 hours/day). This high usage actually seminally builds a 'digital immersion' state, in which long exposure may recalibrate cognitive and ethical frames. These findings are consistent with usage patterns being all but uniform within the sample (SD=1.1), and so they do not appear to be limited to some particular user subgroups.

As shown in Table 2, the exposure frequencies show concerning patterns, especially 74% of fake news exposure. This surpasses recent misinformation studies results (Pennycook & Rand, 2023), perhaps due to Pakistan's heightened susceptibility to information disorder (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). However, the cyberbullying exposure rate (56%) is consistent with Asian university study (Wong et al., 2022), indicating that platform style features may universally promote this kind of behavior irrespective of culture.

It's troubling that the desensitization percentages for Table 3 normalize fake news (65%) up to that level. This is consistent with Persson et al.'s (2023) claim that seeing misinformation over and over 'ethically fatigues' users who become increasingly immune to false content. Apparently, the cyberbullying desensitization rate (52%) correlates with Keipi et al. (2022), who found that the digital aggression is becoming normalized through a repeated usage.

As shown in Table 4 (r=-0.42), the negative correlation between Facebook use and ethical sensitivity is very strong evidence of Desensitization Theory (Funk et al., 2020). Such findings are consistent with cross cultural research which replicates this effect in other Global South countries (Ahmad et al., 2023). The fact that there is a moderate effect size indicating that Facebook use is an important but not exclusive determinant of ethical development.

There is nuanced pattern that further extends current literature when explained in the content-specific analysis of Table 6. The high desensitization to fake news (M = 3.5) also lends too Tandoc et al.'s (2023) "misinformation desensitization hypothesis" that informational harms may be especially efficacious at eroding ethical standards on account of their being insidious, highly pervasive.

Table 7 is most systematic providing the easiest evidence of 39% variance in desensitization explained. Results corroborate Bandura (2022) updated social learning model, explaining how the combined effects of different types of content on ethical numbing. In turn, the very strong predictive power (β = 0.38) of fake news exposure, provides particularly strong support to recent concerns about "algorithmic radicalization" in educational contexts (Tufekci, 2023).

Conclusion
Substantial evidence has been provided in this study as to how much usage of Facebook lead to desensitized university students in Lahore in ethical issues. Results show that there exists moderate negative correlation between ethical sensitivity and Frequency of Facebook usage, indicating that time spent in Facebook is associated with students' reduced moral responsiveness. We found extremely high exposure rates to unethical content such as fake news (74%), cyberbullying (56%), hate speech (48%), where fake news was the strongest predictor of ethical desensitization. Results from regression analysis exhibited that misinformation exposure resulted in a large variance in students' tolerance for unethical behavior.

Additionally, students that encountered hate speech and cyber bullying, more so than those less exposed felt less sensitive to other people's morality. Finally, greater desensitization to distress was found when passive, rather than active engagement, occurred on Facebook. On the whole, these findings are very similar to what Desensitization Theory and Cultivation Theory predict: repeated exposure to unethical subject matter desensitizes us to that behavior and decreases our outrage over it.

By focusing on this youth demographic, the study fills an important gap to a Pakistani context, in which often there is no structured digital literacy education but social media is deeply immersed. Therefore, it underlines the urgency of university and policy making to introduce digital ethics education, raising critical media literacy, and devising interventionary means against the desensitized effect of Facebook. First, it is important step forward to strengthen students' critical engagement with online content as well as awareness about ethical digital citizenship. Overall, the findings are useful in appreciating their significance in understanding how the digital environment affects the development of ethical environments among university students and they require proactively focusing efforts to develop youth who are more ethically resilient in Pakistan.

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