

Understanding the Normalization of Unethical Behavior in Social Media: Psychological Mechanisms and Influencing Factors

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Abstract. Due to the advancement of social media, people are more involved in cyber bullying and online aggressive behaviour at a faster pace. This has raised concerns about these behaviours. Current study reveals how online media help in normalisation of behaviours unlike some of the research that talks about how the behaviour gets diffused through the medium. This study involves a literature review of past research on social media usage and unethical behaviour and its psychological mechanisms. Based on the findings, social media does not cause unethical actions directly, however, it creates a situation for unethical actions. The anonymity, repetition and lack of immediate consequence of social media platforms lessen one's sense of responsibility. Also, psychological processes such as moral disengagement, online disinhibition and desensitization contribute to the gradual acceptance of harmful behaviour. In other words, unethical behaviour is normalized due to environmental and psychological processes. The results suggest that social media should be improved to promote good standards in the future.

Keywords: Social Media, Unethical Behavior, Moral Disengagement, Online Disinhibition

1. Introduction

With the fast advancement of digital technology, social media has been an important part of everyday life, especially of youngsters. Applications like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter may have different affordances and user bases, but each has changed how people converse and share information and construct social identities online. Despite the convenience and novel ways of establishing social connections they offer, these platforms have raised growing concerns about their adverse impacts. Specifically, the increasing prevalence of aggression (cyberbullying, online bullying, and other harmful content) has emerged as a significant subject of study in psychology and public discussion.

According to existing studies have shown, social media environments can have a profound impact on an individual's behavior and psychology. Online communication is different from offline communication in that it is often anonymous, less socially mediated, and faster. These traits may erode social norms and reduce individual responsibility. As a result, behaviours that would otherwise be considered unacceptable in face-to-face contact may seem more acceptable, or even normative,

online. This is because people tend to adjust moral thresholds in the light of their peers' behaviour online. Previous research has studied how the use causes problem behaviour. However, this does not explain the way the behaviour gets normal over time. In other words, it is still necessary to understand better the psychological processes behind people's gradual changes in moral judgment as they are repeatedly exposed to some stimulus [1, 2].

Consequently, this paper analyzes the normalization of immoral practices in the context of social media. The existing studies and psychological mechanisms such as the moral disengagement effect, Internet disinhibition effect and desensitization effect involved in this process. By carrying out this research, researchers intend to make the reader understand behaviour better and assist in generating ideas for future research and practice.

2. Definition and conceptual framework

Social media has become a vital part of everyday life. A vast majority of individuals spend many hours a day using Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, etc. The social networking service is interactive in nature, it helps in the dispersal of power by sharing information including opinions and feelings while talking to other people. Additionally, their two-way functionality and stronger self-presentation factors have increased users' susceptibility to in-the-moment social influence. More communication and a personal experience than traditional media by social media. Users now generate material as well as consuming them. Due to this, the effect of social media on people now greater than ever [3].

Social media's biggest function is quick information communicate it distributes. With viral content, users can consume many opinions in a very short time. People notice the same content multiple times on social media too. When people watch or like a video, many other similar recommendations get them. This is the lousy people algorithm. This constant presence is important because it can influence how people see and feel about certain behaviours, for instance through mere exposure and habituation.

Behaviours that violate social norms or moral standards are referred to as unethical in this paper. Although these behaviors are not always unlawful, they can still be quite harmful. Examples of hateful comments, bullying, fake accounts, conspiracy theories, and more. These behaviors are simpler to perform on social media since the users do not get to see the reaction directly. People may not realise the consequences of their action, hence.

Research suggests that individuals act differently online compared to offline or face-to-face interactions. A reason is that social media decreases social pressure. In person, people often think about how others feel, but online they may feel more distant from others. As distance increases, there is less empathy shown to the ones affected and more willing to harm them [4]. Moreover, another factor that is important is anonymity. When users feel their identity is concealed, they may be more likely to express negative or aggressive opinions.

The idea of the normalization of misconduct refers to how over time behavior that may have been initially harmful in a social context is accepted as normal practice when exposure to this behaviour is frequent enough. It refers to the process by which harmful actions are normalized over time. At first, one might feel that it is wrong or not acceptable. However, when they see this behavior repeatedly over time, especially unpunished, their disposition may change slowly. They may begin to think that such behaviour is commonplace or not too serious [5].

During this process, attention to a narrative usually entails its gradual familiarization, acceptance, and imitation in the behaviour of the audience concerned through habituation, lesser moral sensitivity, and mimicry. People observe the actions first. Afterwards, they get familiarised with it.

After that, they might start to accept it; finally, they might even do something similar themselves. The process is accelerated through social media and constant interactions. Users are not only watching others; they are also venturing into discussions and sharing.

According to psychology, how people take in information and make decisions is related to the normalization of wrongdoing. Individuals do not always exercise deeper thoughts about what they see online. Instead, they often make hasty judgments and do what others are doing. People tend to perceive something as normal if others do it in bulk. It is also concerning the social influence, where people do group things even when they know it to be wrong.

Furthermore, one key social-media effect is that social media fuels platform-level sanctions, and impairs interpersonal moral feedback, such that the meaning of harmful behaviour is weakened compared to offline. In real life harmful behavior can lead to an instant backlash, such as censure or punishment. However, online environments do not always offer this feedback. It allows people to disregard the consequences of their actions more easily. When the standard setting is wrong, society can condone wrongdoing.

In general, Social media creates a distinctive setting where repeated exposure, reduced social pressure, and absence of tangible consequences can shape individuals' perceptions and behaviours. This makes it an important context to study the normalization of unethical behaviour.

3. Literature review

3.1. Social media and unethical behavior

Many studies have looked at the correlation between social media and unethical behavior. Most evidence suggests that social media does not cause misconduct but creates the conditions that can lead to such behavior.

A majority of research points to the conclusion that social media does not cause bad behaviour. Instead, it facilitates a situation that encourages unethical behavior. Due to the online setting, the way people think, feel and act is altered.

The survey data collected from defined participants and the use of statistical models helped Chan et al. analyze cyberbullying on social networking sites. Importantly, the Chan et al. study portrayal of involvement of moral disengagement in online wrongdoings. The study employed survey and statistical analysis to research the association between moral disengagement and online behaviour. According to their findings, those who used moral disengagement were more likely to cyberbully. Some participants, for instance, believed they did not cause serious harm or that the victim deserved such a consequence. Based on the analysis this shows that people are more likely to justify their actions as right rather than accept that they are wrong [6].

In another study, Huang et al. found that when people frame a harmful act as a joke, it reduces the self-scrutiny on the morality of the harmful act. The researchers claim that some people make a joke out of it. Consequently, they might not take their screen behavior as serious. Participants who saw a joke or a funny cartoon in the experiment were more likely to endorse a deed or even commit harm. This probably means social media presentation of information may affect moral judgment [7].

A recent study by Jeong et al. took a closer look at college students' involvement in cyberbullying. Survey tools to measure moral disengagement and online aggression participation. The findings show that students with high levels of moral disengagement are likely to either cyberbully or support it. Zhang et al. notes that the study is important because it focuses on young adults which is one of the main groups of social media users [8].

In addition to these detailed studies, other also benefit. According to Maftei et al., frequent use of the Internet is linked to increased unethical behavior, especially when individuals justify themselves [4]. According to Zhao et al, anonymity is an important factor influencing online behaviour. Users are more likely to behave aggressively or irresponsibly when they feel that their identity is concealed [9].

Moreover, imitation is an additional finding. When users see behaviours attract social rewards, they mimic users that are doing those behaviours. Examples of these rewards include "likes" on social media, comments and/or media visibility. People are likely to do something when they see other people doing it. They are more likely to do this when they get likes and comments as rewards. In this way, seeing something acts as communication that can endorse unethical acts via social media.

At the same time, the online environment reduces accountability. When individuals are in person, they are more aware of social norms and their consequences. On social media, however, it is much easier to overlook these circumstances. This may lead to more impulsive behaviors and less careful decisions.

The studies are able to showcase the different patterns. To begin with, social media increases exposure to other types of behavior that are harmful. The other defining feature is that feedback is not attributable, hence anonymity. Repeated exposure can also influence judgements of what is acceptable in food packaging.

However, they also have some inconsistencies. A psychological perspective is adopted in some research, others an environmental one. Many studies use self-report data; however, not only does recall bias compromise the accuracy of responses, social desirability bias does too. People may inaccurately remember their behavior or may not want to accurately report it.

The studies' general findings are fairly consistent, despite these limitations. The use of social media greatly influences unethical behavior. It does not force people but makes it conducive to do so. It clarifies the commonality of unethical conduct among many people, owing to nudge theories.

All in all, there is a correlation between social media and unethical behavior. Human behaviour is governed by psychological factors as well as environmental factors. Understanding this connection can be helpful in the next section on the psychological processes which normalise wrongdoing.

3.2. Psychological mechanisms of normalization

To know how unethical behavior gets normalized on social media, one has to investigate the psychologies behind it. The normalization of unethical behavior does not happen suddenly. As an alternative, it develops through different psychological processes. Morally disengaging, disinhibiting online, desensitising, and individual difference. Their actions can shed light on how people may gradually begin to endorse harmful behavior online.

Moral disengagement is one of the most important mechanisms. Moral disengagement occurs when people justify their behavior and develop less guilt according to Bandura. They may try to rationalize their behavior in another way instead of thinking their behavior is wrong. People can engage in moral justification whereby they minimize the harm of their actions or blame the target of their actions to reduce their own responsibility. As a result of this, they may not believe themselves responsible for harm [5]. Studies reveal a robust correlation between moral disengagement and online aggression or cyberbullying [10]. Corkum and Shead also obtained similar results. Psycho-physical distance might create a lack of awareness of the impact of the use of social media, particularly in this context [11].

Moreover, online disinhibition is another crucial factor.

People are likely to be more free and aggressive while online than in real life. One reason is anonymity. When individuals think that others are not familiar with them or do not know them well, they may feel safe to say things that they would not say in person. Additionally, online communication lacks the presence of facial expressions and voice tone. As a result, humans can overlook how someone feels. Research indicates a strong link between online disinhibition and cyberbullying as well as other harmful behavior [12]. Put differently, the online environment might change how people behave with others, and not only the identity of the people.

Desensitization also matters for mechanism. Seeing anything many times makes people less sensitive to it, the saying means. On social media, users frequently observe harmful remarks or aggressive response, time and again. Initially, they may feel uneasy. But after some time, they may start to fit it. They may no longer regard it as a serious matter. Due to this, they may be more accepting of this behavior or may even copy this behavior. Research suggests that experiencing online aggression could lower empathy while increasing acceptance of such behaviors [13]. Desensitization is an important pathway through which prolonged exposure to harmful online material may gradually change individuals' norms concerning that behavior.

This process also requires a lot of empathy. Empathy refers to the ability to understand the feelings of others. When individuals are online they have less empathy as they do not get to see the person. For instance, if a comment hurts someone, the writer will not realize how serious they are being. This simplifies the act of overlooking consequences. According to Francisco et al., as one's empathy level decreases, one's level of cyberbullying tends to increase. As a result, a decline in empathy may reduce the perceived moral cost of harming others, further increasing people's inclination to perform or condone aggressive online behavior [14].

The differences among individuals also matter. There are differences in how social media affects different people. Certain individuals are more likely to influence than others. People with lower self-control or weaker moral values might be more readily affected, for example. According to research by scholars Saulnier and Krettenauer, a stronger moral identity decreases the likelihood of an individual engaging in anti-social conduct. People may be insulated from unwanted outside influences by personal values.

Being elderly may also suffice. Adolescents are also more sensitive to peer pressure and social approval because their prefrontal cortex which controls impulses and moral reasoning is still developing [15]. They may go with the trend without thinking twice. Although older users might possess more stable values, they are still susceptible to the influence of social media. On the whole, social media impacts each individual differently.

These mechanisms do not function in isolation. They impact each other. Seeing something often can make it okay to use. Simultaneous connection, online disinhibition can diminish empathy. In this way, they will gradually get used to unethical behavior. It takes several steps over time, not just one.

Consequently, the psychological mechanisms that contribute to normalization of unethical behaviour on social media are several in number. When individuals understand their mechanisms, they can help explain online harms.

4. Discussion and suggestions

These studies indicate that social media plays an important role in the normalization of wrongdoing behaviour. Yet, this process has not been due to only one. Never really controlled by the messaging, it is also influenced by the environment as well as psychological process. Harmful behavior can seem socially normal through the anonymity, repeated exposure, and lack of consequence of many

online platforms. Along with time, psychological factors like moral disengagement and desensitization are helpers to accept it behaviour.

A key point is that social media does not cause people to behave inappropriately. It will alter their perspective concerning behaviour. Over time people can become less sensitive to bad behaviour. They might see these actions as not too serious. Individuals can see many instances in real life where a harmful comment is treated as a joke, which is how this works.

Consequently, several suggestions can be made from these findings. To enhance young person's personality, digital literacy should be improved, first. Individuals must learn how to comprehend online content and reflect on things before reacting. For instance, schools can include basic lessons about behaviour online and its impact. Student will be more conscious of what they are doing on the internet.

Social media channels must show greater responsibility. For instance, harmful comments on many platforms continue to stay on for a long time. The faster these comments are eradicated, the bigger impact it will have. Moreover, platforms can deploy algorithmic interventions like downgrading flagged content in recommendation feeds or otherwise limiting visibility, which reduces the chances of social reinforcement of harmful behaviour. Studies show that decreasing the perceived popularity of aggressive content may diminish its normative effect on users [16]. If harmful behavior is not rewarded with attention, it won't be as common.

Psychological education is also important in setting standards. People may become more careful with their actions if they learn about moral disengagement concepts. When people understand how these psychological procedures work, they may be less likely to be affected by them. The author thinks this is a simple yet effective way to diminish evil behaviour.

In the final analysis, further studies must continue to explore this issue. For instances, researchers can use more experiments to learn about the cause and effect. Researchers should conduct cross-cultural research since cultural variables like individualism-collectivism, platform regulations, social norms concerning online messaging may influence the psychological mechanisms mentioned in the present work. Moreover, cultural impact may determine the degree to which present finding generalises across social groups. This may allow individuals to better understand how universal these results are.

In conclusion, unethical behavior on social media has become a common phenomenon. Environmental and psychological factors are involved. By examining these factors, individuals can determine how to fix this harmful behaviour and improve the online environment.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, this study examine how social media environments normalize unethical behavior. Specifically, this paper examine how digital contexts shape people's moral judgments and behavioural responses. The research looked at existing literature to analyze the relationship between social media use and unethical behaviour as well as the psychological mechanisms that drive the gradual normalization of such behaviour.

Social media does not cause unethical behavior, it creates an environment in which unethical behavior becomes more likely to occur. Characteristics of online environments such as anonymity, increasing same-face exposure, and lack of immediate negative social repercussions decrease the perception of accountability and increase permissiveness of behaviours. Meanwhile, psychological processes – moral disengagement, online disinhibition and desensitization – also (weakens individuals' moral sensitivity and alters their evaluative standards) over time.

Based on these findings, some practical implications can be made. An enhancement in digital literacy will help in creating a better online discourse. Universally, social media platforms should enhance their governance of the content they transmit to limit its amplification. In addition, bringing psychological awareness in instruction to better control their actions on the Internet.

As a whole, this study emphasizes the need to explore the normalization of unethical behaviors from a combined environmental and psychological perspective. By better understanding how people behave in an online context, it enables a theory and practice blueprint for future research and practice.

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