

Use of Social Media and Ethical Dilemmas

Introduction

Social media is now a vital part of life in Bangladesh, offering platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram for communication, learning, and self-expression. With over 50 million users in the country, its influence is far-reaching—but so are its risks. A single post can spread misinformation, damage reputations, or even fuel conflict, as seen in the 2012 communal violence in Ramu sparked by a false Facebook rumor. As psychologist Sherry Turkle notes, while technology keeps us constantly connected, it also creates new responsibilities many users are unprepared for. This study explores the ethical dimensions of social media use—examining key moral theories, everyday dilemmas, and real-life case studies from Bangladesh and beyond. It concludes with practical guidelines to help students use social media responsibly and thoughtfully.

Ethical Frameworks & Theories in Social Media Use

Before diving into specific issues, it helps to understand some **ethical frameworks** – basically, different ways of thinking about what makes an action “right” or “wrong.” These frameworks, developed by philosophers over centuries, can be applied to our behavior on social media today:

- **Utilitarianism (Consequences-Based Ethics):** This idea says that an action is right if it brings the most good to the most people. On social media, this means thinking about what might happen after you post or share something. For example, before sharing shocking news, you should ask: *Will this help people understand something important, or will it confuse or scare them?* A smart and ethical user tries to spread helpful, positive content and avoid anything that might hurt others. For instance, a student may choose not to share a rumor if it could mislead many people, even if it seems exciting.
- **Deontology (Rule-Based Ethics):** This theory, linked to philosopher Immanuel Kant, says we should follow moral rules no matter what the result is. Some things are simply right or wrong, even if breaking the rules gives you more likes or attention. On social media, this means always being honest and respectful. For example, lying or spreading false information is wrong—even if others are doing it. Posting someone’s private photo without their permission is also wrong, even if it seems funny or gets popular. Deontology reminds us to follow basic rules like “tell the truth” and “respect others,” even when it’s hard.
- **Virtue Ethics (Character-Based Ethics):** This idea, first shared by Aristotle, is about being a good person by building good qualities like honesty, kindness, courage,

and fairness. Instead of just asking “Is this action right?”, it asks “What kind of person do I want to be?” On social media, this means being honest about who you are (not pretending to be someone else), being kind in your comments (not bullying or trolling), and thinking before you post when you’re angry. A good social media user also thinks about others’ feelings and avoids bragging or putting others down. The more you practice these good habits online, the more people will trust and respect you.

- **Cultural and Religious Values:** In Bangladesh, many people learn about right and wrong from their religion or culture. Religions like Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism teach values such as honesty, fairness, and not hurting others. For example, in Islam, spreading false gossip (called *fitna*) is wrong—and this clearly applies to social media too. Culturally, people in Bangladesh respect elders and value peace in the community, so students should avoid posting things that insult elders or hurt social harmony. Even though social media connects us globally, it's still important to follow local values—as long as those values are not harmful. But we should also think carefully: if a cultural norm goes against basic human rights or fairness, we should question it. That’s why using both empathy and common sense is important when deciding what to post or share online.

Common Ethical Dilemmas in Social Media

Using social media often puts us in situations where what’s right isn’t immediately clear. Here are some of the most common ethical dilemmas and challenges that students (and all users) face on social platforms:

- **Privacy vs. Sharing:** Social media encourages us to share our lives, but the ethical dilemma is knowing **how much is too much**. Sharing helps us connect, but posting personal details—like your location, family photos, or daily routine—can risk your safety and privacy. Once something is online, you can’t always control who sees or uses it. Another issue is consent—what if a friend in your group photo doesn’t want it online? The ethical challenge is finding a balance: being open without crossing into oversharing or violating others’ privacy. Always think before posting—would this make someone uncomfortable or unsafe?
- **Misinformation and Fake News:** On social media, news spreads fast—true or not. The ethical dilemma is deciding **whether to share something that might not be fully true**. A shocking headline or rumor can be tempting to share, but if it’s false, it can harm reputations, cause panic, or even lead to violence. For example, a fake health tip or a rumor about a public figure can do real damage. The pressure to be part of trending news (FOMO) often makes people skip fact-checking. But ethically, we must take a moment to verify before sharing. Just because others are posting it doesn't mean it's right. Sometimes, the most responsible thing is to *not* share.

- **Addiction and Mental Well-Being:** Social media is designed to grab our attention and keep us scrolling. The more time we spend on it, the more money the platforms make. But this creates an ethical dilemma: **staying online helps us feel connected, but too much use can harm our mental health.** Students often feel stuck between wanting to stay updated and needing to focus on studies or rest. You might plan to scroll for 5 minutes, but end up losing hours and feeling anxious or comparing your life to others. The ethical question is—should tech companies make apps so addictive, and should we let ourselves be controlled by them? The challenge is finding a healthy balance: using social media without letting it hurt our well-being.
- **Echo Chambers and Polarization:** Social media shows us posts we like or agree with, which can trap us in an “echo chamber”—where we keep seeing the same opinions again and again. The ethical dilemma is this: **it feels good to hear only views that match ours, but it can stop us from learning the full truth or understanding others.** If we never see different opinions, we may become unfair or divided from those who think differently. To be ethical, we should try to see all sides of an issue, even if it’s uncomfortable. This helps us stay informed, avoid bias, and reduce the spread of one-sided or false information.
- **Hate Speech, Harassment, and Free Speech vs. Responsibility:** Social media gives everyone a voice, but the ethical dilemma is where to draw the line between free speech and harmful speech. People often feel bold online and may say things they’d never say in person—insulting others based on religion, appearance, or beliefs. This can quickly turn into hate speech or harassment, especially in places like Bangladesh, where such comments can spread fast and hurt individuals or even entire communities. While freedom of speech is important, it comes with responsibility. Just because you *can* say something online doesn’t mean you *should*. Spreading lies, threats, or extremist views under the name of “free speech” can cause real harm. At the same time, too much censorship can silence important truths. The ethical challenge is speaking honestly but respectfully—criticizing ideas without attacking people. If you see someone being bullied or targeted, staying silent supports the harm. It’s more ethical to support the victim, report the abuse, and use your own voice in a way that helps, not harms.
- **Plagiarism and Content Ownership:** The ethical dilemma here is about choosing between doing what’s easy and doing what’s right. It’s tempting to copy a meme, image, or quote without credit, especially when it can bring likes, praise, or save time on assignments. But using someone else’s content as your own is plagiarism—it’s dishonest and disrespectful to the creator. The ethical choice is to give proper credit or ask for permission, even if no one would notice otherwise. This shows honesty and respect for others’ work. So the dilemma is: take a shortcut for attention, or stay true to your values by giving credit where it’s due.

Case Studies on Ethical Challenges in Social Media

To ground the discussion, let's look at a few real-world examples where social media use raised serious ethical questions. These case studies include both Bangladeshi and global incidents, illustrating how diverse and far-reaching the impact of unethical social media behavior can be:

1. Rumor-Triggered Violence in Bangladesh (Ramu, 2012):

One of the most striking cases in Bangladesh occurred in 2012 in a place called Ramu, in Cox's Bazar district. It began with a disturbing rumor on Facebook. A local Buddhist young man was falsely accused of posting images that desecrated the Holy Quran. In reality, it appears the images were tagged to his Facebook profile by someone else, or it was a case of mistaken identity – but many people in the area believed he had insulted Islam. Fuelled by outrage that spread rapidly through social media and word of mouth, **thousands of people formed mobs and attacked the Buddhist community** in Ramu. They torched Buddhist temples, homes, and monasteries, causing huge devastation to a peaceful community that had lived there for generations. The violence lasted hours, and by the end, dozens of houses were destroyed and several temples lay in ruins, all because of an unverified online post. This case highlights multiple ethical failures: the individual (or group) who posted offensive fake images acted maliciously, those who **shared the rumor without evidence** acted irresponsibly, and those who resorted to violence abandoned principles of law and humanity. In the aftermath, it became clear that if people had paused and *verified the information* (for instance, by involving authorities to check the claim) instead of acting on raw anger, the disaster could have been averted. The Ramu incident is a sobering lesson in how **social media misinformation can translate into real-world harm**. It emphasizes the ethical duty of users to be cautious with incendiary content. (It's worth noting that similar incidents have happened again, such as attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh following fake Facebook posts in later years, underlining that this is an ongoing concern).

2. The Cambridge Analytica Data Scandal (Global, 2016–2018):

Not all ethical issues cause immediate visible harm like a riot; some are quieter but still deeply damaging. A famous global case is the Cambridge Analytica scandal involving Facebook data. Cambridge Analytica was a political consulting firm that in 2014 managed to harvest personal data from tens of millions of Facebook users without their informed consent. They did this through a seemingly harmless personality quiz app – only a few hundred thousand people took the quiz, but due to Facebook's loose data sharing at the time, the app pulled data not just from those users but also from all their friends' profiles. This data (names, likes, interests, friend networks, etc.) was then used to build detailed profiles of voters. Cambridge Analytica allegedly used these profiles to target political advertisements and propaganda during major campaigns like the **2016 US Presidential Election** and the **UK Brexit referendum**. The ethical problems in this case are multi-fold: Firstly, **privacy was violated** on a massive scale. People had no idea their personal information was being collected for political manipulation. Secondly, the trust that users placed in a platform like Facebook was abused. Facebook's lack of oversight enabled a third party to exploit user data

– raising the question of the platform’s **ethical responsibility to protect user data**. Thirdly, the whole operation was intended to **manipulate public opinion** – targeting individuals with tailored misinformation or extreme messages to influence their voting behavior, which is an ethical breach of democratic principles. When the scandal came to light in 2018 through whistleblowers and investigative journalists, it caused public outrage. Many users felt betrayed (“#DeleteFacebook” trended for a while) and governments around the world started questioning how these platforms should be regulated. This case study underscores that ethical issues on social media aren’t just about what *users* do, but also about what *companies* and organizations do behind the scenes. Even if you as a student are behaving ethically online, large corporations handling data also need to act ethically. It’s a reminder to all of us to be mindful of the information we share and to demand higher ethical standards from the tech companies that hold our data.

3. Cyberbullying and Its Tragic Consequences: The Amanda Todd Case:

One of the most heartbreaking examples of cyberbullying is the case of Amanda Todd, a 15-year-old girl from Canada. She was tricked by an online stranger into sharing a personal photo, which was later spread across the internet. What followed was relentless bullying—both online and at school. Amanda became isolated, depressed, and deeply affected by the ongoing harassment. In a powerful cry for help, she posted a YouTube video using flash cards to tell her story. Tragically, shortly after that, in 2012, she died by suicide.

Amanda’s case became a global wake-up call about the dangers of cyberbullying and online exploitation. It shows how the internet’s anonymity can lead people to forget there is a real person on the other side of the screen—someone who can be deeply hurt by cruel words or actions. The ethical failure here is clear: those who bully, mock, or spread harmful content ignore basic human decency. Amanda’s story reminds us of the importance of empathy and responsibility online. Whether by standing up for victims, reporting abuse, or simply choosing kindness, we all share a role in creating a safer, more compassionate digital world.

4. The Blue Whale Challenge: A Dangerous Trend and Ethical Wake-Up Call:

One of the most alarming online trends in recent years was the so-called *Blue Whale Challenge*, a rumored “game” that allegedly targeted vulnerable teenagers through social media. First reported around 2016 in Russia, the challenge was said to involve a series of harmful tasks given by anonymous “curators,” starting with mild dares but leading up to serious self-harm and, in some cases, suicide. The final task was allegedly to take one’s own life. While some aspects of the story were later questioned or exaggerated by media outlets, **several confirmed cases of self-harm and suicide were linked to the challenge** in countries like Russia, India, and Brazil.

In Bangladesh, the news created widespread fear after media reports in 2017 suggested that some local teenagers might have been affected. Though most reports lacked verification, schools, parents, and law enforcement reacted quickly, issuing warnings and advising students to avoid dangerous apps and games. The ethical concerns here are layered: if individuals behind the challenge did manipulate teens, that’s a serious abuse of trust and a

criminal act. But even those who forwarded the story without checking the facts contributed to panic and misinformation. The case highlights a larger ethical responsibility—for platforms to monitor harmful content, for users to think critically before sharing shocking news, and for families and educators to guide young people online. It's a reminder that in the digital age, protecting mental health and spreading awareness are shared duties.

(The above are just a few cases among many. We could also discuss how misinformation on social media fueled violence in other countries – such as WhatsApp rumors causing mob lynchings in India, or hate speech on Facebook contributing to attacks on the Rohingya in Myanmar. There are positive case studies too, like social media helping coordinate disaster relief or social justice movements, which remind us that the medium can be used ethically for good causes. However, since our focus is on dilemmas and challenges, the examples chosen illustrate things that went wrong and what we can learn from them.)

Guidelines for Ethical Social Media Use

1. **Think Before You Post:** Ask yourself—Is it true, kind, helpful, or respectful? Don't post when angry, and avoid sharing unverified news.
2. **Protect Privacy:** Keep personal info (like your address or phone number) private. Don't share others' photos or details without their permission.
3. **Be Respectful and Kind:** Treat others online the way you'd want to be treated. Avoid hateful comments, bullying, or offensive jokes.
4. **Avoid Harmful Content:** Don't share gossip, fake news, or private material. If you see harmful posts, report them instead of spreading them.
5. **Control Your Screen Time:** Set limits to avoid wasting time or hurting your mental health. Take breaks and focus on offline life too.
6. **Stay Informed:** Learn how social media works. Watch out for scams, understand how algorithms shape your feed, and think before joining viral trends.
7. **Give Credit:** Always mention or tag the original creator when sharing someone else's work. Don't copy content as if it's your own.
8. **Be a Positive Voice:** Share helpful, kind, and meaningful content. Encourage others, especially younger users, to use social media safely.
9. **Speak Up (Safely):** If you see something clearly wrong, like bullying or misinformation, speak up or report it—unless it puts you at risk.

These small steps help create a better, safer, and more respectful online world for everyone.

Conclusion

Social media has become a central part of everyday life, offering powerful ways to share ideas, stay informed, and connect with others. But along with these benefits come serious

ethical challenges like the spread of misinformation, online hate, loss of privacy, and addictive use. Ethical social media use means being aware of these risks and making thoughtful choices: checking facts before sharing, respecting others' privacy, speaking kindly, and thinking critically about what we post and consume. It's not always easy, but it's essential for building a healthier and more respectful digital space.

Everyone has a role to play. Whether you're posting a photo, commenting on news, or scrolling through your feed, your actions matter. If more people use social media with honesty, empathy, and responsibility, we can reduce harm and increase the platform's positive impact on society. The future of the internet depends on how we use it today—so let's be mindful, respectful, and ethical in every click, comment, and share.