Ethics in Social Media Marketing: How do practitioners balance ethical considerations with strategic goals in practice?

A Qualitative study through Semi-Structured Expert Interviews

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ABSTRACT

The digital landscape has evolved into a complex and potentially harmful environment. This study shifts the focus from platform owners to the practitioners who actively operate within the social media marketing (SMM) space. Central to this research is the concept of Ethical Marketing, which refers to the integrity of professional behavior. The study draws on the Business Ethics as Practice approach, which emphasizes ethical engagement as rooted in self-awareness and moral sensitivity. Motivated by the ideal of a non-exploitative digital ecosystem, this thesis aims to raise awareness and deliver strategic recommendations for ethical compliance. When genuinely implemented, such practices have been shown to enhance long-term business success. Therefore, a critical tension remains: are ethical stances authentic or self-serving? This research assumes that monetary profit often sidelines ethical responsibility towards consumers, who remain marginalized in marketing considerations. To explore this under-researched intersection of strategic and ethical imperatives, 10 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted. Sampling criteria was occupation only, defined as active engagement in the SMM field. Therefore, different accounts, ages, and nationalities form a broad sample. Such a heterogeneous group enabled nuanced and diverse findings. The central research question guiding the inquiry was: *How do social media marketing practitioners manage and balance ethical considerations, such as data & privacy, transparency & authenticity wellbeing, or other negative side-effects, with economic needs while strategically ensuring the consumption of brands, products and social media content?* Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed eight key insights: (I) Business objectives, especially profit, can compromise ethical integrity (II) Unethical practices are widespread within the SMM industry (III) Participants showed ethical awareness and active engagement (IV) Organizational practitioners reported stronger monetary prioritization than freelancers (V) Internal pressures can undermine ethical intentions (VI) Social media presents greater complexity than previous analogue marketing environments (VII) Ethical challenges impact not only users but also practitioners themselves (VIII) Digital addiction emerged as a frequently expressed concern. Overall, the findings suggest a fragmented landscape. While ethical awareness among practitioners is evident, the dominance of monetary objectives and the severity of emerging ethical challenges call for urgent reconsideration of marketing practices to prevent further harm.

KEYWORDS: Ethical Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Business Ethics as Practice, Dark Side of Social Media, Semi-structured interviews

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research context

Commercial roles have always had to identify creative ways for attracting, converting and retaining consumers. In the context of commercial exchanges, characterised by the opposition of a seller and a buyer, it is inevitable that disparities in needs and motivations arise (Emiliani, 2003, p. 107). While sales contexts and intentions vary widely, the overarching label of marketing refers to the intermediary domain governing interactions between businesses and consumers. Nevertheless, the interpretation of marketing's function can vary considerably. The American Marketing Association (2004, as cited in Gundlach & Wilkie, 2009, p. 259) defines marketing as a set of activities aimed at delivering value to consumers, companies, and its stakeholders. However, this idealized framing is frequently challenged by the increasing complexity of the business landscape, which can obscure the equal consideration of different stakeholders' needs. Real life examples have uncovered cases, where value creation exclusively aimed at the benefit of organizations, at times also through the promotion of harmful content for the consumer (Anttila-Hughes et al., 2018, p. 31).

From a broader standpoint, such actions resonate with the definition of fraud as outlined in the Italian criminal code: The term *truffa* refers to the deliberate act of misleading someone for personal gain at the expense of their harm (art. 640 c.p.).

This thesis builds upon the recognition of a structural power imbalance in commercial settings, where sellers may possess the upper hand, potentially perpetuating exploitative practices (Kiplangat, 2023, p. 11). Consequently, it adopts a consumer-protective stance, grounded in the idea that this latter category demands greater attention due to its potential exposure to harmful practices and the risks posed by unethical commercial conduct. In this context, the thesis explores the concept of ethical integrity in the domain of social media marketing, a field that has received scattered attention from researchers in terms of the intersection of strategy and ethics (Granstedt, 2025, p. 278).

This research has been motivated by a fundamental critical view towards social media. These have come under scrutiny for leveraging exploitative mechanisms to optimise revenue at the expense of user wellbeing (Nistor et al., 2024, p. 4533). In this sense, they embody the above mentioned notion of unfair commercial practice. However, as attention is increasingly directed towards platform owners' ethical responsibility to create less harmful digital infrastructures, this study adopts an investigative shift of focus. The essence of this approach aims at unveiling the ethical integrity of the individuals who operate within these platforms. These actors, while not directly accountable for platform design, benefit from its mechanics (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 2) and consciously choose to pursue careers in an environment widely criticized for its negative health and societal implications (Singh & Singh, 2019, p. 2). This thesis explores the overlooked dimension of shared ethical responsibility. While platform owners architect the digital environment, practitioners also play an active role in perpetuating or resisting its exploitative tendencies. Public and academic scrutiny is so intense that the accountability of those operating on these widely debated platforms inevitably becomes a dominant theme in public discourse. This perspective unveils a fundamental yet frequently overlooked phenomenon: the actors who leverage ethically questionable infrastructures while evading public and academic scrutiny, as the spotlight is predominantly directed towards platform owners.

In order to investigate this issue, the present thesis adopted a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. The collected data was then subjected to thematic analysis in accordance with the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 77–101). The central research question guiding the study is as follows:

How do social media marketing practitioners manage and balance ethical considerations, such as data & privacy, transparency & authenticity wellbeing, or other negative side-effects, with economic needs while strategically ensuring the consumption of brands, products and social media content?

The present thesis refers to the central actor group under investigation as **social media marketing practitioners**. The advent of social media has had a profound impact on the professional landscape, giving rise to new occupational roles (McCosker & Farrell, 2016, p. 3). In the context of this study, social media practitioners are defined as individuals who engage with social media platforms for the purpose of achieving strategic objectives, thereby distinguishing them from general users. While these strategic objectives are often associated with the pursuit of monetary profit, it is important to note that they may also serve other ends. For instance, in the context of political campaigning, the goal may be influence or visibility rather than direct financial gain.

Despite the existence of some overlap between users and practitioners in their engagement with digital platforms, a key distinction lies in intentionality. In fact, practitioners typically act with a goal-oriented mindset, aiming to achieve predefined outcomes such as visibility, engagement, or conversion. In contrast, the general user category is more likely to engage for personal motives such as entertainment, education, or social interaction, goals not primarily driven by market-based rationales (Emiliani, 2003, p. 107).

The broader field in which practitioners operate, and which provides a context for investigation, is conceptualised as **social media marketing** (SMM). According to Tuten and Solomon (2017, p. 18, as cited in Jacobson et al., 2020), the term social media marketing is defined as the practice of using "social media technologies, channels, and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for an organization's stakeholders." This framing captures the essence of SMM as both a technical and strategic dimensions underlying organisational value creation in the digital platform marketing sector.

The efficacy of these activities is underpinned by the underlying characteristics of social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define it as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". The collaborative and participatory features of social media offer marketers unique advantages (Kudeshia & Mittal, 2015, p. 37). *User-generated*-content, in his promotional nature can be deployed without traditional advertising costs, often achieving higher impact due to its perceived authenticity (Ali, 2025, p. 6).

The thesis will adopt the notion of practice (Tsoukas, 2017, p. 2) as dimension for analysis. Practices are defined as repeated, routinised forms of action that can reveal underlying values and moral orientations. This methodological approach facilitates the investigation of how ethical or profit-driven logics manifest in day-to-day professional behaviour. The present study seeks to understand how ethical dilemmas are managed in the context of strategic professional routines by focusing on practice, where repeated behaviour signifies relevance in the outlet of this study.

In order to investigate the moral dimension of these practices, this thesis adopts the business ethics as practice lens, as originally proposed by Clegg et al. (2007). This standpoint builds upon the premise that values become ingrained and enacted through repeated behaviour, and that ethical integrity – if present – should be observable through action (Clegg et al., 2007, p. 112). Consequently, it functions as a diagnostic instrument to evaluate whether practitioners operate in accordance with ethically defensible values or primarily according to instrumental rationality aimed at profit maximization.

1.2 Societal Relevance

This thesis demonstrates a high degree of societal relevance, insofar as financial gain has become a dominant existential motivator in modern society (Stehr and Voss, 2019, p. 6). There is an increasing tendency for both individuals and institutions to pursue profit not just as a means to an end, but as an end in itself (Veblen, 1899). This is often displayed in ways that lack reflection or moral nobility. In response to this trend, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained traction. CSR articulates the expectation that businesses contribute positively to society, whether through environmental stewardship, social justice, or community engagement. It is important to note that this approach serves to expand the role of businesses beyond the pursuit of monetary profit alone, thereby emphasising their responsibility to create societal value in addition to economic success (Gibson, 2019, p. 1).

Social relevance further relies in the growing demand, particularly from Generation Z, for ethical integrity in the public sphere. The exposure inherent to social media has resulted in consumers acting as guardians, holding both public figures and brands accountable to values that resonate with their worldview. This shift stands for an indicative of a more general societal expectation for ethical consistency across public discourse and corporate communication.

The relevance of this study stems from the growing public debate in the regards of digital platforms, where the deleterious psychological and social effects of exploitative digital infrastructures can no longer be ignored (Bellis et al., 2021, p. 4; Fiebert et al., 2021). A growing body of literature critiques SMM for prioritising monetary objectives over moral responsibility (Nistor et al., 2024, p. 4533). This results to the following shift in attention this thesis will adopt: from platform designers to practitioner, as a vital and underexplored angle.

Further evidence of the relevance for can be observed in the regulatory landscape responding to digital issues. To regulate the digital environment, governments are taking measures to address exploitative

behaviours, with actions ranging from addressing data protection violations to imposing restrictions on advertising directed at minors (Parliament of Australia, 2024).

In conclusion, the present thesis makes a significant contribution to the field through its strategic focus on delivering actionable ethical recommendations. In the context of digital economies, brand reputation, which is closely associated with ethical perception, has emerged as a fundamental factor in determining long-term success (Pantelica, 2008, p.119). Adopting a management research approach that prioritises real-world solutions to contemporary issues (Mishra and Subudhi, 2020, p. 1), this work seeks not only to diagnose ethical tensions but also to offer practical paths forward in order to mitigate current criticisms.

In light of the potentially deleterious societal impacts of SMM, this thesis aims to explore how practitioners can fulfil their responsibilities in a manner that fosters non-harmful commercial conduct, ensuring ethical integrity, potentially benefitting from it as a, genuinely enacted, strategic asset.

1.3 Academic Relevance

Although the subject of ethics in marketing has historically gained academic attention to a certain extent (Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Laczniak & Murphy, 1993; Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Clegg et al., 2008), the existing literature continues to underscore the necessity for a more extensive examination of this important and profoundly ethical domain (Granstedt, 2025, p. 278).

In this already under-explored field, the ethical dimension of SMM has received even less scholarly consideration. Given the pervasive nature of social media in contemporary society and its considerable influence on consumption behaviours, this issue requires urgent attention (Granstedt, 2025, p. 278). It is necessary to acknowledge the significance of implementing research efforts that explore the manner in which moral decisions are executed within the domain of SMM (Sharma et al., 2024, p. 473).

To date, ethical concerns in the SMM field have often been addressed through the lens of data and privacy (Granstedt, 2025, p. 284), as well as the emerging literature on the so-called *dark side of social media* (Singh & Singh, 2019, p. 2). The prevailing focus of these discourses has been on the issue of user vulnerability and its deleterious effects on consumers. However, there research remains inconsistent on how ethical dilemmas are experienced by SMM practitioners themselves. This thesis builds upon that neglected dimension by addressing a professional category that, despite its growing relevance, remains insufficiently researched (Carter et al., 2007, p. 22).

In this regard, the thesis not only investigates whether SMM practitioners may engage in questionable practices, but also aims to explore their potential lack of awareness or preparation in navigating such ethical challenges. As Carter et al. (2007, p. 22) hypothesise, practitioners may encounter ethical dilemmas and experience difficulties in formulating effective responses to critical situations. Consequently, the thesis adopts an educational perspective, proposing tools and insights that may help equip practitioners to act more consciously and ethically in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

From a strategic standpoint, this thesis also aims to contribute actionable recommendations, in line with the management research approach outlined by Mishra and Subudhi (2020, p. 1), which emphasises the identification of real-world problems and the generation of practical solutions through rigorous academic methodology. In light of the increasingly intertwined nature of trust, CSR and brand reputation, the impact of ethical behaviour on long-term revenue has received limited scholarly attention (Granstedt, 2025, p. 293). The central objective of this thesis is to provide insights that are of practical benefit to practitioners, enhancing their ethical reflexivity, and to consumers, protecting them from harm.

1.4 Thesis structure

The thesis begins by introducing the research topic, providing a contextual background and broader reflections that have motivated a more profound engagement with the subject. The section presents the research justification and societal relevance.

Subsequently, a consequential representation of the theoretical state of art is provided, in which concepts are introduced in a sequential manner, progressing from contextualization, cause, effects and suggestions for solution.

The methodological section provides a detailed rationale for the chosen research design, ensuring transparency and demonstrating methodological rigor.

The subsequent chapter presents the findings derived from data collection and thematic analysis, organised under key themes and supported by direct evidence.

The discussion section interprets these findings in relation to the theoretical framework, while also integrating relevant new literature. The purpose of this section is to expand the analytical perspective by presenting reflexive interpretations of the emerging themes.

In conclusion, the thesis presents the key findings, discusses their practical implications, acknowledges the limitations of the study, and suggests directions for future research.

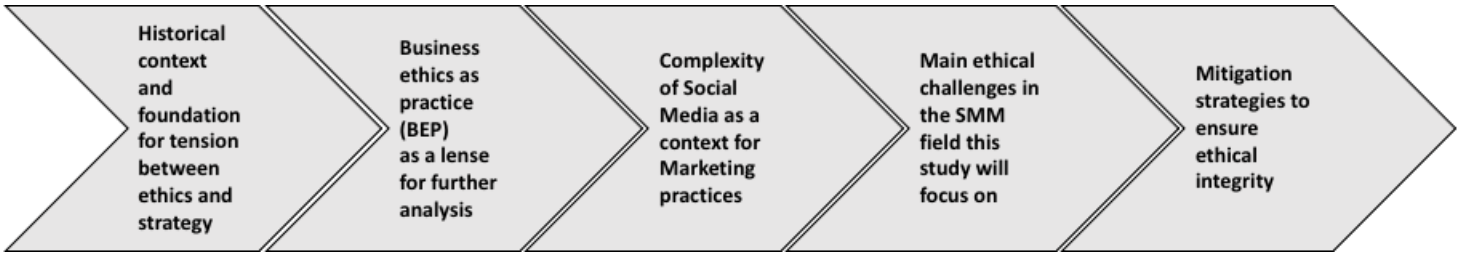

Fig. 1: Visualization of Theoretical framework

2. Theoretical Framework

In the domain of SMM, strategic objectives have become increasingly dependent on quantifiable metrics, such as reach, visibility, community engagement, and audience growth. These metrics frequently function as intermediate indicators towards the ultimate objective of revenue optimization. Nevertheless, these objectives rarely position ethics as a guiding principle, thereby creating a fertile ground for tension. Scholars argue that financial imperatives may conflict with ethical commitments in practice (Abela & Murphy, 2008, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 285), thus giving rise to the central concern of this thesis.

2.1 Fundamental tension between ethical integrity and strategy

From a definitional standpoint, ethics historically refers to judgments about right and wrong (Bogue, 1904, p. 45). Nevertheless, such binary assessments are too rigid to account for the complexities of today's business landscape. In contrast, this thesis adopts a more contextually grounded perspective (Tsoukas, 2018, p. 36; Clegg et al., 2007, p. 116).

Marketing ethics, as defined by Abela & Murphy (2008, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 279), concern the "systematic study of how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions". These standards are philosophically rooted in two main traditions: deontology, which evaluates the morality of actions themselves, and utilitarianism, which focuses on the consequences of those actions (Hunt & Vitell, 1986, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 279). This thesis will take into account both the utilitarian and deontological approach.

Moreover, a distinction is posited between normative ethics, which prescribes idealized behaviour and descriptive ethics, which concern the practical unfold of ethical decisions in every-day settings (Granstedt, 2025, p. 279). The present thesis adopts a descriptive perspective, focusing on ethics as lived experience within organisational life. The repeated adoption of ethical behaviour is indicative of its significance and integration into managerial culture.

However, even with an increased ethical awareness, the pursuit of strategic outcomes can take precedence over moral considerations. Abela & Murphy (2008, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 285) emphasise that when profit maximisation exerts a predominant influence on decision-making processes, ethical considerations may be marginalized.

However, this perspective is not universally accepted. While certain authors emphasize the persistent conflict between ethics and commercial strategy, others argue that ethical behaviour, when authentically enacted and communicated, can function as a strategic asset. In accordance with this perspective, a growing body of research suggests that businesses capable of incorporating ethical considerations into their fundamental operations can foster trust, credibility, and long-term competitive advantage (Pantelica, 2008, p. 119).

The evolving expectations of the modern consumer play an important role in this regard. The notion of ethical integrity has evolved from being a mere add-on to a core. This paradigm shift is in line with the emergence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The notion of CSR incorporates the necessity for

organisations to consider their moral and societal obligations, extending beyond the pursuit of financial gain (Gibson, 2019, p. 1). This is in line with the idea of *new* capitalism, promoted by Marc Benioff, American tech-entrepreneur and philanthropist. This modern business paradigm is rooted in purpose over profit, while criticising a too narrow focus on monetary revenue only, as has been witnessed over the last few decades (Granstedt, 2025, p. 290).

Nevertheless, the adoption of ethical behaviours do not always stem from genuine value purity. The use of ethical conduct as a strategic instrument is a concept that merits further examination. It is evident that certain companies adopt ethical stance to enhance their reputational benefits, rather than out of higher moral standards. Schultz et al. (2024, p. 805) conceptualize the notion of *digital ethicswashing* as a form of misleading communication where firms present themselves as more ethically committed in digital contexts than they truly are. This phenomenon underscores the blurred boundaries between ethical conduct and strategic self-interest. As stakeholder demands for ethical accountability intensify, so too does the incentive for organisations to appear ethical, regardless of actual practice (Granstedt, 2025, p. 280).

In order to understand the reasons for unethical behaviours to be adopted, it is necessary to examine the pressures exerted at both the organisational and individual levels. Ferrel & Gresham (1985, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 281) emphasise the role of internal pressures, such as performance expectations, in shaping ethical decisions.

On the other side external interests are associated with broader social and ethical obligations, in line with CSR (Gibson, 2019, p. 1). The seminal work of Freeman and McVea (2001) about stakeholder theory, combined with Cavusgil and Zou's (1994) seminal contributions to successful marketing strategy, offers a solid theoretical foundation to the assertion, that sustainable success stems from achieving a balance between firm-centric objectives and the needs of a broader stakeholder landscape.

Huisman and Regan (2013, p. 26) elaborate on the dynamics of modern business environments, which now include new stakeholder groups such as online communities. They theorize the importance of directing communication efforts toward these groups, which are vital to a business's continued existence, who aim at leading the industry. Brand reputation is increasingly shaped by electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Verma & Yadav, 2022, p. 111), a phenomenon further amplified through the dissemination of user-generated content (UGC) (Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61). These notions highlight the crucial role consumers play in determining business success within the collaborative and participatory digital landscape in which organizations operate.

In this productivist context (Rodrik, 2023) driven by performance capitalism (Chicchi, 2020, p. 15) the capacity to ensure ethical integrity while aiming at revenue optimization emerges as a defining challenge for contemporary social media practitioners.

2.2 Business ethics as practice

2.2.1 Ethics in practice and context dependency

Ethics, while theoretically informed, are enacted within real-world settings. The *Business Ethics as Practice* (BEP) (Clegg et al., 2007) approach is builds upon this idea, shifting attention away from rigid normative frameworks that categorize actions as categorically right or wrong. Instead, it emphasizes the complexity and fluidity of ethical behaviour as it unfolds in organizational contexts (Tsoukas, 2018, p. 36).

In this context, three key terms are central and will recur throughout this thesis: *practitioners*, referring to the actors whose ethical decision-making is under investigation; *praxis*, which denotes concrete actions taken in specific, situated circumstances; and *practice*, understood as routinized, collectively shaped ways of doing things (Tsoukas, 2018, p. 2).

This study draws on both concepts of praxis and practice, to explore the everyday conduct practitioners bring to their work, with a particular focus on how they respond to ethically critical situations. This understanding builds upon Clegg et al.'s (2007) argumentation that meaningful ethical behaviour arise in moments of tension or conflict, whereas practitioners demonstrate their moral standards under form of response (p. 117).

Loacker and Muhr (2009, p. 269) further add upon by defining ethics as a process of becoming rather than a fixed state of being, emphasizing the dynamic nature of ethical engagement. The BEP approach deliberately distances itself from such restrictive frameworks, including deontology (Kant, 1998, in Clegg, 2007, p. 108) and utilitarianism (Loacker and Muhr, 2009, p. 266), which are criticized for prioritizing abstract principles over lived experience. This poststructuralist perspective challenges the pursuit of moral certainty, highlighting the unresolved and evolving nature of ethical responsibility.

Tsoukas (2018, p. 36) similarly argues that ethical awareness and conduct emerge through lived experience, rather than through the application of decontextualized theoretical principles.

In line with this understanding, several scholars argue similarly (Tsoukas, 2018, p. 36; Clegg et al., 2007, p. 116). The authors highlight the limitations of rigid, decontextualized approaches, which often fail to capture the nuanced, context-specific nature of lived experiences. In contrast, the BEP's context-sensitive perspective offers a valuable lens for uncovering the deeper dynamics of unique ethical situations.

While theoretical grounding remains relevant, its function is to support reflection and interpretation, not to dictate action through prescriptive frameworks, which are often too rigid to accommodate the demands of unique and unpredictable situations (Clegg et al., 2007, p. 116).

By foregrounding practice over abstract norms, the BEP lens offers a valuable means of engaging with ethical issues as they unfold in real-world organizational settings. It acknowledges the inherent ambiguity, fluidity, and unpredictability of modern professional environment (Loacker and Muhr, 2009, p. 267), qualities that make it particularly fitting for studying ethical tensions in fields such as social media marketing (SMM).

Clegg et al. (2007) further expand on this critique exercised upon the attempt to rely on inflexible norms, whereas ethical judgment is understood as situational, deeply dependent on the specific context in which it arises, and therefore extremely variable (Clegg et al., 2007, p. 110).

Loacker and Muhr (2009, p. 267) reinforce this view by framing ethics as a dynamic, evolving process inseparable from the context in which it unfolds. Drawing on Dillard and Yuthas (2002, p. 51), they argue that ethical understanding cannot be detached from the particularities of the situations in which it emerges (Clegg et al., 2007, p. 111).

2.2.2 Profound nature of Reflexivity

Ethical reflexivity, within the Business Ethics as Practice (BEP) perspective, is understood as an ongoing, self-reflective process shaped by moral sensitivity. Reflexivity consists in the continuous practice of self-interrogation, doubting about the integrity of adopted practices (Bauman, 1993, as cited in Clegg et al., 2007, p. 117).

Bauman conceptualized such a behaviour as *considered ethics* which relies on a constant suspicion toward one's own ethical stance. Such a process can intensify discomfort, as ethical integrity is an unreachable ideal, serving more as a guiding principle than an achievable goal. This ideal builds upon the ongoing striving for moral impeccability through profound critical self-examination (Bauman, 1993, as cited in Clegg et al., 2007, p. 117).

Loacker and Muhr (2009, p. 267) reinforce this idea, calling for a constant interrogation of established rules and taken-for-granted assumptions. The authors advocate personal engagement and subjective interpretation.

This responsibility requires what Loacker & Muhr (2009, p. 267) the authors describe as *responsible action* which entails drawing on introspective judgment to navigate moral ambiguity, particularly in contexts where external codes offer little guidance.

Yet ethical reflexivity is not limited to inward reflection. Drawing on Levinas (as cited in Loacker and Muhr, 2009, p. 271) underscore the importance of relational ethics, recognizing that moral subjectivity emerges through responsiveness to others. Ethics, in this view, extends beyond the self and requires openness to the needs and vulnerabilities of others. Carter et al. (2008, p. 94) further develop this idea through the notion of a *silence strategy* suggesting that ethical awareness should also attend to the unsaid and the unseen, as hidden dimensions of organizational life that call for careful moral attention.

Aristotle's foundational concept of *phronesis*, as further developed by Bachmann et al. (2018), provides a valuable lens through the notion of *practical wisdom*. His notion of *phronesis* involves the ability to deliberate about actions that contribute not only to personal benefit but enhance common good (Bachmann et al., 2018, p. 150), resonating with Levinas' idea that ethical consideration must extend beyond the self to include responsibility for others (Loacker & Muhr, 2009, p. 271).

According to Aristotle ethical wisdom is shaped by three core capacities: first, openness to understand each particular situation as it is. Second, the theoretical knowledge and practical experience to

apply suitable means. Lastly, as a third step, the author calls for moral sensitivity to pursue nobel ends (Bachmann et al., 2018, p. 150).

Building on this classical foundation, Bachmann et al. (2018) define practical wisdom as the capacity to act ethically by integrating theoretical understanding with experiential knowledge. Its translation into management literature shifts the analytical focus toward organizational and professional contexts, laying the groundwork for the themes explored in this study. Within these settings *practical wisdom* is associated with notions such as ethical leadership and responsible decision-making (Bachmann et al., 2018, p. 147).

This makes *phronesis* a fitting addition to the BEP perspective. The ability to perceive and balance tensions within complex situations (Bachmann et al., 2018, p. 155), is central to this study's inquiry into ethical ambiguity. Furthermore, it underlines the importance of choosing ends that are morally worthy. This requires moral sensitivity and an orientation toward communal benefit rather than personal gain (Bachmann et al., 2018, p. 150).

2.3 Complexity of social media as an ethical context

Having laid the foundation for the historical and conceptual tension between strategy and ethics, this subsection explores the contextual conditions that make social media marketing (SMM) particularly complex from an ethical point of view. The underlying hypothesis is that SMM, compared to its traditional, offline dimension, presents an increased level of navigational complexity (Dumbiri, 2024, p.2) and public exposure, factors which intensify ethical risk and demand greater moral attentiveness from practitioners.

Hult et al. (2011, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 283) argue that the interactive nature of social media, rooted in the principles of Web 2.0 (Huang & Tsai, 2009, p. 257) - has fundamentally changed the nature of marketing communication. The dissolution of geographic boundaries has enabled practitioners to reach broader, more diverse, and less predictable audiences. As the number of stakeholders potentially affected by marketing content grows (Hult et al., 2011, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 283), public scrutiny intensifies as well. With this expanded reach comes not only greater influence, but also heightened responsibility. This expansion of reach and exposure amplifies the ethical importance of practitioners' decisions. Where missteps once could have gone unnoticed, today they are rapidly divulgated across digital networks. Errors in judgment, ethical lapses, or misleading messaging can lead to immediate backlash and long-term reputational damage, which is now recognized as one of the most significant assets within digital branding strategies. Reputational damage, defined by Gavilanes and Párraga (2018, p. 194) as the negative impact on a company's credibility and public perception resulting from online crises, potentially undermining their strategic positioning in the long term. Jaehnig & Onyebadi (2011, p. 17) have assigned the role of *watchdog* to social media, where visibility also means vulnerability. The authors note digital platforms foster a structural expectation for transparency and accountability, compelling practitioners to uphold ethical standards not only for moral reasons, but also as a matter of survival.

Academic perspectives remain divided on whether social media optimizes or complicates marketing operations. While some view it as a democratizing tool that opens up new strategic possibilities and fosters

engagement (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 2), others caution that it introduces structural complexities, which further create ground for ethical challenges. Scholars argue, navigational complexity exceeds when compared to the analogue era (Dumbiri, 2024, p. 2). Before examining specific ethical challenges in detail, two contextual dimensions deserve closer attention: regulation and algorithmic infrastructures.

2.3.1 Regulatory ambiguity

Regulatory ambiguity represents a fundamental challenge of the digital environment. As a recent phenomenon, which gained unseen expansion in the last decade, the regulatory landscape of social media remains largely fragmented and inconsistently applied. The rapid evolution and widespread adoption of digital platforms have outpaced legislative developments, resulting in a legal grey-zones, especially in it's early stages (Wallach & Marchant, 2019, p. 505).

This regulatory lack has been interpreted as strategically taken advantage by some digital actors (Smyth, 2020, p. 578), as in the ability to operate at scale without being adequately be held accountable.

However, while this regulatory oversight might have served some expansion, it also introduces substantial risks. The global dimension of SMM forces practitioners to engage across jurisdictions with diverse legal standards. Inconsistent or unclear regulations increase the likelihood of unintentional breaches, legal uncertainty, and ethical oversights (Milmo, 2025). From a theoretical standpoint, this underscores the importance of ethical sensitivity, where practitioners are often required to interpret and respond to ambiguous or incomplete norms without clear external guidance.

2.3.2 Algorithmic ambiguity

A second major complexity arises from the opacity of algorithmic infrastructures that underlies user interaction, content visibility, and audience engagement. Although this thesis will not delve into the broader *dark side* of social media, as conceptualized by Singh & Singh (2019, p. 2), it is important to recognize that practitioners operate within a platform architecture that they do not control, yet which significantly shapes their strategic possibilities (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 2).

Public debate has increasingly centered on the ethical implications of these opaque systems, particularly regarding digital addiction and it's deleterious consequences. While practitioners may not directly design or manipulate algorithms, their work is inevitably shaped by them. Ethical decision-making is therefore nested within a system whose logic remains largely inaccessible, forcing practitioners to respond to outcomes they may not fully understand or predict (Sundet et al., 2025, p. 18).

Further complex is the monopolistic stance big tech companies have in the digital landscape. Major players like Meta and Google maintain dominant positions, offering unmatched audience reach and pricing power. As Granstedt (2025, p. 290) points out, practitioners often feel limited by this oligopolistic structure. Switching to alternative platforms can entail significant competitive losses such as reduced visibility and strategic disadvantage. This perceived lack of choice limits ethical independency, creating tension between platform logics and the practitioner's own moral compass.

2.4 Main ethical challenges in the SMM context

Because this thesis builds upon the understanding, that social media is more complex than traditional offline marketing (Chary, 2014, p. 11) and therefore requires greater ethical consideration, the following sub-section will focus on the key ethical challenges identified in this paper. The issues outlined below have been selected based on their frequency in the literature and are therefore considered as the most salient (Granstedt, 2025, p. 285). The selected thematic clusters are: (I) transparency and authenticity, (II) data and privacy, and (III) consumer well-being. These topics are often interconnected, with overlapping dimensions and cause-and-effect relationships.

2.4.1. Transparency and Authenticity

Transparency and authenticity is a commonly discussed domain in relation to ethical challenge in SMM and will serve as an overarching theme in this section. They encompass a set of related ethical concerns that will be grouped under this category, based on thematical coherence. Practitioners are frequently criticised for lacking transparency, often engaging in misleading or deceptive practices in pursuit of strategic goals (Nistor et al., 2024, p. 4533).

As digital advertising increasingly integrates influencer-based formats, the distinction between genuine recommendation and paid promotion becomes blurred. Financial incentives behind such endorsements raise concerns about their authenticity, particularly when practitioners promote products they would not use themselves. This practice undermines trust and questions the ethical integrity of both the individual and the brands involved. In recognition of these issues, regulatory instruments such as the European Union's Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (2005/29/EC) explicitly prohibit the misrepresentation of commercial content as personal opinion. Article 6 of the Directive bans the inclusion of misleading claims, while Article 7 addresses omissions of critical information (Micklitz, 2009, p. 90). Zgheib (2017, p. 1482) further defines deceptive advertising as the use of false or misleading features to manipulate consumer decision-making. Despite regional differences in regulatory scope and enforcement, such frameworks converge on the shared objective of safeguarding consumer trust through transparency and disclosure (Micklitz, 2009, p. 90).

Numerous instances in practice demonstrate the ethical implications of insufficient transparency (Allen, 2016; Markham, 2022, p.2). When practitioners fail to clearly disclose sponsorship arrangements, audiences are misled - even if such deception is not deliberate. The ethical concern lies not only in whether a recommendation is genuine, but also in the intentionality behind influencing consumer behaviour. Using one's visibility and influence to shape public perception without openly declaring commercial interests raises profound ethical questions about manipulation and consent.

In response to such cases regulatory bodies like the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) have increased enforcement of disclosure standards, issuing formal warnings and in some cases financial penalties (Markham, 2022, p. 2). Yet, despite these efforts, ambiguity persists around accountability. National regulations in various EU member states often place responsibility directly on individual practitioners. In

contrast, broader EU-level regulations, such as the E-Commerce Directive, focus more on the hosting platforms that enable such behaviour (Zanathy, 2021, p. 799). This thesis adopts the former position, aligning with a practitioner-centred approach that places ethical responsibility on the directly interested actor. This lens, while underrepresented in current research, allows for a closer analysis of moral agency in everyday decision-making.

The urgency of this discussion becomes even clearer when considering extreme examples involving the promotion of harmful products with potential severe consequences for consumer well-being.

2.4.2 Data and Privacy

Data and privacy constitute one of the most debated ethical challenges in SMM. This thematic cluster exemplifies the fundamental tension (see section 1.1) between the two main stakeholder groups: users and practitioners. Data refers to the digital information generated by users as they interact with platforms, under form of personal information which forms the foundation of targeted marketing strategies (Cavlak & Cop, 2021, p. 16). Through increasingly sophisticated data collection techniques, practitioners rely on detailed user profiles and develop highly personalized content, which enhances engagement and maximizes strategic effectiveness. Real-time data monitoring supports rapid campaign adjustment and resource optimization, offering a strong competitive advantage.

However, the very same mechanisms that provide value to practitioners are also at the heart of growing user dissatisfaction. Many users perceive that their fundamental right to privacy is being compromised and they express concerns about exploitation. There is a prevailing sense that personal data acquisition process is emblematic of a foundation of exploitative nature. This scenario reflects a broader imbalance of power within the digital landscape, where practitioners hold a position of control and benefit, while users are rendered increasingly vulnerable and dependent on platform policies (Emiliani, 2003, p. 107).

One of the most frequently cited user complaints centers around the opacity of the data extraction process (Singh, 2020, p. 23). Users often report that data is collected without their fully informed consent, or through mechanisms designed to obscure rather than clarify terms. For example, access to landing pages may be restricted unless users accept cookies or data collection terms. In other cases, consent is solicited using unclear language and hidden buttons that obscure the user's real choice **(**Firmani et al., 2019, p. 2). Such practices challenge the ethical integrity of informed consent and raise concerns around manipulation and autonomy.

The broader implications of such practices point to a pattern in which strategic goals take precedence over user autonomy and transparency, by prioritizing commercial goals over ethical responsibilities (Abela and Murphy, 2008, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 285).

However, the ethical landscape is not entirely uniform. Certain actors have deliberately positioned themselves in opposition to prevailing industry norms, emphasizing ethical commitments such as user privacy as a strategic and reputational asset. By centering privacy in their business models, these actors

demonstrate that ethical responsibility can itself function as a form of competitive differentiation, building consumer trust and loyalty in saturated digital markets (Peter & Dalla, 2021, as cited in Sharma et al., 2024, p. 479).

Beyond individual organizational ethics, the regulatory dimension of data and privacy introduces further complexity. Jurisdictions vary significantly in their approach, scope, and enforcement. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), introduced by the European Union in 2018, stands as one of the most comprehensive efforts to regulate data collection, storage, and use. It emphasizes user rights, transparency, and consent, and has become a global benchmark. However, its jurisdictional limitations mean that cross-border digital actors must navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, legal standards, generating significant tension in the global data economy (Milmo, 2025).

Moreover, data privacy concerns intensify when considering vulnerable populations. The collection of data from minors without proper safeguards, such as parental consent, not only exceeds ethical boundaries but also potentially violates legal standards (Fisher et al., 2023, p. 39). These practices raise serious questions regarding digital protection and the differentiated responsibility practitioners hold when engaging with sensitive user groups.

2.4.3 Well-being

The final thematic cluster addressed in this thesis concerns consumer well-being, encompassing a range of ethically problematic practices that may negatively impact users' physical and psychological health. As digital environments increasingly permeate daily life, ethical questions about how these platforms affect user welfare have grown more urgent. The literature since 2020 reflects a notable increase in concerns over the harmful effects of excessive social media use (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 630). Scholars have linked such overuse to a series of severe negative psychological outcomes, including reduced attention span, anxiety, depression, frustration, and diminished self-esteem (Bellis et al., 2021, p. 4). Together with physical health consequences such as postural problems and chronic pain (Fiebert et al., 2021).

A significant share of the discourse on social media's ethical risks is situated within the so-called *dark side* of social media (Singh & Singh, 2019, p. 2), a term that highlights the deliberate use of addictive design features that promote prolonged usage. These include infinite scrolling, push notifications, and algorithmically optimized content loops. Such mechanisms are not neutral, as they are intentionally designed to maximize engagement, which serves increased revenue (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2020, p. 321).

In this context, practitioners who use these platforms for commercial purposes also bear ethical responsibility. Although platform providers create the technical infrastructure, practitioners consciously choose to operate within these environments and often design strategies that align with or exploit these mechanisms (Singh & Singh, 2019, p. 2). As awareness of social media's harmful effects continues to grow, ethical accountability cannot rest exclusively with the platform operators. It must extend to the commercial actors who knowingly engage users through potentially harmful structures.

Beyond general concerns about addictive design and digital overuse, specific forms of promotion of potential for harm including content call for closer ethical scrutiny. One such category involves the promotion of harmful goods or services, which may directly or indirectly threaten user health or well-being. These include, for example, endorsements that normalize self-destructive behavior (Novaliando & Attamimi, 2024, p. 72), promote goods with known adverse effects (Anttila-Hughes et al., 2018, p. 31), or generate psychological distress through misleading or manipulative messaging (Goor et al., 2020, p. 1031).

Of particular concern are practices targeting vulnerable user groups, such as adolescents or individuals with limited cognitive maturity. When practitioners promote content without fully considering the psychological, social, or physical impact on these groups, the risk of ethical transgression rises. Theoretical frameworks emphasize that practitioners must exercise moral judgment not only in what they promote, but in how and to whom content is delivered (Novaliando & Attamimi, 2024, p. 72). Commercial goals must not override the responsibility to avoid harm.

A second area of ethical concern relates to the psychological impact of curated and idealized content, often referred to as the *highlight reel* effect. As outlined by Parnell (2017) This phenomenon describes how individuals selectively present exaggerated or idealized aspects of their lives online. These curated portrayals, centered around luxury lifestyles, physical appearance, or social status, may significantly distort reality. Over time, repeated exposure to such content can create unrealistic societal expectations and contribute to psychological distress among viewers. Issues such as self-comparison, low self-worth, and social anxiety are frequently cited as consequences of these portrayals (Goor et al., 2020, p. 1031).

Now that the strategic–ethical tension, the contextual complexity of social media, and the core ethical challenges have been mapped out, the next sub-section will shift focus mitigation strategies adopted by practitioners to ensure ethical integrity.

2.3 Guidelines for ethical integrity

This sub-section focuses on theoretical recommendations and practitioner-oriented strategies to align with what Davidovic et al. (2024) define as ethical marketing. Unlike traditional marketing, which often prioritizes revenue maximization (Patton, 2008), ethical marketing seeks to generate long-term value for a broader network of stakeholders (Huisman and Regan, 2013, p. 26). It is guided by moral principles that function as an internal compass for decision-making and conduct.

Ethical marketing also includes strategic advantages: practitioners who adopt such approaches can build trust, credibility, and achieve long-term industry sustainability (Pantelica, 2008, p. 119).

This theoretical position is reinforced by real life cases, which undermine the long-term sustainable growth, ethical marketing strategies can lead to, as for instance by building credibility trust and reputation. Fundamental pillars for modern business success in the digital environment.

It is noteworthy that one commonly cited reason for the adoption of unethical behaviour is it’s capacity to boost short term profit further than what ethical marketing is capable to do (Wigodski Sirebrenik, 2023, p. 26). Misleading practices, such as falsely attributing features to a product or increasing prices

without justification, can significantly increase profit margins by creating a wide gap between production costs and sales pricing. Instead, ethical marketing is incompatible with such paradigms, as it is aims at long-term sustainable strategies, that built on transparency and solid values.

A key point of comparison lies in the long-term outcomes of these contrasting approaches. While unethical strategies may entail immediate financial gains, they often prove unsustainable and can permanently harm business models. Ethical marketing, by contrast, tends to promote slower but more sustained growth. This distinction is largely explained by what has been referred to as reputational damage (Gavilanes and Párraga, 2018, p. 194). When unethical practices are uncovered through public scandals, the resulting loss of trust can cause irreversible harm to a brand's profitability.

Consequently, long-term survival should be prioritised, as it is more likely to generate sustained economic success over time, even if the pace of growth is more gradual (Wigodski Sirebrenik, 2023, p. 26).

Recognizing this, the following section outlines mitigation strategies that aim to support long-term economic sustainability while safeguarding consumer well-being. This approach aligns closely with the overarching objective of this thesis. A common element among these strategies is the emphasis on proactiveness. Practitioners are called to adopt a morally sensitive mindset, driven by reflexivity and accountability (Bauman, 1993, as cited in Clegg et al., 2007, p. 117).

A strong **ethical compass** should guide practitioners' day-to-day decisions. This involves cultivating an internalized value system that aligns with both personal integrity and broader societal responsibility. Practitioners are encouraged to select professional environments that reflect their ethical principles. Simultaneously, organizations should invest in dedicated departments or teams tasked with embedding ethics into the company culture, beyond mere compliance. **Education** plays a crucial role: practitioners must remain informed and continuously update their knowledge of the ethical challenges in their field, along with effective mitigation strategies (Granstedt, 2025).

Community moderation is increasingly expected to be performed by practitioners. They are required to monitor and manage interactions within their communities, such as comment sections under their posts or on their landing pages. This aligns with the EU member state regulations, which places growing emphasis on the responsibility of practitioners, beyond platforms themselves, by seeking the accountable for hosting and mitigating such behaviours (Zanathy, 2021, p. 799).

Engagement with societal, political, or environmental issues, commonly referred to as **brand activism**, further aligning with CSR principles (Gibson, 2019, p. 1), can further reflect ethical commitment.

However, the adoption of such practices is delicate, as their effectiveness depends on correct implementation. If executed poorly, they may lead to significant backlash instead of leading to competitive advantage.

Practitioners must ensure that any public stance is consistent with internal values and backed by authentic actions, rather than serving as mere marketing strategy (Kolieb, 2024, p. 378).

Despite limited alternatives due to the monopolistic influence of dominant platforms (Granstedt, 2025, p. 290), practitioners should maintain critical mindset and resist conforming uncritically to exploitative

platform mechanisms. They are encouraged to uphold ethical standards even in environments where such behavior is not incentivized (Appel, 2020, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 292).

Transparency and authenticity also serve as central pillars. Transparency requires disclosing intentions behind content, data usage practices and any commercial intent (Coker, 2017, p. 659). Authenticity refers to the genuineness of the practitioner's engagement and messaging. Misleading practices need to be categorically avoided (Zgheib, 2017, p. 1482).

Given that legislation continues to evolve and differs across jurisdictions (Zanathy, 2021, p. 799), practitioners must stay informed and ensure compliance, even in uncertain and unregulated spaces, through solid ethical compasses Scholars increasingly emphasize the principle of consumer respect, defined as acting in the best interests of the audience (Ashworth & Bourassa, 2020, p. 2447). For instance, practitioners are advised to only promote products they would use themselves and to assess whether promoted goods contribute positively to consumer well-being and the broader social environment (Gibson, 2019, p. 1).

Ethical conduct also refers to the avoidance of relying on exploitative platform mechanisms, grounded in the *dark side* of social media (Singh & Singh, 2019, p. 2).

Integrity relies on not taking advantage of unethical situations, such as exploiting vulnerable categories, such as minors. Adolescents are increasingly vulnerable to advertising, as in their consciousness has not yet fully developed. In order to tackle this some jurisdictions have already taken steps to restrict access for younger users (Parliament of Australia, 2024).

Now that the context for this research has been set, the next section will open up on the adopted research design.

3. Research design

3.1 The nature of qualitative research

Qualitative research is particularly fitting to this study's aim of uncovering how SMM practitioners navigate ethical and financial priorities. It offers an interpretive, naturalistic lens for understanding phenomena in real-world contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 63), emphasizing meaning-making over numerical abstraction.

Derived from *qualitas* (latin for the essence of a thing) qualitative inquiry privileges depth, context, and fluidity over static measurement (Erickson, 2023, p. 33). It assumes reality is socially constructed through experience and interpretation, which vary across time and setting (Borg & Gall, 1996, as cited in Awasthy, 2020, p. 149). Similarly, Ross (1999, as cited in Awasthy, 2020, p. 146) argues for the existence of multiple, context-dependent realities. This interpretivist foundation allows ethical practices in SMM to be seen not as fixed but as evolving and negotiated by practitioners.

Given the study's focus on ethical-strategic tensions, qualitative methods offer critical exploratory value. By addressing *what, why,* and *how* questions where generalizations fall short, they facilitate discovery of grounded concepts and subtle shifts in practice (Awasthy, 2020, pp. 148–149). This aligns with the *Verstehen* approach, the understanding through participants' perspectives, which builds upon nuance and complexity (Mishra & Subudhi, 2020, p. 7).

A central feature of qualitative research is its holistic view, aiming to understand phenomena in their full complexity (Awasthy, 2020, p. 149). This was reflected in the recruitment of a diverse sample of SMM practitioners, enabling a fuller picture of how ethical and monetary priorities intersect (Rhodes & Brickman, 2008, p. 112; Sarkar, 2024, p. 394). Throughout sampling, data collection, and analysis, flexibility often termed as *bricolage* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, in Kincheloe, 2001, p. 679), was applied not as a limitation but as a methodological strength. This adaptability allowed us to explore unanticipated ethical tensions and profit-related trade-offs as they emerged.

Gupta (2014, as cited in Mishra & Subudhi, 2020, p. 1) stresses that management research begins with a real-world problem and uses contextual engagement to generate practical insights. This logic guided our study structure. It begins by situating the ethics-profitability conflict, then analyzes how SMM's dynamic landscape amplifies that tension. Key ethical themes: transparency, data privacy, and user well-being are then explored, followed by practitioner-led mitigation strategies aimed at avoiding unethical outcomes, in direct alignment with Gupta's action-oriented approach.

3.2 Semi-structured In-Depth Expert Interviews

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the most appropriate qualitative method, given the research aims and context (Minhat, 2015, p. 210). Positioned between structured and unstructured formats, semi-structured interviews offer a balance of flexibility and focus. Unlike structured interviews with rigid, pre-set questions or unstructured ones with no guide at all, semi-structured formats allow for guided spontaneity, making them especially effective for exploring complex, context-sensitive topics.

A topic guide was developed to outline key research domains while allowing the interviewer to adapt questions spontaneously during the conversation (Singh, 2019, p. 29). This adaptability extended to tailoring the guide to each participant's role, supporting a richer variety of perspectives.

The guide served as a flexible framework rather than a fixed script, helping maintain direction while allowing space for emergent insights (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4).

The researcher adopted an active interviewing stance, using real-time listening and multitasking to identify relevant follow-up questions based on participant input. Because these follow-ups were unscripted, they encouraged depth and authenticity, creating a natural, conversational flow (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 6). A tone shift between conversational and informal helped foster trust, prompting participants to share more genuine reflections. Even when familiar with a topic, the researcher still asked open questions to acquire analyzable data. This approach proved valuable in uncovering hidden opinions and deeper ethical reasoning (Agarwal, 2020, p. 84).

3.3 Sample & Sampling Criteria

To gain a nuanced understanding of how SMM practitioners navigate ethical and strategic pressures, the sample was deliberately diversified. The primary sampling criterion was occupation: all participants were actively engaged in social media work at a professional level. This distinction separates practitioners from general users, highlighting that their engagement is driven by strategic goals, defined here to include not only financial profit but also audience reach and community building. These will be explored in detail later, but it is important to note that strategy in SMM is multi-layered, not linear.

In addition to occupation, the sample was varied by gender, age, education, and geography. Participants represented multiple European countries (Italy, Germany, Hungary, Slovenia, Portugal), as well as non-European regions (Asia, the Middle East, Nigeria). This allowed for the exploration of cross-cultural, regulatory, and contextual differences. Age diversification captured multiple seniority levels and generational standpoints. Some practitioners had matured professionally before social media became dominant; others grew up with it. These contrasting timelines offered a more textured view of the field. In line with Rhodes & Brickman (2008, p. 112) and Sarkar (2024, p. 394), this kind of diversity enhances representativeness and allows for broader generalizability than a homogeneous sample.

The sampling followed a purposive strategy, selecting participants whose roles and experiences aligned with the study's objectives, particularly the diversity of the SMM field (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 6). Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals qualified as domain experts based on their direct industry experience (Sharma, 2023, p. 637).

Participants were primarily recruited via the researcher's professional network, particularly through adjacent fields such as Media, Communication, and Marketing. Direct friends were excluded to avoid bias. Special attention was given to including senior-level professionals able to reflect on field developments. To reach this sample, peers in related areas (e.g., influencer marketing legal supervision) were asked to forward

interview requests. This introduced a snowball sampling component, whereby initial contacts referred suitable participants (Sedgwick, 2013, p. 1).

Outreach was conducted through platforms such as WhatsApp (when contact information was known) and LinkedIn, which enabled connection with previously unknown professionals involved in strategic SMM activities. The next section provides an overview table detailing participants by age, gender, nationality, and occupation.

The following table provides an overview of participants and their relevant for the subsequent analysis criteria, age, country of residence and occupation.

Interviewee Tag	**Age**	**Country of residence**	**Occupation**
Future Social Media Practitioner (22)	22	Turkey	Student
Social Media Manager (23)	24	Taiwan	Social Media Manager
Influencer (24)	24	America	Influencer
Influencer Marketeer (24)	24	Slovenia	Influencer Marketeer
Social Media Manager (27)	27	Germany	Social Media Manager
Strategy and Communication Expert (29)	29	Hungary	Strategy and Communication Expert
Content Creator (29)	29	Italy	Content Creator
Digital Marketeer (33)	33	Nigeria	Digital Marketeer
Tech Expert (55)	55	Portugal	Tech Developer
Digital Consultant (55)	55	Italy	Digital Consultant

Table 1: Participant overview table, including Interviewee Tag, Age, Country of residence and occupation.

When invited to participate in the research, participants were required to sign a consent form, provided by the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication's (ESHCC) (Janssen & Verboord, 2024, p. 35). This form clearly outlined the scope and conditions of participation in the study, ensuring transparency and informing participants of any potential risks associated with their involvement.

3.4 Operationalization

Question domain	Focus	Question
Role in Social Media	Context Ambiguity of Practicioners being also Users	• Can you briefly introduce yourself? (Current role, past experiences, years in SMM, education) • How would you define social media? • What is your role in the broader Social Media Context? • Are you a user or a practicioner?
Personal evaluation of Social Media	Explore negative evaluation Highlight ambiguity of operating in a personally negatively evaluated environment Explore relationship between personal and professional evaluation of Medium	• How do you evaluate Social Media on a personal level? • What bothers you most personally about Social Media? • Which public debates about the negative side effects of social media (e.g., addiction, well-being decline) are you aware of? • How do you personally feel about these debates?
Professional evaluation of Social Media (positive)	Draw up on strategic opportunities of Social Media Competitive Advantage of Social Media	• How would you define ""strategy"" in your social media marketing work?" • What are the strategic goals of your company in their Social Media activity • What are the strategic priorities of your/companies Social
Professional evaluation of Social Media (negative)	Touch upon risks of Social Media practices Explore ethical challenges and their evaluation	• What risks do you see in using social media platforms for marketing purposes? •How would you define ethics in the context of your work? •Are ethical discussions (e.g., about user well-being, manipulation, data privacy) a part of your team/company culture? •What are the most critical ethical challenges you perceive in
Real life cases	Shift focus to practice	• Can you recall a specific situation where you encountered an ethical dilemma?
Mitigation Strategies (free-lancer/company) (personal/professional)	Explore awarness of ethical challenges and how they are handled in practice, whether the focus relies on a personal or peer oriented mitigation behaviour and how companies handle this	•How does your company's broader strategy align with your personal values and goals? •How do you ensure ethical compliance? • What is your company's stance and how do they communicate internally ethical standards? • How do you feel in operating in such a debated environment? • How do you feel in operating in an environment you have a personal negative evaluation of?
Reflection on industry	Broaden perception beyond indivi	• Can you recall a specific situation where you encountered an ethical dilemma? • What have you experienced in the industry generally regarding to importance to ethical compliance?
Hopes and outcomes for future	Interview closing Future hopes for the Social Media Marketing Industry, based on current fears	• What are your future hopes and outcomes for the Social Media Marketing industry? • What would you like to see - or not to see - in the future of the Social Media Marketing industry?

Table 2: Overview of the topic guide, question domains and aims.

As previously noted, the diverse nature of the sample was carefully considered throughout the interview process. While a general topic guide provided structure, it was flexibly adapted to each participant's profile to ensure relevance and depth (Singh, 2019, p. 29). Questions were tailored to reflect individual characteristics and evolved from theoretical foundations, consistent with DeCarlo's (2018) description of a deductive approach.

Interviews began with personal introductions focused on current roles and prior experiences. Given the dual identity of practitioners, as both users and professionals, participants were invited to position themselves within the broader social media landscape. This contextualization helped depict the tension between personal and professional evaluations of social media. Participants were then asked to share their individual perceptions of the medium.

The discussion next moved to the professional use of social media, encouraging reflection on how platforms support strategic goals compared to earlier analogue paradigms. Ethical challenges were gradually introduced by inviting participants to consider potential risks related to their practice. Questions remained broad and open-ended, allowing for spontaneous, participant-led insights (Ogden & Cornwell, 2010, p. 9).

The conversation then shifted to concrete examples: real-life dilemmas, the role of company culture, and day-to-day management of ethical concerns. Finally, participants were prompted to reflect more broadly on industry-wide trends and offer their outlook for the future. This prismatic questioning strategy supported a layered understanding of how ethical tensions unfold in context (Awasthy, 2020, p. 149) and addressed all components of the guiding research question:

How do social media marketing practitioners manage and balance ethical considerations, such as data & privacy, transparency & authenticity wellbeing, or other negative side-effects, with economic needs while strategically ensuring the consumption of brands, products and social media content?

This sequence, beginning with role clarification, followed by personal reflections, strategic goals, ethical risks, and broader industry perspectives, ensured both logical progression and conceptual cohesion. The structure, while consistently adapted, proved effective in eliciting rich, relevant responses.

All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The atmosphere was kept conversational yet professional to ensure participant comfort (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 6) while retaining a rigorous academic focus (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015, p. 48). During interviews, the researcher took observational notes to support later analysis and improve recall (Middendorf & Macan, 2002). Consent to record was obtained after an informal introduction.

Microsoft Teams' built-in AI transcription tool provided real-time transcripts. These were securely stored, backed up in a private cloud, and rigorously cleaned for accuracy. Edits included removing filler words and disfluencies, improving flow and readability. This cleanup process also marked the beginning of Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) familiarization phase, laying the groundwork for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interview data was analyzed in alignment with the guiding research objective: exploring how SMM practitioners balance ethical challenges with profitability. Thematic Analysis (TA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 77–101), was employed to identify recurring patterns and build a coherent narrative suited to the exploratory nature of the study. All six recommended steps were rigorously followed.

The first step consists in transcript familiarization. As transcripts were cleaned, removing interjections and filler words, the researcher simultaneously absorbed the content and reflected on emerging insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Notes taken during the interviews served as additional reference points and supported this early engagement, while also helping maintain alignment with the research objective (Middendorf & Macan, 2002). These preparatory actions helped mitigate the dispersion challenge common in qualitative data by preserving focus through ongoing interaction with the material.

In the second phase, initial coding was conducted manually using Atlas.ti Web. Segments of text, ranging from individual sentences to longer responses, were labeled with descriptive codes, which captured both explicit and underlying meanings. A total of 247 initial codes were generated across ten transcripts. While content unrelated to the research focus was excluded, openness was maintained toward unexpected insights, in line with the exploratory ethos of qualitative inquiry (Singh, 2019, p. 29). Atlas.ti supported the coding process by enabling structured storage and efficient retrieval (Gibbs, 2007, p. 103). To enhance clarity, all codes were later exported to Excel and reorganized into a more visual format.

This reorganization laid the groundwork for the third step: generating themes. Codes were clustered into broader sub-themes, such as concerns around well-being and privacy, grouped under the category Ethical Challenges for Users. These thematic groupings helped condense the wide-ranging dataset into structured, narratively coherent categories, allowing for a clearer analytical overview (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Many themes had already begun to emerge during data collection and were refined as patterns solidified.

Subsequently, in the fourth step, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence. Some codes were reassigned or eliminated, and sub-themes were consolidated under overarching thematic categories. This mosaic-like process involved layering codes into increasingly abstract structures while maintaining fidelity to the raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). The key guiding question remained whether the identified patterns genuinely reflected the dataset and meaningfully advanced the research objective.

The fifth step consisted in, naming themes to finalize their structure. This evaluative step ensured that each theme contributed to a logical progression and conceptual integrity (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). The resulting thematic map mirrored the theoretical framing of the thesis. It opened with the core tension between ethical and strategic goals, then elaborated on specific ethical challenges arising from this tension, and finally, moved toward practitioner-enacted mitigation strategies. This sequence reflects the logic of

qualitative management research, which begins with a problem and seeks to arrive at actionable insights (Mishra & Subudhi, 2020, p. 1).

The analytical process aligns with the three-step coding model proposed by Boeije and Bleijenbergh (2010, p. 111), involving open coding (initial labeling), axial coding (theme clustering), and selective coding (final theme synthesis). From the original 247 codes, 11 sub-themes were developed and further refined into 3 overarching themes: Tension, Ethical Challenges, and Mitigation Strategies. This stepwise progression is consistent with qualitative methodology, where interpretation involves both immersion in the material and strategic distancing to discern broader patterns. Like the churning of milk, meaning emerges through a reflective back-and-forth engagement with the data (Awasthy, 2020, p. 153).

For visual organization, codes were structured in Excel using color-coded tables, which allowed for quick thematic overviews and supported the synthesis of sub-themes into main categories. This tool proved particularly useful in zooming out to assess the structural logic of the developing narrative and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the dataset. At this stage, full thematic internalization was achieved, enabling the construction of the final report.

The sixth and final phase involved translating this structure into the findings section. The themes were presented as an integrated narrative, with illustrative quotes used to anchor key points in participants' lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). These narratives formed the analytical structure of the report, allowing the raw data to be transformed into clear, evidence-based insights.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

To enhance both validity and reliability, this study was carefully designed to prioritise trustworthiness and credibility. Multiple theoretical perspectives addressing different dimensions of rigour were combined to reinforce academic integrity.

The concurrent use of methodological strategies and theoretical approaches strengthened conceptual depth and mitigated bias. This aligns with *triangulation*, described by Mishra and Subudhi (2020, p. 6) as a method for enhancing validity. The integration of both inductive and deductive reasoning further contributed to methodological rigour (Guthery, 2007, p. 222). While the topic guide was initially grounded in existing theory, reflecting a deductive point of departure (Thomas, 2003, p. 9), the research process remained open to emergent themes. This iterative flexibility enabled a more nuanced understanding of complex phenomena (Awasthy, 2020, p. 146), a hallmark of qualitative inquiry. As Singh (2019, p. 29) reminds us, openness in qualitative research must be accompanied by depth, not superficiality.

Rigour was ensured through adherence to methodological integrity (Tracy, 2010, p. 840), with each step of the research process carefully documented. Transparency was upheld by providing visual records of the analytical procedures, allowing readers to assess the research logic. Although replicability is not the primary aim in qualitative work, given its context-specific nature (TalkadSukumar & Metoyer, 2019, p. 1; Awasthy, 2020, p. 146), this study seeks to enhance validity through deliberate sample diversity. Participants varied by age, background, geographic origin, and occupational role to reflect the heterogeneous nature of

the SMM field. This sampling strategy supported analytic generalisability and a broader, more layered understanding (Rhodes & Brickman, 2008, p. 112; Sarkar, 2024, p. 394).

Interview questions were crafted to elicit reflections on both individual practices and wider industry dynamics. The topic guide was tailored to participants' profiles, enabling both contextual sensitivity and individual expression. Such design helped capture industry-wide patterns while remaining rooted in the lived experience of practitioners (Sarkar, 2024, p. 394).

Thematic saturation was achieved by asking comparable questions across participants, ensuring consistency in scope while allowing flexibility in responses. This mirrors Agarwal's (2020, p. 84) view of semi-structured interviews as structured yet adaptable tools.

The combined use of Atlas.ti and Excel ensured analytic rigour and traceability. Interviews were securely recorded, and coding steps were visually documented for transparency (Gonzalez Ocantos & Masullo, 2024, p. 25). Codes were exported into Excel and colour-coded by domain, facilitating clarity and thematic organisation (Gibbs, 2007, p. 103).

Note-taking during interviews complemented recordings by capturing subtle observations that might not be audible. These notes served as a pre-analytical tool, reviewed before formal coding to recall key takeaways and sharpen focus. This step helped counteract thematic dispersion, where qualitative richness risks fragmentation, by reinforcing direction and maintaining coherence throughout the analysis (Bednarek, 2024, p. 554).

4. Results

4.1. Reasons for ethical tension

4.1.1 Strategic goals as a reason for ethical tension

The central hypothesis of this thesis, that monetary profit is prioritized over ethical considerations such as consumer respect, was strongly supported by the data. 8 out of 10 interviewees underscored the strategic importance of profit in their professional practices, consolidating the research premise. While the ways this priority was reported to be enacted varied, the core message remained consistent: monetary profit dominates decision-making, often above ethical integrity.

Another key finding concerns the layered nature of monetary profit, which may not always be pursued directly but is often approached through intermediary objectives that ultimately contribute to profit maximization.

This emphasis on profitability was articulated both explicitly and implicitly. When asked about their professional priorities, participants repeatedly pointed to conversion metrics and performance indicators tied to financial gain. Such emphasis reflects a tendency to objectify and instrumentalize the consumer, reducing ethical concerns to secondary status.

Notably, this prioritization emerged not only through what was said, but how it was said. Across multiple interviews, tone and attitude conveyed a shared orientation toward strategic goal achievement. Such a mindset is closely aligned with one stereotype of the performance driven actor prevalent in contemporary Western business culture (Gras, 1944, p. 82).

Profit maximization, widely recognized as a central force in modern economic systems (Veblen, 1899; Stehr and Voss, 2019, p. 6)), can sideline broader ethical responsibilities. When financial outcomes dominate, moral considerations are easily be marginally considered (Abela and Murphy, 2008, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 285). Such a conditions creates the fertile terrain to exploitative or unethical practices at the expense of others.

One practitioner's comment was particularly illustrative. The interviewee argued, ethical behavior, does not guarantee financial reward and therefore tends to be treated as secondary, if not optional, a *nice-to-have*, rather than essential. This mindset was further reinforced by a concrete example, in which a financial gain, could justify the compromise of ethical standards. In such a depiction profit serves as the exclusive indicator of value.

> *"I cannot buy bread … with ethics … it's not a currency that the pin machine accepts …*
> *Or if a tobacco company would ask me to make a new logo? I would do it'' (Strategy and Communication Expert - 29)*

> *"We talk about to make 10 million at the end of the year …*
> *A goal, always … is conversion, speak the company profitably.*
> *The goal is conversion … There is always conversion … Why?*

Because I would like that … you go out and buy my product." (Digital Consultant – 55)

Profit pursuit as a top priority strategic goal has proved underlining complexity and a layered multi-step nature. Practitioners drew light upon the increasingly complex and dynamic nature of strategy in the social media context. Success in the digital platform context is a more nuanced process, targeted through intermediary steps. These intermediary steps are primary targeted by professionals in their strategic SMM routines, yet their achievement always reconducted to the main goal: profit prioritization. This layered dimension further emphasizes the importance monetary profit covers, while strategically targeted through precise digital metrics, such as reach, engagement, community building etc. prioritization. Successful marketing increases these dimensions, and in line also boosts conversion rates, as a direct result. An interviewee mentions the example of Coca Cola's successful marketing strategies, as in their communication, aims at positioning the product at *top of mind* of the consumers, marketing technical term to describe memorability. This position in the consumers minds, serves the purpose when it comes to the moment of consumption. When a consumer is thirsty, even more likely when the product is visually present, that *top of mind availability* will serve the conversion. This example greatly exemplifies the layered nature of monetary profit achievement, which can see intermediary steps, as in the ladder case memorability leads to conversion in need.

The pursuit of profit as a main strategic goal appeared to follow a layered process. Rather than being addressed directly, profit was often approached through steps that ultimately aim at it. Practitioners described success in digital marketing as complex and dynamic, achieved by focusing on key metrics such as reach, engagement, and brand visibility. These are targeted in day-to-day work and ultimately contribute to higher conversion and revenue.

One interviewee explained, effective marketing helps place a brand in the consumer's mind so that it comes to mind when a purchase decision is made. This was illustrated through the idea of *brand memorability* (Bainbridge, & Oliva, 2017, p. 141) instead of causing an immediate sale, marketing increases familiarity, which then leads to conversion at the moment of need.

"… every company that does communication … wants at the time you need her, you think of her... Coca Cola I didn't see the message that makes me convert, yet I think of Coke.
All the activities of a business are … aimed at selling … in a more or less direct way.'' (Digital Consultant – 55)

The interviews challenged the assumption that profit is the sole driver of practitioner activity in digital spaces. While monetary gain emerged as a dominant motivation, it was not universal. Practitioners reported additional purposes for engaging with social media, such as enjoyment, entertainment, or education.

One content creator, for instance, emphasized the psychological stimulation she derives from online interaction as a key motivator, even while acknowledging the centrality of profit in her work. Her position

exemplifies a broader pattern: individual practitioners, such as influencers or freelancers, often framed their activity as more casual or personally fulfilling. In contrast, organizational practitioners typically maintained a more strategic and profit-driven perspective, closely aligned with business goals.

This distinction between individual and organizational practitioners revealed subtle yet important differences in how platform engagement is approached, shaped by context, role, and intention.

> *"because it was a different stimulus, so it's not purely related to making money." (Content Creator – 33)*

> *"And the goal of marketing is for people to sell their **** and make money." (Strategy and Communication Expert - 29)*

A further notable insight, discussed further in a later section [see section 4.2.3] refers to the obscure, as opposite to positive, motivations behind practitioners' digital engagement.

This finding reflects a broader concern over social media's *dark side*, where addictive design and dopamine-driven feedback loops can foster unhealthy, compulsive usage. Interview data suggests that for some practitioners, engagement was neither profit-driven nor positively motivated, but rooted in psychological dependency. One particularly interviewee described digital addiction as an emotionally driven compulsion, revealing that practitioners themselves may fall victim of infrastructures they operate in.

> *"…not … for the gain itself, but because it was the only thing that made me feel good." (Content Creator – 33)*

4.1.2 Social Media's contextual complexity as a reason for ethical tension

Social media introduces a level of complexity that exceeds traditional analogue marketing . Its fast pace, global reach, and recent emergence make it a challenging environment to navigate, particularly in terms of ethical behavior. Interview data confirms that the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of digital platforms complicates practitioners' ethical decision-making. Artificial Intelligence was repeatedly mentioned as an example of this rapid innovation, illustrating how quickly the digital landscape shifts. As platforms continue to develop faster than regulatory frameworks can adapt, practitioners face a fragmented legal environment. With no universal standards, ethical adherence becomes inconsistent and difficult to ensure.

> *"The fast and pace of evolution becomes quite astonishing.*
> *And will there's no show, no signs of it slowing down."(Tech Expert – 55)*

> *"And the legal situation doesn't keep up as quickly as the innovations come" (Social Media Manager – 27)*

What further characterizes the navigational complexity of the social media landscape and heightens the risk to ethical integrity is the multitude of platforms forming it. Each platform embodies a different operational paradigm that practitioners must master to remain effective. This results in significant complexity, ranging from unique algorithms and content logics to diverse audience and practitioners need to navigate these simultaneously. The complexity is compounded by the dynamic, fast-paced evolution of these platforms.

What is particularly interesting to note is the contrast between this extreme complexity and the virtually non-existent entry barriers to working in the SMM industry. No formal credentials or qualifications are required to fill the occupation of SMM practitioner, often just a device is sufficient. This accessibility contributes to a wide array of improvised practitioners operating with inconsistent levels of awareness and competence, often unintentionally contributing to ethical ambiguity and questionable practices.

As illustrated in the following insights from industry voices, both the multi-platform nature of SMM and its near to in -existent barriers for professional entry intensify the landscape's challenges:

> *''Everyone has their own [logic] … From Youtube to TikTokok the ability to hold a user's attention became more and more difficult'' (Digital Consultant – 55)*

> *"casual time now can make money," (Social Media Manager – 23)*

What further enhances complexity of digital navigation for practitioners is the spatial dislocation, social media builds upon. As made evident during the COVID 19 pandemic, previous paradigms such as in presence work become less dominating thanks to digitalization, where work now can be completed from home. This spatial dislocation lowers the limitation of geographical boundaries accentuating globalization and reducing cross country difficulty of communication creating an interconnected global community. Yet the increased visibility, as the possibility to have a global audience sees increased revenue as a result of this increased visibility , equals to increased responsibility and subsequently risk as well. Global exposure heightens the risk of a so called backlash, where miss steps are promptly criticized heavily and spread virally, seriously compromising long term survival and leaving practitioners with the feeling of *walking on a razor blade*, where every potential misstep results in a global scandal impacting reputation, fundamental pillar for digital success. This ladder increased risk for reputational damage is further accentuated by the underlying nature of digital platforms as in spatial dislocation allows for geographically flexible consumption and increased scrunity as the non face to face confront increases the willingness to spread negativity, such as critique, and in extreme cases hate, as the lack of confrontation comforts users in this negative divulgation

This finding, which emerged consistently across multiple interviews, highlights how spatial dislocation, as a structural condition of digital media, intensifies the complexity of online navigation for

practitioners. As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional paradigms such as in-person work lost importance due to accelerated digitalization, enabling remote work as a standard mode of operation. This shift reduces geographic constraints, expands cross-border communication, and fosters a highly interconnected global environment.

However, with this increased visibility comes amplified risk. The global reach that enables greater revenue potential also increases exposure to public scrutiny. A single misstep can trigger a viral backlash, potentially threatening a practitioner's long-term credibility. This reputational fragility leaves practitioners feeling as though they are *walking on a razor's edge*, where every action carries the weight of possible scandal, especially damaging in a landscape where reputation is central to digital success.

The risk is further intensified by the nature of online spaces: spatial dislocation allows geographically fluid content consumption, while the absence of face-to-face interaction lowers the limitation for public negativity. Users often feel encouraged to criticize, sometimes heavily, precisely because they are shielded behind screens. As one interviewee notes:

> *"People are fast to criticize on social media because they are behind a screen." (Social Media Manager - 23)*

> *"OK they hardly convert and very easily criticize so it's a is a is a very, very delicate environment." (Digital Consultant - 55)*

4.2 Ethical Challenges

The core ethical tension explored in this section lies in an asymmetry of power, as alluded to in the introduction [see section 1.1]. The sometimes overlapping yet differentiated roles of practitioners and users manifest in distinct ethical challenges faced by each category. The relationship is imbalanced. Through qualitative coding, 22 open codes were linked to consumer-related challenges, compared to 12 codes addressing practitioner concerns, indicating that users are more frequently exposed to ethical risks. Several interviewees suggest that unethical behaviour is at times consciously employed to increase profit, even when this comes directly at the expense of user interests.

Conversely, this imbalance is further amplified by the fact that users do not exhibit comparable unethical behaviours toward practitioners, as in this ladder category is not driven by profit reasons, capable of blurring ethical integrity.

The following section will explore in detail the ethical challenges faced, divided by category (I) Users (II) Practitioners (III) Users and Practitioners.

4.2.1 Ethical challenges for users

Deceptive advertising emerged as the most prominent ethical challenge across interviews. While varying in application, from manipulated marketing messages to interface-level nudging, these practices

share a unified aim. Influencing consumer decisions through misleading communication. Although their application differ, their strategic aim leads ultimately to monetary gain. Deceptive strategies rely on the deliberate use of inauthentic or incomplete information to shape consumer perception and trigger purchase decisions that might not have occurred under transparent conditions.

An emblematic case was shared by Digital Marketeer (33), who recalled being asked to promote a new pair of wireless earphones by a tech company. The product's key selling point was the battery life. Although, this feature was advertised as offering 24 hours of autonomy, while the actual capacity amounted to only 10. The practitioner recognized the ethical compromise involved, pointing out the potential harm for consumers who would base their purchase on inaccurate expectations. Financial loss and dissatisfaction were seen as inevitable outcomes once the true product performance failed to match the advertised claims.

> *"I was gonna do a tech campaign launch for a new earbud.*
> *And the earbud had 24 hours.*
> *But the real feature was 10 hours.*
> *The negative effects of it is people losing their money, through wrong information, through some scam'' (Digital Marketeer - 33)*

This example highlights the risk of exposure when misleading claims are used for commercial gain. It also points to a broader issue: the fine line between persuasion and deception. As the interviewee explains, his understanding of fair marketing is rooted in the belief that marketing should provide solutions to consumer needs. This definition promotes genuineness by excluding misleading practices. Yet he also reflects on the blurred boundary between persuasion and manipulation, between fair marketing and unethical tactics. While sales remain an indisputable goal, marketers must be creative to meet this demand. Still, the interviewee stresses the ethical imperative to stay transparent and open. The tension between fair and unfair marketing practices recurred across interviews, with 6 out of 10 participants raising this concern.

Beyond exaggerated claims or omissions, the data revealed a second form of ethical misconduct: misleading platform mechanics. These refer to manipulative engagement strategies embedded in platform business models, operating at a more subtle yet deliberately deceptive level. In such cases, users are not just misinformed but strategically misled about the nature of their interactions to stimulate engagement.

A compelling case reported by a Tech Expert (55) illustrates this dynamic. He was invited to collaborate on a dating platform whose conversion strategy relied on fake user profiles managed by human agents. These profiles, often presented as highly attractive individuals, were used to simulate reciprocal interest and encourage real users to interact. This engineered illusion led users to believe they were making genuine romantic progress, when in reality, the interactions were fabricated to optimize paid subscriptions, promising continued access to what appeared to be mutual connection.

"*So they were creating fake engagement in order to incentivize [customers] to pay.*"
(Tech Expert - 55)

This case reflects a deeper instrumentalization of user behavior, where emotional vulnerability is exploited through fabricated interactions presented as genuine. The deception lies in both the manipulation of emotional stakes and the illusion of neutral platform functionality, ultimately serving profit-driven goals.

Building on the earlier discussion of success layers in digital marketing, interviews revealed that not all deceptive strategies aim at immediate profit. Some tactics serve intermediary objectives that ultimately reinforce long-term commercial advantage. These often take the form of seemingly generous offers, such as free content or discounts, designed to collect personal information, particularly email addresses or phone numbers.

One interviewee described this practice as central to modern marketing infrastructure. Acquiring direct contact details enables targeted outreach via high-conversion channels like WhatsApp or email. These techniques outperform general advertising by driving repeat purchases and extending the customer lifecycle.

While the interaction may appear benign, its real function is profiling, built on user trust and limited awareness of how the data will be used. The ethical issue lies in the collection itself, but prominently in the lack of transparency around its purpose. Users believe they are receiving value, when in fact they are surrendering data to systems designed to reshape their future behaviour, reinforcing the asymmetry between perception and intent.

" The promotions, just to get them out of the anonymity […] to have his phone number, [which has a] very high conversion rates." (Digital Consultant 55)

While some deceptive strategies pursue direct profit, others operate more subtly targeting foundational enablers of long-term commercial success, such as brand reputation. In digital markets where trust drives engagement and loyalty, reputational capital becomes a strategic asset and thus, increasingly subject to manipulation (Pantelica, 2008, p. 119).

The data revealed that ethical credibility is often constructed performatively: several interviewees described cases in which brands promoted values like sustainability or inclusivity to cultivate a moral image that was not consistently reflected in practice. This tactic, known as *digital ethics-washing* (Schultz et al., 2024, p. 805), mirrors previous patterns of deception, where consumers are led to believe in an authentic values-driven mission, when in fact the ethical narrative serves instrumental aims. Unlike overt false claims, the deception lies in the strategic curation of narrative, framing ethics as purpose while using it as positioning.

As neutrality in social and environmental matters is no longer viable, brands face pressure to take visible stances. Yet when such stances lack substantive backing, they create a dissonance between projected

identity and actual intent, a subtle but impactful form of deception that secures competitive advantage under the appearance of moral integrity.

One participant, for instance, reflected critically on whether her company's environmental commitments were genuinely pursued or simply leveraged for branding purposes.

> *''For [us the goal is] more views, likes and followers [ultimately aimed at] selling product.*
> *But then they phrased it better.*
> *They want to stop single use plastic.*
> *Sometimes I really don't know [if] that's just a way to sell bottles.''*
> *(Social Media Marketeer – 23)*

Deception in digital environments extends beyond practitioner actions and can emerge from the regulatory systems that frame user experience. A key example is law-washing (Assalve, 2025, p. 1060), where legal frameworks deliver a false sense of protection, as these regulatory frameworks lack effective implementation.

The GDPR, often cited as a benchmark, illustrates this gap. While build on correct foundations of user control over data, its execution lacks serving this noble purpose, as the real landscape is dominated by unread consent banners and impossibility to navigate if not by accepting consent. These mechanisms contribute to symbolic regulation and lack effective implementation, reinforcing a structure that appears protective while offering limited practical safeguards.

> *" Even though the principle is correct to give users control over their data - In reality GDPR for most of the companies […] consents forms that no one reads to before they use website." (Tech Expert – 55)*

4.2.2 Ethical challenges for practitioners

Beyond user-side concerns, the data revealed that practitioners themselves face significant ethical challenges within the social media environment. Among these, reputational damage emerged as the most frequently coded theme, underscoring its role as the dominant ethical risk from the practitioner's perspective. This finding complicates the ethical landscape: practitioners are not only potential sources of harm but also vulnerable actors within the same complex environment system.

Reputational damage, defined earlier as the negative impact on a company's credibility and public perception resulting from online crises, potentially undermining their strategic positioning in the long term (Gavilanes and Párraga, 2018, p. 194) poses a critical threat in digital models driven by visibility, reach, and perceived authenticity. In an attention economy where influence is measured through metrics like follower count and engagement, both individuals and brands depend on exposure to sustain relevance. Trust functions as a core currency and once compromised recovery may be impossible. As one interviewee underscores the

risk of professional erasure subsequent to a public digital scandal: “your page becomes a ghost” (Content Creator – 29). Another linked such reputational fallout directly to financial risk:

> *“We’ll have a significant backlash,*
> *And there can also be financial consequences [due to the] authentic trust loss.”*
> *(Tech Expert – 55)*

The data suggests that high-stakes visibility in social media generates ongoing psychological strain for practitioners. While not always explicitly named, their reflections convey a sense of cognitive tension in balancing exposure with ethical expectations. This dynamic is perhaps best captured by the metaphor of *walking on a razor blade*. Each post or interaction demands careful calibration, where a single misstep risks reputational collapse. Practitioners compared this pressure to operating at extreme carefulness, where there is little room for error and no safety net.

This pressure profoundly shapes the practitioner’s relationship with content creation. Rather than encouraging creativity or authentic expression, fear of backlash leads to self-censorship and emotional tension. Practitioners described hesitating before publishing, repeatedly adjusting tone and message, and struggling to align strategic intent with audience expectations for integrity. The result is a cautious, calculated mode of engagement, paradoxically lowering the authenticity that audiences demand.

This reputational fragility is amplified by the structural features of platform economies. Spatial dislocation dissolves geographic boundaries, allowing backlash to scale rapidly across borders. What might once have remained local can now escalate into global scandal, where reputational risk, under these conditions, is intensified both in scope and speed (see Section 4.1.2).

Importantly, the awareness of this exposure creates ethical ambiguity. When practitioners act responsibly primarily to avoid reputational fallout, their integrity appears strategic rather than principled. As the data suggests, this echoes concerns around *ethics-washing*, where moral positioning serves brand maintenance rather than genuine conviction. While participants were aware that unethical conduct threatens long-term sustainability, their comments also revealed the ambiguity of intent: is integrity a principle or a strategy?

> *“If I did the wrong thing today and I win, what about tomorrow?”*
> *(Social Media Marketeer – 33)*

> *“You can make money by taking every deal […] this is not gonna make you sustainable in the long term.”*
> *(Influencer Marketeer – 24)*

“People will realize that you're not being authentic and it's easier to lose customers.” (Social Media Marketeer – 33)

Another ethical challenge identified in the data is the pressure stemming from constant connectivity. This strain originates in the dual nature of the practitioner role: while social media serves as a professional tool during work hours, it continues to mediate personal interactions beyond them. The resulting overlap produces a state of continuous digital exposure, often accompanied by symptoms linked to overuse and digital dependency, a theme explored further in the next section.

That practitioners themselves suffer from the negative effects of the digital environment marks a critical shift from the thesis’s initial premise, which primarily cast them as agents of potential harm. One content creator and livestreamer offered a particularly vivid account: she described a grueling 20-hour work rhythm that left space for rest only during short weekend intervals. This relentless pace eroded her connection to offline life, leading to a dissolution of boundaries between her personal identity and public-facing persona. As she put it, her “real identity had ceased to exist,” surfacing only occasionally. Over time, her digital self took precedence, progressively displacing her private self. This extreme case illustrates the acute psychological toll faced by public-facing practitioners, exacerbated by the structural conditions of social media work, spatial dislocation, blurred work boundaries, and the demands of perpetual online labor.

“It becomes alienating [to work on social media], because I reduced my contacts with the outside world.”

“[…] I felt a bit like a little Chinese girl in a factory and instead of sewing she had to create content, always renew herself, always be nice, always be online.” (Content Creator - 33)

Her experience underscores the psychological toll public figures may incur, particularly regarding personal integrity and privacy. In roles defined by constant visibility, the boundary between private and professional life becomes increasingly porous. This tension escalated when professionally produced, sexually suggestive content was circulated by her ex-partner’s mother to her family. The event severely disrupted her familial relationships, leading to estrangement and intensifying a broader sense of alienation and social isolation.

‘’My ex-partner's mother decides to mail these sexy pictures to my parents and of course it blows up. Sort of a rift between me and my parents, so I find myself further even more alienated because my parents decide to cut off any kind of relationship with me.’’ (Content Creator - 33)

The participant’s account highlights the severity of psychological and personal distress practitioners may endure over extended periods, emphasizing the ethical relevance of the risks embedded in digital

professional environments. Her case illustrates how the boundless visibility of digital platforms not only disrupts work-life boundaries but heightens personal exposure. Unlike analogue settings, online content remains permanently accessible, easily reproduced, and broadly disseminated, intensifying the potential for long-term emotional or reputational harm, particularly when personal and professional identities converge.

Such findings highlight the urgent need to better safeguard the frequently overlooked group of practitioners, affected by negative consequences commercial digital environments entail.

4.2.3 Ethical challenges for users and practitioners

A final ethical challenge to be considered is one that affects both groups, users and practitioners, even if under different forms. The dual identity of practitioners as both professionals and private users of social media contributes to shared vulnerabilities. What emerged across various interviews was a negative personal evaluation of social media's impact on daily life: participants described a sense of time distortion, fatigue, and the shaping of thought patterns around unrealistic expectations. Despite this, when asked whether they had ever reflected on the tension between their personal discomfort and their professional reliance on these same platforms, many admitted they had not.

> *"On a personal level?*
> *Well, I hate it. Unfortunately, I'm addicted to it..*
> *It shapes how I look at the world, how I look at things.*
> *I often do a break. Switch off.*
> *Sometimes you just really want to switch a button and turn off."*
>
> *"Did I ever think of the fact, that I hate Social Media and still work with them?*
> *I actually never looked at it from that perspective." (Strategy and Communication Expert – 29)*

This quote reflects the critical view many practitioners hold toward social media on a personal level. However, when prompted to reflect on the experience of working within an environment they themselves evaluate negatively, most had not meaningfully engaged with this question before. This suggests that ethical concerns are often not central in their day-to-day professional considerations. Some even expressed mild unease when confronted with this contradiction.

This lack of reflection highlights the ambivalence of their position. On the one hand, they are active agents who deploy digital strategies professionally; on the other, they are subject to the same mechanisms of constant connectivity and digital overexposure as any other user. In some cases, this resulted in symptoms commonly associated with digital addiction, such as alienation, burnout, and light signs comparable to a depressive state of being. These effects appear to stem from the erosion of boundaries between work and private life, intensified by the continuous presence of social media across both domains. Furthermore, the emerged overlook of ethical consequences perpetuated through, even unintentional, unethical behaviour,

calls for greater consideration of addressing the shared consequences, given the severity of impact on severe dimensions such as mental health.

The quote reflects the critical stance many practitioners hold toward social media in their personal lives. Yet, when asked to reflect on working within an environment they themselves view negatively, most had not meaningfully considered this contradiction. This suggests that ethical concerns remain peripheral in their everyday professional reasoning, and some expressed mild discomfort when this tension was brought up.

The data highlights the ambivalence of their position. While practitioners actively shape digital environments, they are simultaneously subject to the same pressures of constant connectivity and overexposure as general users. Frequently this condition overlaps with symptoms linked with digital addiction, including burnout, alienation, and early signs of depressive states. These effects appear rooted in the collapse of boundaries between personal and professional life, accentuated by the pervasive presence of social media.

The data points to a concerning pattern, where engagement persists despite harm, reflecting the dynamics of addictive behavior. This ambiguity calls for urgent ethical attention, particularly regarding its implications for mental health and practitioner well-being.

4.3 Mitigation strategies

This section examines strategies practitioners use to manage ethical tensions while pursuing professional goals. A key finding was the reliance on a personal ethical compass, a term participants used to describe how they determine adequateness of actions, especially in the absence of formal guidance.

This compass reflects internalized values shaped by personal experience. For some, it is rooted in integrity and a desire to act responsibly. For others, ethical conduct is framed more strategically, as a means to sustain credibility, prevent reputational harm, and ensure long-term success.

One interviewee illustrated his personal motivation to act ethically as rooted in *Karma*, the Buddhist belief that one's actions will eventually return.

> *"I'm a strong believer in energy and Karma.*
> *So if you're giving in the wrong energy, doing the wrong things,*
> *you're going to get that in return.*
> *I ensure that I am always ethical in my approach to work." (Digital Marketeer – 33)*

While ethical views differ across individuals, the data underscores the importance of a clear ethical position in contexts where formal regulation is lacking. Several participants highlighted the role of workplace alignment with personal values, noting that company culture can significantly support or complicate ethical practice.

“Everybody is different, but then it's also about personal values.
So it's about you as a person, your code, you bring into work.”

“In such gray areas it ultimately comes to individual decision and the way you perceive this as a part of your personal and company culture. It's about you as a person and your code, you bring to work” (Tech Expert, 55)

These findings indicate that ethical decision-making is shaped by both personal conviction and situational context. The following analysis examines how practitioners operationalize their ethical compass across four recurring dimensions identified in the interviews: transparency, ethical boundaries, adding value, and quality assurance.

4.3.1 Transparency

The need for transparency was consistently emphasized across a significant number of interviews, underlining its importance in upholding ethical standards. In this context, transparency refers to the authenticity and genuineness of a practitioner’s communication efforts. In contrast to deceptive practices, these ethical guidelines promote honesty. While misleading strategies are frequently used in the highly competitive landscape of social media marketing, practitioners widely acknowledge that authenticity should be a core ethical principle in promoting products and services.

Whether driven by personal conviction or the recognition that ethical integrity supports long-term business sustainability, or a mix of both, many practitioners pointed to the value of transparency. Some even drew comparisons to interpersonal relationships, suggesting that ethical behavior should not be limited to professional life but should extend to one’s overall conduct as an individual.

Transparency emerged as a recurring theme across interviews (6 out of 10), underscored as essential to ethical practice. In this context, it refers to the authenticity and sincerity of communication, countering the widespread use of deceptive strategies in competitive social media marketing. Despite the prevalence of such tactics, the data revealed a shared belief that ethical promotion must prioritize honesty.

Whether rooted in personal values or a strategic view of ethics as key to long-term credibility practitioners consistently emphasized transparency as foundational. Some extended this principle beyond professional contexts, comparing it to the honesty expected in personal relationships, and emphasizing the need for transparency to be rooted not just in professional norms but in one’s core values.

‘’A personal value I bring into work is always transparency, right?
And this also means being able to communicate what we are trying to achieve’’ (Social Media Manager 33)

''You need to be honest to your friends, otherwise you're gonna lose friends, right?'' (Influencer Marketeer 24)

4.3.2 Ethical boundaries

A key strategy that emerged across interviews was the establishment of ethical boundaries, personal limits practitioners set to navigate complex professional environments. These boundaries function as internal frameworks for determining acceptable conduct, particularly in contexts where formal regulations are lacking.

This practice becomes especially relevant within the collaborative and fast-paced world of social media marketing, where practitioners frequently encounter requests that test their moral boundaries. Whether crafting campaigns for brands or promoting products as influencers, they often operate in grey zones marked by diffuse responsibility and limited oversight. In such moments, the ethical compass becomes the primary tool for decision-making.

Notably, six out of ten participants recalled moments when their ethical standards were challenged. Some withdrew from projects after recognizing troubling implications; others refused involvement from the outset. These instances underscore the dual function of boundaries: they protect audiences from potential harm and protect practitioners from compromising situations. Content creators, in particular, described the need to balance creative integrity with commercial demands, often devising strategies to remain ethically consistent without undermining campaign effectiveness.

"We exit the project." (Tech Expert - 55)

"I didn't take the campaign up. " (Social Media Marketeer - 33)

"I wouldn't accept it." (Strategy and Communication specialist - 27)

"Once I understood I didn't continue, so actually I didn't even get paid." (Content Creator - 29)

"This would make me feel terribly uncomfortable, so what can I do?
Here my creativity comes in.
*I'm not going to make you a video, where I make a ******* [explicit sexual practice],*
but maybe if you want you can buy a video where I eat a lollipop." (Content Creator - 29)

4.3.3 Value creation

Another ethical anchor emerging from the interviews was the commitment to **adding value** through one's work, defined as generating cultural or social benefit, whether through usefulness, inspiration, or emotional resonance, rather than promoting content perceived as harmful or exploitative.

Despite variations in interpretation, the core logic held. Ethical decisions were often filtered through a sense of broader responsibility. This principle expands the ethical compass from individual integrity to the collective impact of digital work. Practitioners described assessing whether their output contributed meaningfully to the public sphere, beyond commercial objectives.

This stance was often tested through personal criteria, such as whether they would share the campaign with someone close, or by avoiding content aligned with trends they considered superficial or socially corrosive. “Adding value” thus served as both a moral guideline and a standard of professional quality, shaping both what practitioners chose to promote and how.

> *“If it’s something I don't believe it's positive for society.Then I'm not doing it.*
> *If I'm working something that I believe it's creating value then I'm I'm OK” (Strategy and Communication Expert – 29)*

4.4 Quality assurance

Closely tied to the principle of adding value is quality assurance, a standard practitioners apply to ensure credibility and coherence. In influencer marketing, where inauthenticity risks are high, it functions as both ethical safeguard and strategic tool.

Interviewees emphasized choosing collaborations aligned with brand values, maintaining a consistent image, and avoiding content that feels overly commercial. Authenticity emerged as both moral principle and professional asset, crucial for building trust and sustaining influence.

Yet quality is not always upheld. Under pressure to meet targets or deadlines, some admitted to minor compromises. Still, the perceived long-term costs of eroding authenticity outweighed short-term gains. Quality assurance thus operates as a protective mechanism, preserving ethical intent and professional integrity.

‘’For me personally, the difference is influences are people that actively promote products and when looking at their content everything looks forced.
Content Creators instead are people that actively create content, create lifestyle, and then maybe incorporate products, who are perceived as more genuine and authentic.
So I prefer to work with content creators rather than influencers usually.

But I was sometimes under pressure to find 25 people, but I was only able to find 20.
Then maybe the last two people don’t really resonate, but you have one more day and haven't reached your goal…And then sometimes you're like, well, it is what it is.
[alluding to the acceptance of non desirable outcomes under pressure]

You can make money by taking every deal, but at the end of the day, this is not gonna make you sustainable in the long term, you can be.
Obviously the end goal is to get money, but it's also sustainable growth.''
(Influencer Marketeer - 24)

5. Discussion and comparison with literature

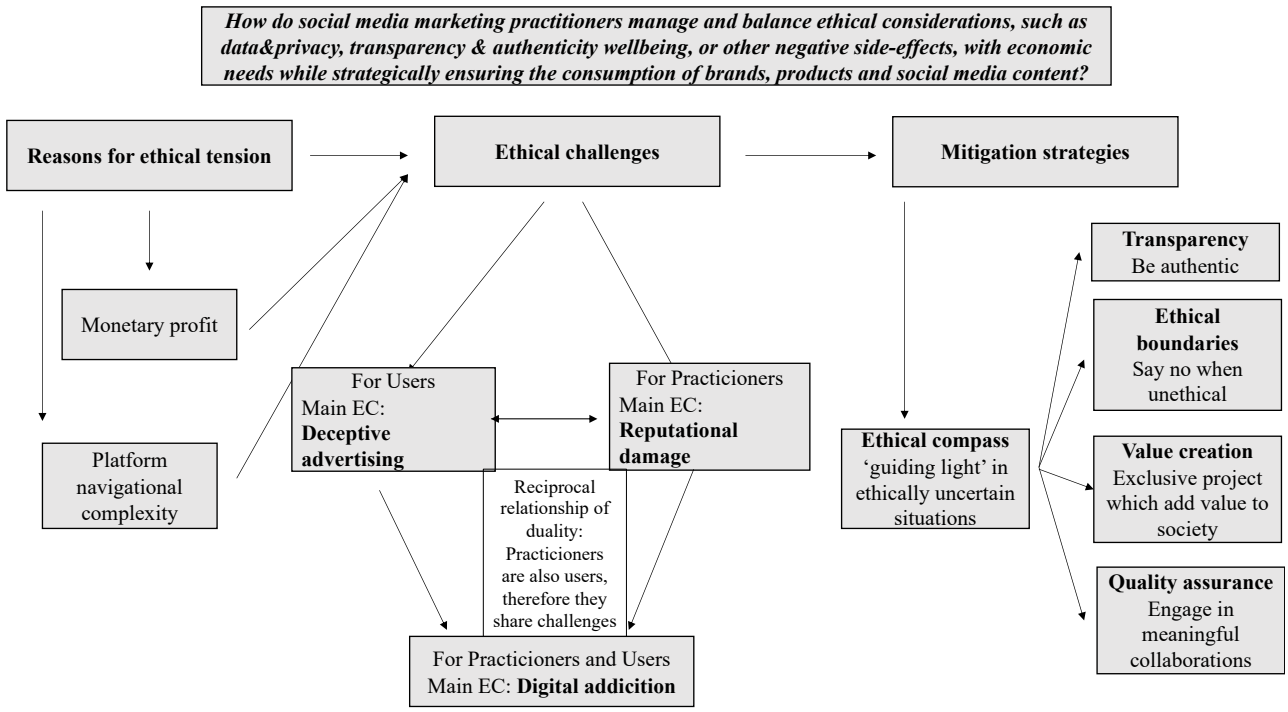

Fig. 2: Conceptual map of main findings

5.1 Reasons for ethical tension

Before presenting the key findings on the reasons behind ethical tension in the SMM, it is important to acknowledge that these reasons are likely to extend beyond the scope of this study. While this thesis focuses on two central factors: the pursuit of monetary profit and the inherent complexity of the social media landscape, it recognizes that other influences may also play a significant role. These include, for instance, internal practitioner values and attitudes toward ethical behavior, as outlined in the BEP framework. For clarity and coherence, the analysis will concentrate on confirming the initial assumption that monetary gain can overshadow ethical integrity, especially within the fast-paced, dynamic, and collaborative nature of digital platforms.

5.1.1 Strategic goals as reason for ethical tension

This thesis finds strong support for its underlying assumption: the pursuit of monetary profit is a key driver of ethical tension in social media marketing. Particularly in professional contexts, revenue optimization is widely recognized as a core measure of success, both by companies and freelancers. This aligns with Tuten and Solomon's definition of SMM as the use of digital platforms to advance marketing goals with the ultimate aim of value creation (2017, p. 18, as cited in Jacobson et al., 2020).

Interview data reinforced this idea. 8 out of 10 practitioners' concept of value was measured through financial success. Ethics were treated as beneficial but non-essential, as a an add-on rather than a structural

part of decision-making. This reflects Abela and Murphy's (2008) argument that strategic aims often push ethical concerns to the margins (Granstedt, 2025, p. 285).

Although the theoretical framework of this study draws from more expansive views of value that emphasize corporate social responsibility (CSR) and social purpose (Gibson, 2019, p. 1), the findings depict a less idealized reality. Patton (2008) critiques dominant definitions of value as overly narrow and economically focused. While literature suggest a substantial shift which encompasses behaviours aimed at communal wealth beyond organizational profit, this study suggests that the older, profit-centered paradigm still shapes much of social media marketing in practice.

Huisman and Regan (2013, p. 26) argue that digitalization has expanded the stakeholder landscape beyond traditional organizational actors. On social media, users act not only as consumers but also as, often uncompensated, producers of content that directly enhances brand visibility and engagement. Their role as central stakeholders, with influence over brand perception and platform dynamics, is strategic. Despite this, organizations remain hesitant to fully engage users as active stakeholders. Even though inclusive communication strategies have been linked to benefits like increased trust, loyalty, and reputational value (Pantelica, 2008, p.119), many practitioners continue to overlook these audiences in practice.

This hesitancy is mirrored in the interviews, where participants showed limited concern for end users, despite their essential role in driving the visibility and success of digital campaigns.

Veblen's (1899) critique of conspicuous consumption remains highly relevant. He framed the public display of wealth as a social performance, detached from ethical integrity and rooted in self-serving motives. Contemporary theorists have expanded this critique: Stehr and Voss (2019, p. 6), for example, describe the accumulation of wealth as a pathological compulsion, often lacking intrinsic purpose and falling short of broader societal value when judged through a CSR lens (Gibson, 2019, p.1). These perspectives resonate strongly with this study's findings. Across cases, monetary outcomes consistently dominated decision-making, with little attention paid to ethical reflection beyond surface-level commitments.

This thesis further identifies a crucial distinction in the SMM landscape: the professional setting in which practitioners operate. On one end are organizational actors, working within structured hierarchies and performance-driven cultures, as described by Ferrel and Gresham (1985, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 281). On the other are independent actors, such as freelancers, influencers, and content creators, who often entered the field informally. One interviewee put it succinctly: "casual time can now make you money" (Social Media Manager – 23), describing how habitual online activity evolved into professional visibility and opportunity.

This divergence produces distinct motivational patterns. Independent practitioners often cited creativity, enjoyment, or education as driving forces, suggesting a model of engagement not always driven by profit. Organizational actors, by contrast, aligned closely with monetary outcomes and performance metrics. These differences suggest varying degrees of ethical motivation autonomy: freelancers may retain more control over value-based decisions, while employees are more constrained by institutional logics.

Viewed through the lens of BEP, the findings suggest a largely pessimistic outlook. While (Clegg et al., 2007) argue that ethics should be embedded in organizational routines and internalized as part of a moral compass, the interviews challenge this ideal. A majority of participants explicitly prioritized financial goals over ethical reflection. This supports Abela and Murphy's (2008, as cited in Granstedt, p. 285) view that the dominance of profit frequently sidelines ethical intent.

Yet ethics were not entirely absent. Many participants described using personal strategies to maintain moral boundaries while pursuing business objectives. In this sense, (Clegg et al., 2007)'s notion of embodied ethical stance finds some support: individual actors did demonstrate efforts to navigate value tensions.

However, the findings also point to a broader pattern of strategic reasoning. Participants repeatedly referenced strategic goals and task-based logic. This indicates that alongside BEP, a Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) lens was highly recurrent, further adding upon it's relation as dominant. SAP posits that actions are guided by strategic intent rather than moral frameworks (Whittington, 1996). In practice, these two logics appear to co-exist, but SAP plays a stronger role in shaping actual decision-making. This aligns with wider critiques of contemporary capitalist society, where personal profit-maximization frequently overrides collective ethical concern.

5.1.2 Navigational complexity of social media

This thesis conceptualizes SMM as more complex than traditional marketing (Dumbiri, 2024, p. 2). Digitalization has added significant navigational challenges, requiring practitioners to constantly adapt to shifting platform norms, audience expectations, and technological dynamics. These pressures complicate efforts to maintain ethical integrity.

Interview data strongly supported this framing. Many practitioners described their work as demanding and unstable, requiring continuous vigilance. Metaphors such as *walking on a razor blade* or balancing on a *tightrope between skyscrapers* captured the high stakes of ethical missteps in this environment.

Hult et al. (2011, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 283) argue that Web 2.0's interactive affordances (Huang & Tsai, 2009) and the erasure of geographic boundaries have amplified reputational risk. Gavilanes and Párraga (2018, p. 194) further describe reputational damage as disproportionate and often irreversible in the digital sphere. This view was reflected in the data: 6 out of 10 participants cited reputational risk as a central ethical and strategic concern in their daily work.

The lack of uniform regulation intensifies this complexity. While social media platforms have expanded rapidly, regulatory frameworks have stayed behind, particularly during early phases when platforms operated with minimal oversight. Today, varying national laws further complicate legal and ethical coherence across jurisdictions (Wallach & Marchant, 2019, p. 505).

Both literature and interviews confirm that the pace of innovation has outpaced regulatory development, forcing practitioners to navigate a fragmented and often ambiguous ethical landscape.

In this context, many rely heavily on personal judgment and internal ethical standards in the absence of formalized guidance.

5.2 Ethical challenges

5.2.1 Ethical challenges for users

The central ethical challenge identified for users is deceptive advertising, defined as the use of false or misleading features to manipulate consumer decision-making (Zgheib, 2017, p. 1482). This emerged strongly across interviews, even if expressed in varying forms. The data affirms a core assumption of this thesis, that such strategies are deliberately employed in professional social media marketing.

Yet, reflections by practitioners revealed a deeper layer. What may seem unethical from a user perspective can simultaneously be viewed by marketers as a legitimate strategy. The tension between persuasion and exploitation is not new. Advertising has long relied on creativity to drive sales (Jones, 2020). Accordingly, the boundary between fair marketing and manipulation remains thin and subjective.

This thesis does not seek to judge or deliver evaluations. Instead, it aims to equip readers with the tools to assess such practices critically. Key to this assessment is intentionality, as in the extent to which practitioners knowingly adopt strategies that mislead or exploit users (Nistor et al., 2024, p. 4533).

While much critique targets platform design, this study shifts focus to those who activate these mechanisms. Responsibility should extend beyond infrastructure to include practitioners who deliberately exploit it (Abela & Murphy, 2008, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 285). Interviewees referenced using dark features (Singh & Singh, 2019, p. 2), such as misleading design, manipulative interfaces, and fake engagement bots, to drive visibility and conversions. These examples underscore a need to scrutinize how professionals knowingly sustain harmful platform dynamics for personal or client gain.

5.2.2 Ethical challenges for practitioners

A key finding of this research, unexpected and expanding upon the theoretical outlet of this research, is that practitioners themselves face ethical challenges. This expands the discussion beyond user risk, revealing dual vulnerability within the SMM ecosystem. Users may be exploited, but practitioners are also exposed to ethical and structural pressures.

As discussed earlier, the complexity of SMM creates a precarious working environment [see section 4.2.1]. This not only blurs strategic clarity but can compromise ethical judgment. Interviewees described instances where ethical lacks stemmed not from intent, but from a gap of resources, guidance, or mental availability.

Freelancers, especially influencers and content creators, appear particularly affected. Their work dissolves boundaries between personal and professional life, as social media becomes both workspace and personal space. Without clear limits, visibility blurs self and audience expectation, producing a sense of alienation.

This is intensified by addictive platform design (Singh & Singh, 2019, p. 2), where dopamine-based feedback loops prolong engagement. The dual identity of user and professional adds ethical strain, a theme explored further in the next section. Remote work accentuates isolation: one interviewee described 20-hour workdays in a single room. From a broader perspective these narrations are in line with the hikikomori emergence, individuals in extreme digital withdrawal (Rosenthal & Zimmermann, 2012, p. 82). What makes this condition particularly insidious is its silence. Those affected rarely address their distress, making their suffering invisible, further hidden under *Highlight Reels (*Parnell, 2017), unrealistic and idealized representations of in-authentic happy and glamorous lives.

5.2.3 Ethical challenges for users and practitioners

This section builds on the duality between practitioners and users, revealing not just role differences but shared vulnerabilities. Practitioners, often both producers and consumers of content, face many of the same ethical risks. Most notably, 8 out of 10 participants reported excessive social media use, referred to here as Digital Overuse (Büchi et al., 2019, p. 2).

While this thesis initially focused on protecting users from exploitative platform design and unethical marketing, both literature and data reveal a broader issue: practitioners are equally affected. Since 2020, growing scholarly concern has highlighted the societal effects of excessive social media use, with digital addiction now classified in the DSM-V as comparable to other compulsive disorders (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 630; Bellis et al., 2021, p. 4). These concerns were echoed in interviews, with many participants attempting *digital detoxes* to regain control.

Digital addiction affects both content consumption and production, as both rely on platform architectures optimized for engagement through endless scrolling and algorithmic loops. This thesis identifies digital addiction as not only a personal affliction but a broader societal condition.

Sensations described referred to compulsive platform use as reshaping how people live, work, and relate, eroding boundaries between personal time, professional duties, and digital presence. These blurred lines compromise self-regulation and risk altering core aspects of human balance, attention, and connection.

Participants also expressed strain from maintaining idealized digital identities. The emotional toll of curating highlight reels aligns with literature describing how portrayals of luxury and success distort reality (Parnell, 2017; Goor et al., 2020, p. 1031). These distorted expectations can lead to anxiety, low self-worth, and social withdrawal.

5.3 There is still hope! Mitigation strategies in practice

Although this study confirms its core assumption, that practitioners often prioritize business goals, particularly monetary profit, over ethical integrity (Abela & Murphy, 2008, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 285), it also uncovers a more hopeful dimension. Many participants demonstrated a firm ethical stance, resisting compromise even under pressure.

While profit remains central, especially for those in organizational settings, interview data revealed a persistent commitment to an internal ethical compass. As Tsoukas (2018, p. 2) notes, ethical action often emerges most clearly in moments of tension. These responses were shown to be context-dependent (Clegg et al., 2007, p. 110), varying with situational specifics and professional constraints.

The idea of *reflexivity* from Business Ethics as Practice (Clegg et al., 2007, p. 117), defined as a deeply internalized ethical stance, was strongly supported by participant accounts. Practitioners described strategies used to avoid misconduct and maintain ethical alignment. Their reflections echoed Bauman's concept of *considered ethics* (Bauman, 1993, as cited in Clegg et al., 2007, p. 117), a process marked by constant dissatisfaction with one's own moral adequacy and sustained by a never-ending drive for ethical refinement. Levinas' idea of *relational ethics* (Loacker & Muhr, 2009, p. 271) also found resonance, as practitioners often expressed concern for those impacted by their actions.

However, ambiguity persists. Schultz et al. (2024, p. 805) define *digital ethics-washing* as the practice of presenting as ethical for reputational gain rather than genuine intent. In such cases, ethical behavior, like CSR compliance (Gibson, 2019, p. 1), may be adopted strategically to serve brand image. This complicates assessments of intent, as inauthenticity can be difficult to detect.

A further challenge arises when ethical autonomy is constrained by organizational pressures. Ferrel & Gresham (1985, as cited in Granstedt, 2025, p. 281) argue that internal constraints, such as institutional culture and expectations, often compromise ethical integrity more than external ones. Practitioners in structured environments frequently reported conflict between institutional demands and their personal ethical convictions.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Main findings

The broad scope offered by qualitative research, combined with the deliberately open-ended nature of the research question, enabled the emergence of unexpected findings. These insights expand upon the original expectations while remaining grounded within the overarching domain of social media, particularly in relation to marketing as occupational engagement and the ethical integrity demonstrated by practitioners. The question guiding this study has been:

How do social media marketing practitioners manage and balance ethical considerations, such as data & privacy, transparency & authenticity wellbeing, or other negative side-effects, with economic needs while strategically ensuring the consumption of brands, products and social media content?

The principal findings summarized of this research are presented below in the following conceptual order: (I) Business goals, particularly monetary profit, can compromise ethical integrity (II) Unethical practices are widely diffused across the SMM industry (III) Interview participants demonstrated ethical awareness and active ethical engagement (IV) Practitioners embedded within organizational settings reported a stronger prioritization of monetary goals compared to freelance actors (V) Internal pressures have the potential to sideline ethical integrity (VI) Social media as a context for marketing practices present increased complexity compared to the previous analogue paradigm (VII) Ethical challenges also negatively impact practitioners (VIII) Digital addiction emerged as one of the most frequently expressed concerns.

The initial assumption, that monetary profit can blur ethical integrity through a frenetic approach that may ultimately sideline it, finds a more nuanced confirmation in this thesis. Practitioners confirmed that business goals, often framed in terms of monetary profit, hold priority in their professional settings.

While none of the interviewees reported intentionally engaging in deliberately unethical practices, they described a less favourable view of their peers and the wider industry, pointing to the widespread diffusion of unethical conduct aimed at prioritizing business over CSR-oriented, altruistic goals.

At the same time, practitioners demonstrated a strong enactment of value-driven ethical behaviors, allowing for a more optimistic outlook than the initially assumed one-sided, exploitative scenario.

A significant difference emerged in the intrinsic motivations practitioners reflected across categories. While freelancers often engaged with social media from a more casual, personally driven starting point, those employed within organizational settings exhibited a distinctly different professional stance. The prioritization of monetary profit was more strongly emphasized by this group. For them, SMM represents a formal occupation and a stable income source, making their attachment to profit as an intrinsic motivation more apparent.

Factors described as internal pressures, whether individual or organizational, such as meeting business targets or ensuring financial stability, were seen to compromise ethical integrity.

As a context for marketing practices, social media has shown to present more complex ethical terrain than its analogue predecessors, making the digital environment increasingly fertile for ethical tension and difficulty in upholding full integrity.

Notably, freelance practitioners often navigate dual roles, as users during their free time and as marketers during work hours, blurring the lines between personal and professional life. The resulting state of constant connectivity intensifies the negative evaluation of social media's broader societal impact. This duality underscores the platform's capacity to harm both macro-level societal dynamics and micro-level individual well-being.

It further reinforces this thesis's initial critical premise: that social media platforms, built on addictive mechanisms to maximize engagement and revenue, often do so at the expense of user welfare, as in digital addiction was mentioned across a significant number of interviews. However, this study redirects the focus by interrogating how practitioners themselves uphold ethical integrity while operating within such a profoundly ambiguous terrain.

6.2 Implications for practice

This thesis has consistently surfaced calls for change in response to the ethical risks embedded in SMM. These insights extend beyond theoretical critique to offer concrete, strategic recommendations for mitigating harm. Such an applied orientation reflects a management research approach that bridges conceptual understanding with actionable outcomes (Mishra and Subudhi, 2020, p. 1)

The most urgent priority is the development of more effective and consistent regulatory frameworks to protect both consumers and practitioners. While bodies like the FTC have set precedents through warnings and sanctions (Markham, 2022, p. 2), enforcement remains uneven. Stronger legal boundaries, clearer standards of accountability, and robust mechanisms for enforcement are needed to ensure a safer and fairer digital marketing environment.

Beyond legal measures, the SMM field requires increased ethical awareness. This thesis calls for professional associations and educational institutions to promote formal training. Given the low barriers to entry, many practitioners lack ethical preparation. Structured guidance would reduce unintentional misconduct and foster stronger ethical foundations industry-wide.

Importantly, ethics can be both principled and strategic. As this research confirms, CSR-aligned practices enhance brand reputation and stakeholder trust (Gibson, 2019, p. 1). When implemented sincerely, ethical behavior benefits both society and business, showing that commercial success and moral responsibility are not mutually exclusive.

To complement regulation, the industry must also develop and uphold internal ethical codes. Community-driven norms, peer accountability, and shared benchmarks can elevate standards where law falls short. As the field continues to evolve, practitioners must take an active role in shaping its ethical direction.

Equally urgent is the need to address the psychological toll on practitioners. Contrary to idealized portrayals, this research exposes a more precarious reality shaped by overwork, blurred boundaries, and

digital overexposure. Drawing parallels to industries like logistics, where strict working hour limits safeguard wellbeing, this thesis advocates for similar protections in SMM, including clearer boundaries, institutional safeguards, and mental health standards.

Finally, the issue of digital addiction, affecting both users and practitioners, demands structural change. Platform designs must be reimagined to reduce harm, and coordinated action among users, marketers, and policymakers is essential. Addictive affordances must be critically interrogated to ensure healthier digital environments.

Taken together, these recommendations call for cross-sector collaboration, between regulatory institutions, platform providers, practitioner communities, and educators, to meaningfully address the ethical and psychological vulnerabilities uncovered in this study.

6.3 Limitations of this research

This study is not without limitations. First, although the interviews were designed to be neutral, the author's critical stance toward social media may have subtly influenced the interview environment and participant responses. This reflects the established *interviewer effect*, where respondents align their answers with perceived expectations (Diefenbach, 2009, p. 880). Despite a pre-interview disclaimer emphasizing that there were no correct responses, framing bias may still have shaped the data.

Second, the sampling strategy relied on personal outreach and snowballing, which risks introducing *homophily bias*, where participants are similar to the initial sample (Heckathorn, 2002, p. 16). Given the researcher's academic, educated, context, often tied to ethical awareness, the sample may overrepresent reflective practitioners, potentially limiting broader generalizability.

Third, a discrepancy emerged between participants' self-reported ethical conduct and their descriptions of industry-wide critical adoptions. While no one admitted to unethical behavior personally, many described it as widespread. This suggests the influence of *social desirability bias*, where respondents present themselves favorably on morally sensitive topics (Fisher, 1993, p. 303).

Fourth, this study acknowledges a gap between stated attitudes and actual behavior. The Italian saying *tra il dire e il fare c'è di mezzo il mare* captures this. A wide divide may exist between intention and action. Known as the attitude–behavior gap, this is a recognized limitation of self-report data (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005, p. 173). The informal, fast-paced format of the interviews may have further widened this gap, favoring spontaneous over reflective responses.

Fifth, although the sample included diverse roles, only two participants had entered the field informally, transitioning from casual users to professionals. This mechanism is addressed as *underrepresentation bias* underrepresents the freelancer category and limits insight into early-stage ethical development in SMM careers. Broader representation is needed in future studies to capture a fuller spectrum of digital marketing trajectories (Bungai et al., 2015).

6.4 Directions for further research

Given the observed differences in motivation and ethical stance between freelancers and organizationally employed practitioners, future research would benefit from a more balanced sample distribution across these categories. Rather than prioritizing one group, designing studies that allow for direct comparison, under consistent methodological parameters, may strengthen the internal validity of findings and provide deeper insight into how ethical integrity operates across structural contexts. A more symmetrical approach would also support a clearer delineation of whether ethical behavior is shaped more by individual orientation or by professional positioning in specific sectors.

Additionally, future research should expand beyond human decision-making by examining how emerging technologies, especially AI-driven tools, as commonly mentioned across interviews and literature. Algorithmic bias is a well-documented issue: from racial profiling to discriminatory exclusions, such as not showing plus-size bodies or marginalized communities in ads. These outputs are not neutral. They reflect the bias of the developers who create and deploy them. As automation increasingly governs visibility and targeting, critical scrutiny must be directed at how ethical responsibility is embedded into these systems from the outset.

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Appendix A

Interview guide

Role in Social Media
• Can you briefly introduce yourself? (Current role, past experiences, years in SMM, education)
• How would you define social media?
• What is your role in the broader Social Media Context?
• Are you a user or a practitioner?

Personal evaluation of Social Media
• How do you evaluate Social Media on a personal level?
• What bothers you most personally about Social Media?
• Which public debates about the negative side effects of social media (e.g., addiction, well-being decline) are you aware of?
• How do you personally feel about these debates?

Professional evaluation of Social Media (positive)
• How would you define ""strategy"" in your social media marketing work?"
• What are the strategic goals of your company in their Social Media activity
• What are the strategic priorities of your/companies Social Media activities?
• Based on your experience, what does a typical brief with a client look like, does it put strategy or ethical respect first?
• What opportunities does SMM offer to companies compared to traditional market

Professional evaluation of Social Media (negative)
• What risks do you see in using social media platforms for marketing purposes?
• How would you define ethics in the context of your work?
• Are ethical discussions (e.g., about user well-being, manipulation, data privacy) a part of your team/company culture?
• What are the most critical ethical challenges you perceive in SMM?

Real life cases
• Can you recall a specific situation where you encountered an ethical dilemma?

Mitigation Strategies
(free-lancer/company) (personal/professional)
•How does your company's broader strategy align with your personal values and goals?
•How do you ensure ethical compliance?
• What is your company's stance and how do they communicate internally ethical standards?
• How do you feel in operating in such a debated environment?
• How do you feel in operating in an environment you have a personal negative evaluation of?

Reflection on industry
• Can you recall a specific situation where you encountered an ethical dilemma?
• What have you experienced in the industry generally regarding to importance to ethical compliance?

Hopes and outcomes for future
• What are your future hopes and outcomes for the Social Media Marketing industry?
• What would you like to see - or not to see - in the future of the Social Media Marketing industry?

APPENDIX B:

Full coding table

Open coding	Axial coding 1	Axial coding 2	Selective coding
• Motivation in job depends on salary • Brands have conversion as a goal • Conversion is the main priority • Ethics don't pay • Would develop campaign for an oil company • Sees potential for revenue ☞ *"The goal is conversion." (Tech Expert - 55)*	Monetary focus	Strategic goals	Reasons for tension in the SMM field
• Brand identity as strategic goal • Value appearance as strategic goal • Community building as strategic goal • Goal is conversion even if not as first step • Communication --> persuasion --> conversion in need ☞ *" It means doing communication. All the activities of a business are directed and aimed at selling, all of them in a more or less direct way.'' (Digital Consultant - 54)*	Layered nature of strategic goals, conversion is the final goal but can be achieved through intermediary steps		
• Not purely related to money, also enjoyment entertainment • Enjoyment --> profit • Switch from entertainment to profit has blurred ☞ *"...not ... for the gain itself, but because it was the only thing that made me feel good." (Content Creator - 29)*	Conversion isn't necessary the reason for SMM practice		
• Evolution of SM increases it's complexity • High competition in SM • Monopoly of big tech companies for SMM ☞ *''The blog, then came Youtube, then Facebook,Instagram, TikTok, be Real, The competition ... is very high.'' (Digital Consultant - 54)*	Complexity of SM	Complexity of SM	

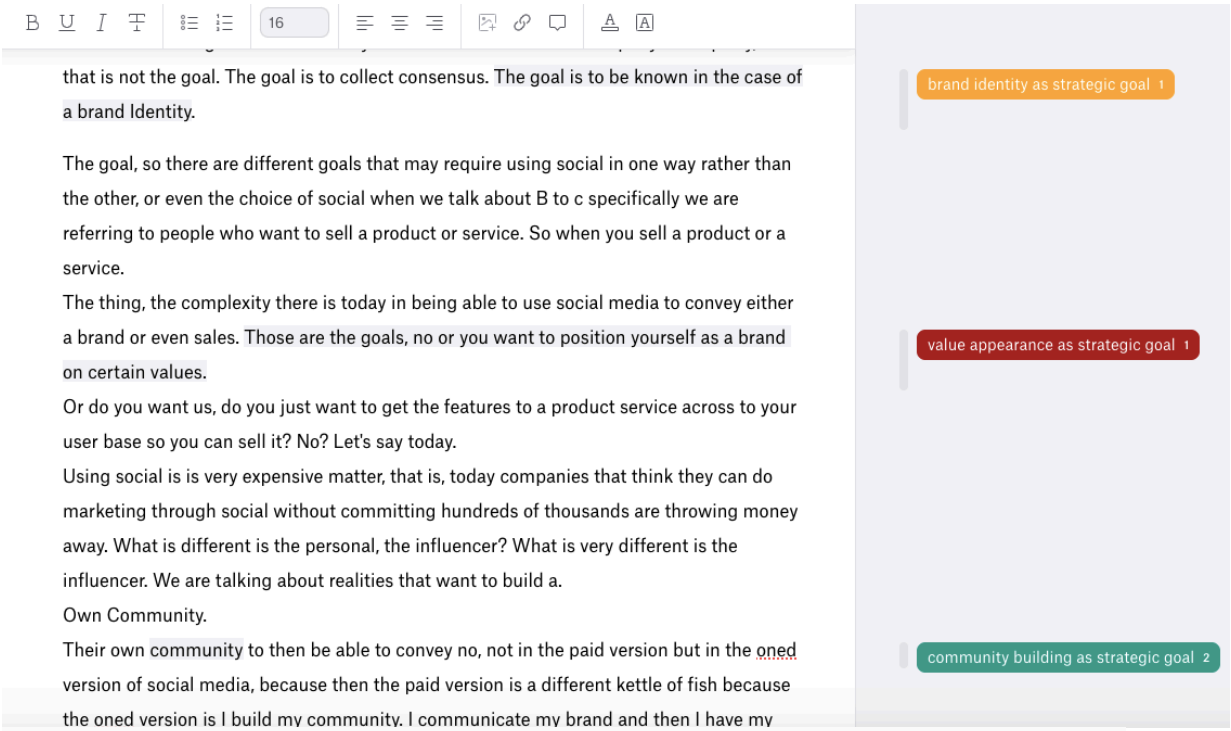
• Spatial dislocation accentuates critique • Increased scrunity ☞''People are fast to criticize on social media because they are behind a screen.'' (Social Media Marketeer - 23)	Increased scrunity		
• Questions mission of company • Ethics-washing • Selling vision while profit is the goal ☞''They want to stop single use plastic. But then, like the biggest goal of our company, is definitely selling 'product' . I do believe them, but then the other time I was like, that's just a way to sell bottles.'' (Social Media Marketeer - 23)	Deceptive advertising: ethics-washing	Ethical Challenges for Users	Ethical Challenges
• In-authenticity: false profiles • Fake bots drive fake engagement and mislead the consumer to upgrade to the premium plan ☞ ''So they were creating fake accounts, typically very nice ladies, very nice pictures, but they were fake, like an agent would operate 20 to 30 accounts and was basically trying to create fake engagement with real customers in order to incentivize them to pay.'' (Tech Expert-55)	Deceptive advertising: fake profiles		
• Leverage on addictive designs to trick the consumer • Impulse buying is applied to create urgency to pressure the consumer into purchasing • Trigger the user, who abandons check out and send a promo • Acquire data from user through promotion	Deceptive advertising: psychological tricks		

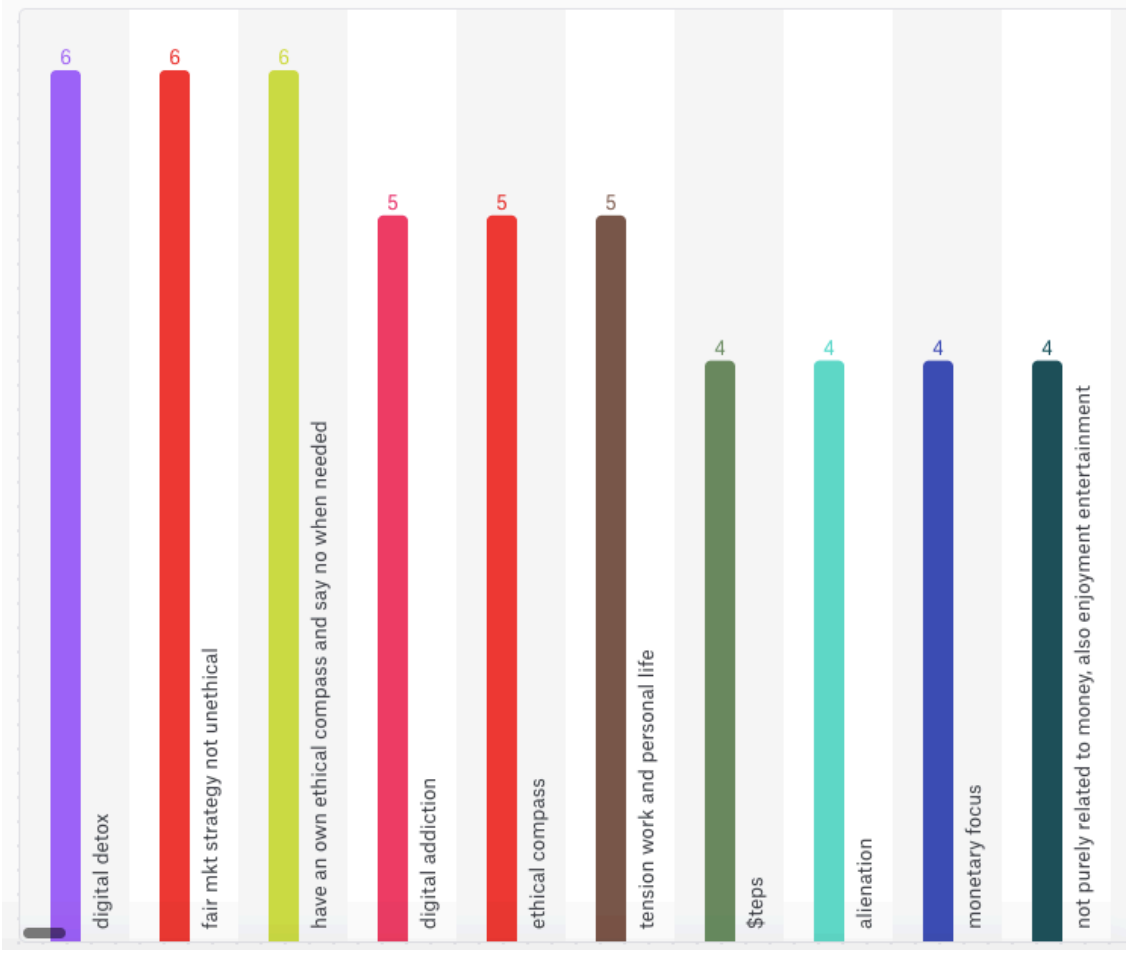
☞ ‘’Very limited collection that is only going to be available for a few hours. That is really designed that you don't even think about price, right?’’ *(Tech Expert – 55)*			
• Deceiptive advertising • Real life case: deceptive advertising in form of false claims • Promotion of malfunctioning products ☞ *‘’I was gonna do a tech campaign launch for a new earbud.* *And the earbud had 24 hours. But the real feature was 10 hours." (Digital Marketeer - 33)*	Deceptive advertising: false claims		
• Reputational damage harms business • Unethical behaviour isn't sustainable in the long term • Trust erosion leads to a loss of customers • Backlash makes a ghost out of you ☞ *People will realize that you're not being authentic and it's easier to lose customers.’’ (Social Media Marketeer - 33)*	Reputational damage can affect profitability	Ethical Challenges for Practitioners	
• Time awarness is diversified for practitioners • Tension between public and private life ☞ *‘’Time has a whole special dilation, so we're not really aware of how much time actually goes by. It's alienating to live working on social media." (Content Creator - 33)*	Alienation and Tension create difficulties in living a 'normal' life		
• SM lead to digital addiction • Hates SM • SM influences negatively self perception • Constant connection drives anxiety ☞ *"Well, I hate it. Unfortunately, I'm addicted to it" (Strategy and Communication Expert - 29)*	Digital Addiction	Ethical Challenges for Users and Practitioners	
• Have ransparency and authenticity as a code	Transparency		

• Act transparent because of Karma • Need for honesty - critique on industry • Keep feed real • Advertise product you use ☞ ''*Transparency and openness comes in as an ethical practice in social media.'' (Tech Expert 55)*		Ethical compass	Mitigation strategies
• Have an own ethical compass and say no when needed • Real life case case: unethical offer refused • Doubt on aggressive project with low ethics ☞ *''I didn't take the campaign up. '' (Social Media Marketeer 33)*	Limits: say no		
• If money is earend it is mandatory to give back to community • Work needs to add value to society • Work needs to create value • Marketing needs to solve problems of consumer ☞ *''If it's something I don't believe it's positive for society. (Tech Expert - 55)*	Add value		
• Carefully select influencers to collaborate with • Their content is not the one too worry about • Ensure quality of the content • Guidelines to influencers • Familiarize with project ☞ ''*For me the difference is influences are people that actively promote products versus Content Creators actively create content, who are perceived as more genuine and authentic. So I prefer to work with content creators rather.'' (Influencer Marketeer - 25)*	Quality ensurance		

APPENDIX C:

Example coding done in Atlas ti





APPENDIX D:

Color coded open code grouped into axial for theme creation

Clsutered tension vision strategic goals (strategy | nuanced | non $ related | trans in SM from fun to $) strategy | complexity				
both strategy > ethics	Strategic goals	Str prevails on ethics		
only care if UX convert	Strategic goals			
motivation in job depends on pay	strategic goals			
brands make $	Strategic goals			
monetary focus	strategic goals			
ethics don't pay	Strategic goals			
oil company example where $ > ethics; if not u another	tension/strategic goal>ethics			
would develop for PM	strategic goals	Monetary profit > ethics		
sees potential for revenue	strategic goals	monetary profit		
$teps	MI bastard/AMS			
AMS businessman	MI bastard/AMS			
easily criticize, hardly buy	Undefined	MI bastard/complex		
Leggi sbatti	MI bastard			
law seen as obstacle	MI bastard			
value appearance as strategic goal	Strategic goals			
community building as strategic goal	Strategic goals	Nuanced monetary profit		
goal is conversion even if not at first step	Strategic goals	Nuanced monetary profit		
communication --> persuasion --> conversion in need	Strategic goals			
brand identity as strategic goal	Strategic goals			
respect as STRATEGIC goal	Strategic goals	not strictly monetary profit		
not purely related to money, also enjoyment entertainment	strategic goals			
enjoyment --> profit	strategic goals	from U		
switch from entertainment to profit has blurred	strategic goals			
Evolution of SM --> Complexity of SM	Complexity SM	CHECK THIS ROW		
High competition in SM	Complexity SM			
Evolution of SMM job	Complexity SM			
Monopoly Big Tech for SMM	Complexity SM/Ethical challenge for Practicioners			
spatial dimension fast criticize	Complexity SM/Ethical challenge for Practicioners			
no exposure if bad time	Complexity SM/Ethical chall	For P: public figure tension real life/scrunity/exposure		
scrunity	Complexity SM/Ethical chall	For P: public figure tension real life/scrunity/exposure		

Clustered ethical challenges for U view: main takeaway deceiptive (false claim, psychological (platform + trick) --> trick consumer			
acquire data from user through promotion	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (trick disclosure)	
hide commercial interest	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive	
if brand feels like a frend --> increased	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (in-authentic behaviour of P)	
questions mission of company - greenwashing	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (ethics-washing)	
greenwashing	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (ethics-washing)	
selling vision while profit is goal	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (ethics-washing)	
addictive design	Ethical challenge	for U (+ P: well-being/digital addiction)	
in-authenticity - false profiles	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (fake profile trick)	
fake bot to ppl pay deceptive advertising	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (fake profile trick)	
impulse buying	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (trick impulse)	
Urgency	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (trick impulse)	
user abandons a check out and you'll send a promotion	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (trick impulse)	
deceiptive advertising	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (false claim)	
case: deceptive advertising in form of false claims	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (false claim)	
scam	Ethical challenge	for U Deceiptive (false claim)	
greenwashing for laws	Ethical challenge/	for U Deceiptive (ethics-washing)	
promotion of harmful behavior: gambling/guru	Ethical challenge	for U: promotion of harmful content	
leggerezza nel dire SI inizialmente	Ethical challenge	For U: P overly light on decisions	
no big ethical awarness	Ethical challenge	less awarness	
context dependent	Ethical challenge	subjectivity	
invalid justification: if I won't someone else will do it	Ethical challenge	justification	
closer relationship.	Ethical challenge	authenticity	
closer relationship --> mitigate	Ethical challenge	authenticity	

Clustered ethical challenges for P view: reputational/alienation/public figure tension			
reputational damage suffers business, trus	Ethical challenge	For P (reputational damage)	
for P: backlash	Ethical challenge	for P: backlash	
unethical isn't sustainable in the long term	Ethical challenge	For P (reputational damage) (CHECK LUIS)	
trust erosion will make you lose customers	Ethical challenge	For P (reputational damage) (CHECK LUIS)	
trust loss - for P	Ethical challenge	For P (reputational damage) trust	
oblio	Ethical challenge	For P (reputational damage)	
time alienation for p	Ethical challenge	for P: alienation (CHECK)	
tension work and personal life	Ethical challenge	for P (tension work/life more accentuated)	
for P: public figure impacts on real life	Ethical challenge	For P: public figure tension real life/scrunity/exposure	
for P: discomfort of exposure	Ethical challenge	for P: discomfort	
for P: feeling of low worth --> chinese girl e	Ethical challenge	For P: expoitation	
invest in appearance to match beauty stan	Ethical challenge		
changing voice is not in authenticity rathe	Ethical challenge	in-authenticity/fair mkt	

Clustered ethical challenges P+U view: digital addiction, yet one category decides to work with it..		
digital addiction	Ethical challenge	for P+U (digital addiction)
peter hates social media	Ethical challenge	for P+U (digital addiction)
not being in control of tools you use	Ethical challenge	for P+U (not in control)
job loss through automation: ethicical cha	Ethical challenge	for P+U (job loss)
highlight reel	Ethical challenge	for P+U: in-authenticity - highlight reel

Mitigation ethical dilemmas clustered view (Transparency | Ethical Compass | Add value | Ensure Quality | Regulations | Company)			
transparency	Mitigation	Transparency	
transparency and authenticity as a code	Mitigation	Trasparency and authenticity as a code	
act transparent bc believe in Karma	Mitigation	Trasparency and authenticity bc Karma	
need for honesty	Mitigation	Trasparency and authenticity as a code	
keep feed real	mitigation	authenticity	
advertise product you use	mitigation	for P: product u use	
have an own ethical compass and say no when needed	Mitigation	From P (Ethical Compass)	
ethical case for peter	Mitigation	limits say no	
doubt on aggressive project with low ethics	mitigation	limits say no	
gray area: company and individual culture as guidance	Mitigation	From P (Ethical Compass)	
ethical compass	Mitigation	From P (Ethical Compass)	
subjectivity of ethical compass	Mitigation	From P (Ethical Compass)	
no deceiptive	Mitigation	From P (Ethical Compass)	
consumer protection - empathy	Mitigation	From P (Ethical Compass) - anchored deeply	
fried chicken doesn't go against his values	Mitigation	From P (Ethical Compass - values)	
consumer respect	Mitigation	From P = Consumer Respect	
stand up against unfair practices	Mitigation	Stand up	
If brand earn they need to give back to their communit	Mitigation	CSR	
work needs to add value	Mitigation	From P = Add Value	
add value to society	Mitigation	Add value REMERGE	
creating value	Mitigation	add value REMERGE	
David's definition of marketing	Mitigation	add value REMERGE	
careful selection influ	Mitigation	From P = Ensure Quality	
their content is not the one too worry about	mitigation	From P = Ensure Quality/add	
quality of the content	Mitigation	From P = Ensure Quality/add	
picky which influencer to collaborate with	Mitigation	From P = Ensure Quality/add	
guidelines to influencers	Mitigation	From P = Ensure Quality/add	
influ fit	Mitigation	From P = Ensure Quality/add	
ethical challenge for P	Mitigation	From P = Ensure Quality/add	
familiarize with project	Mitigation	From P = Ensure Quality/add	
is okay with data acquire if protected	Mitigation	Regulations as guideline	
legal boundaries as code	Mitigation	Regulations as guideline	
need for allignment with company culture	Mitigation	From P	
large companies allocate resources to ethics	Mitigation	From P	
company culture shapes ethical respect	Mitigation		

APPENDIX E:

AI Declaration

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information
Name: Nicolas Randolfi
Student ID: 747263
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000
Supervisor Name: Dr. Sven-Ove Horst
Date: 04/07/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [ChatGPT], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

Extent of AI Usage
☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity
☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]
Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Nicolas Randolfi
Date of Signature: 04/07/2025

Prompt and action used:

ChatGPT has been used as a research buddy over the months, moreover as a ‘’person’’ to discuss ideas with, which can lead to a constructive dialougue.

The tool assisted with grammar and ortography check.

The tool has never been used to come up with something which was not mine.