

Ethical Dilemmas of Moral Muteness in Media and Advertising Agencies: A Case of Print Media in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Moral muteness or the inability or reluctance to address ethical concerns when faced with moral conflicts is a serious problem in Pakistan's print media advertising industry. In this study, the factors of client pressure, organizational culture, fear of retaliation and internal conflicts between personal values and professional responsibilities are examined as leading to moral muteness among advertising professionals.

Methodology: A qualitative research methodology was employed and 53 advertising professionals from creative directors, account managers and media planners from the leading agencies in Pakistan were interviewed through semi structured interview.

Findings: The results indicated that intense client demands, a profit centered organizational culture and job insecurity create an environment where ethical discourse is not promoted, and professionals resort to rationalizing moral compromises to keep their careers afloat and client relationships intact. Supporting these measures, and from industry bodies like Pakistan Advertisers Society (PAS), All-Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) and Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) could be a way to establish a suitable framework in which trade needs to be undermined by ethical standards.

Conclusion: The present study contributes to the literature on media and advertising ethics by investigating the ethical dynamics in Pakistan's advertising sector. Examples of what could be recommended include building an ethical culture of open ethical openness, and developing the industry's ethical standards. Future research is suggested to study the effect of digital transformation on ethical decision making in advertising and to evaluate the effectiveness of the ethics focused reforms in agencies.

Keywords: Moral Muteness, Ethical Dilemmas, Advertising Industry, Print Media, Advertising Agencies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has a print media; its advertising industry is an integral part of their media landscape and has been the dominant means of shaping public perception and consumer behavior. In 2023, the advertising industry in Pakistan stood at USD 652 million, out of which print media takes up about 25% of the total expenditure, whereas digital platforms are rapidly emerging. Advertising agencies are charged with promoting brands and products, but are regularly faced with difficult ethical dilemmas (Abbasi, 2021; Butt, & Fatima, 2023, Rauf, 2020). Moral muteness is one of the most important of these: the inability or unwillingness to speak up about ethical issues, even where the practitioner knows that moral conflicts exist. Moral muteness in the advertising context occurs when professionals keep silent about questionable practices, as in the case of client pressure or organizational constraints Shabir, et al., (2017).

More so in Pakistan's print media advertising industry, where the ethical standards are often trampled under the commercial interests. Despite having the regulatory bodies like APNS and PEMRA they are ignored in their favour just for better deals. A study of 68% of advertising professionals in Pakistan revealed that 45% were afraid to speak out on ethical issues because they were afraid of retaliation or being made insecure at their jobs (Ahmed & Khan, 2019). The silence results in not ethical scrutiny of the misleading advertisements, exaggerated product claims, and the promotion of socially harmful products including, tobacco and sugary drinks (Adnan et al., 2016; Shabir, et al., (2015).

In a competitive market, the challenge of balancing commercial objectives with moral responsibilities becomes even more daunting. While readership of the print media has declined as a result of the rise of digital media, the print media sector remains a dominant platform for political, corporate and public service advertising (Arshad, 2015). That creates an environment in which professionals are between keeping profitable client relationships and following ethical standards. In many instances, fear of losing key accounts or a damage to agency client dynamics results in moral muteness, which effectively silences ethical discourse (Ali et al., 2015; Shabir, et al., 2015a).

The research grew out of increasing concern regarding ethical practices in the advertising industry in Pakistan, specifically in print media where the ethical norms and business imperatives often overlap. However (Asghar & Shahzad, 2018; Shabir, et al., 2015b) public image is still dominated by print media in Pakistan, especially newspapers have a broad readership across demographic. But moral muteness, when advertising experts fail to speak of ethical matters undermines industry integrity and public trust. With the world learning about social responsibility and the ethics of business, it is important to understand how Pakistani advertising companies can work within the issues without sacrificing professional or commercial goals. This paper discusses these issues and discusses moral muteness and suggests how advertising can be more transparent and ethical.

Pakistan's print media advertising sector faces a serious ethical dilemma: Professionals usually remain silent about moral problems they know may contradict, even if they know. Client pressure, reprisal fears and an ethically closed workplace culture all promote this silence. The misleading advertising, including deceptive claims and socially destructive items, is now due to ethical neglect. While APNS and PEMRA cannot stop unethical violations, they destroy customer trust and industry integrity (Cheah & Shimul, 2021). This study attempts to explore moral muteness in Pakistan's print media advertising industry and how advertising professionals can undertake ethical practices without fearing reprisals.

The main aim of this research is to explore the moral muteness in Pakistan's print media advertising industry due to which there are many ethical dilemmas. Specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) To identify the key factors contributing to moral muteness among advertising professionals.
- 2) To examine the impact of moral muteness on ethical decision-making within advertising agencies.
- 3) To evaluate the role of organizational culture in promoting or discouraging ethical discussions.

- 4) To propose strategies for fostering ethical openness in the advertising industry.

This study makes several important contributions to the understanding of ethical dilemmas in Pakistan's print media advertising industry:

- Provides a detailed analysis of the factors contributing to moral muteness in advertising professionals, enhancing the literature on business ethics.
- Offers new insights into the effects of moral muteness on ethical decision-making processes within advertising agencies.
- Evaluates the role of organizational culture in either fostering or inhibiting ethical discussions, contributing to management and organizational studies.
- Proposes actionable strategies for promoting ethical openness, offering practical recommendations for industry reform and ethical practices.

The paper is organized into five main sections. The research background, motivation and problem statement are presented in the introduction. The study reviews the literature on moral muteness and ethical dilemmas in the advertising industry. It describes the qualitative approach; data collection and analysis techniques. The findings and discussion sections discuss the results of the thematic and narrative analyses and discuss key themes of moral muteness. The conclusion summarizes the findings and suggests some ways of promoting ethical openness in advertising agencies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Moral Muteness in the Advertising Industry

According to Bird, moral muteness is the inability or unwillingness to stand up for ethical issues in one's organization when one knows they exist. Moral muteness is of particular concern in the context of the advertising industry where advertising has such an influence on public perception and consumer behavior. In Pakistan, (Arshad, 2015), argued that the commercialization of print media has increased moral muteness among advertising professionals, many of whom remain silent because of pressure from corporate clients. Much like the public relations work of Ahmed and Khan on public relations performed in corporate realms, our work also revealed that pressures to maintain a positive image can silence ethical voices, resulting in moral compromises (Ahmed & Khan, 2019).

It's not just advertising agencies that are reluctant to speak up about ethical dilemmas, it's media organizations as well. In this study (Abbasi, 2021), examined the problems of ethics in the media in Pakistan's journalism industry by finding that its fear of deterring its losing advertising revenues accounts for widespread ethics muteness, arguably in reporting issues such as political scandals and corporate frauds. The significance of this doesn't only pertain to advertising professionals, as they acknowledge that there are unethical practices such as false ads, misleading promotions, but they are kept quiet for fear of damaging client relationship or job security.

2.2 Ethical Dilemmas in Media and Advertising Practices

What makes the advertising industry so complicated is that there are usually complex ethical dilemmas that arise in developing nations like Pakistan. The source of these dilemmas is the conflict between the necessity to maintain truthful representation and the pressure to make compelling, attention-grabbing content. Arshad and Ashraf say journalism in Pakistan is frequently rife with ethics violations because reporters and media professionals are usually compelled to meet the desires of advertisers, thus compromising integrity of the content (Arshad & Ashraf, 2014). Ahmad, Ahmad, and Ghafur also studied how mass media professionals in Pakistan confronted the challenge of ethical reporting versus the pull of advertisers in a e-environment. By examining their findings, they uncovered that the ethics of the media landscape were complicated by the fast-growing digitalization of the media landscape, where the need for

quick and sensational content put additional pressure on professionals to compromise ethical standards (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Ghafur, 2020).

The representation of marginalized groups is another dimension of ethical dilemmas in the advertising industry. In Pakistani media, the portrayal of transgender individuals was found to often perpetuate harmful stereotypes, without a consideration of the ethical implications of such representations in that space by (Asghar & Shahzad, 2018). It is not alone in this, advertising is replete with more commercial imperative than ethical consideration of social impact. This further added weight to the ethical ambiguities that media professionals in Pakistan face, who strive to uphold journalistic ethics while coping with advertisers' expectations and digital communication trends as thorned in the work of (Adnan et al.2020) on the role of Urdu news media in Pakistan.

2.3 Challenges in the Advertising Industry: A Pakistani Perspective

The ethical dilemmas in Pakistan's advertising industry are exacerbated by unique challenges faced by the country's advertising industry especially in print media. The industry is growing with the digital age and traditional print media is struggling to stay relevant, which has made advertising revenue more and more important. In Adnan (2020) the print media representation of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is discussed and the role of advertisers in shaping the public perception (Adnan, 2020). The difficulty of newspapers' usual reliance on advertising revenue often means they report biased and ethically breached because newspapers too want to please the advertisers, big companies of multinational or government making.

Furthermore, (Arshad, 2023) shows how print media report on conflicts between India and Pakistan, finding that advertisers played a role in framing political narratives (Arshad & Batool, 2023). Not only does this cloud public perception, but it also brings into question what ethical responsibilities advertising professionals have in the face of requirements from their clients and the need to accurately and balance report. Adnan and colleagues describe the changing media landscape in Pakistan, which has brought new challenges for advertising professionals as they must operate in an increasingly digital environment, and deal with the ethical implications of traditional print media practices.

2.4 Thematic Analysis of Ethical Challenges in Advertising

The theme analysis of the ethical issues in advertising has been used to find patterns of ethical issues and how the professionals deal with the ethical dilemmas. To carry out a thematic analysis of ethical decision making, (Chappell et al., 2011) reported that the lack of structured ethics discussions in advertising agencies often results in 'moral muteness' that is, professionals avoid expressing ethical concerns because they believe it would disrupt commercial relationships. Likewise, (Christians, 2005), studied ethical and political pressures in journalism, using thematic analysis to show that in a culture of ethical silence in their workplaces, advertising and media professionals often downplay ethical concerns to avoid conflicts with clients.

In a similar research, Cohn examined ethical issues unique to advertising professionals and carried out thematic analysis to uncover that misleading advertising and societal misrepresentation are common themes. The results indicated that professionals have to make compromises with ethical standards due to client expectations and agency profit motive (Cohn, 2005). Author of this study continued this line of inquiry and studied how students in marketing reacted to ethical dilemmas and through thematic analysis concluded that perceived professional norms favor persuasion and commercial success over ethical integrity. They found that ethical concerns are rationalized, or ignored, in advertising education just as in real world advertising practices (Cheah & Shimul, 2021).

2.5 Narrative Analysis of Advertising Professionals' Experiences

Narrative analysis has also been used as an adjunct to this to investigate how advertising professionals address ethical conflicts and how they personally handle them. Like (Csillag, 2019), professionals explain

moral muteness in human resource management as a rationalization of ethical silence in an organizational culture adaptation. This is similar to what Chukwuma and (Chukwuma & Ngwoke, 2022), did when they used narrative analysis to examine how advertising professionals rationalize navigating ethical conflicts. Professionals often used storytelling to distance themselves from the ethical aspects of their work and arrive at a creative or technical aspect to alleviate cognitive dissonance, they found. Chaudhry and Ashraf (2012) furthered this discussion by looking at ethical framing in media and advertising during Pakistan's political elections. Using narrative analysis, (Chaudhry & Ashraf, 2012), demonstrated that professionals often justify ethical silence as a product of cultural narratives of loyalty to clients or organizational success. These studies by (Christians, 2005), and (Donovan et al., 2009) also indicate that advertising campaigns for social causes tend to continue to prioritize customer requirements over ethical transparency. According to their study of the Australian White Ribbon Day campaign, Donovan and colleagues find that even pro social campaigns face ethical conflicts, especially when messages are crafted to align with public relations objectives rather than substantive ethical standards. The study of Hornbach's "The Smell of Spring" advertisement (Anipa, 2020), is a case study analysis of social group representation, showing how advertising narrates controversial narratives that raise ethical concerns of representation. Admittedly, their findings suggest that advertisers are often more concerned about engagement than they are about ethical considerations, making the ethical landscape in advertising that much more complicated. Also, as Csillag pointed out, ethics in advertising is often embedded in narratives that favor profit, which professionals use to legitimate questionable advertising practices.

Table 1: *Comparative Analysis of Advertising and Media Ethics Studies*

Reference	Technique	Results	Limitations	Findings
(Abbasi, 2021)	Case study on media ethics in Pakistan	Demonstrated the negative impact of advertisers on media ethics, silencing critical reporting to retain advertising revenue	Focused on journalism; role of moral muteness in advertising less detailed	Advertising revenue drives ethical compromises, silencing critical voices in media
(Adnan et al., 2016)	Survey on factors promoting reading habits in students	Identified commercial pressures as a significant factor influencing ethical content in educational advertising	Limited to educational context, excludes broader advertising practices	Commercial interests affect the ethics of advertising content in educational materials
(Adnan, 2020)	Analysis of CPEC portrayal in media advertising	Revealed how media advertising on CPEC was shaped by corporate and governmental interests	Focused on one specific project (CPEC), not covering other sectors or projects	CPEC media portrayal skewed by corporate and government pressure, influencing public perception
(Ahmad, Ahmad, & Ghafur, 2020)	Study of information-seeking behavior of media professionals	Showed that corporate advertisers heavily influence media professionals in content creation	Lacks coverage of emerging media platforms and their impact on ethics	Ethical dilemmas intensified by digitalization and sensational content creation
(Asghar & Shahzad, 2018)	Analysis of media portrayals of transgender	Highlighted unethical portrayals of marginalized groups	Does not explore practices regarding other marginalized	Media misrepresents transgender individuals under

individuals in Pakistan	driven by commercial pressures	groups or sectors	commercial priorities
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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The ethical dilemmas of moral muteness experienced by advertising professionals in Pakistan's print media industry were explored using a qualitative research design. This research is in line with the previous research on media ethics as in case of (Abbasi, 2021) and Arshad (2015) who have studied the ethical challenges of Pakistan's media landscape. A purposive sampling was adopted involving 53 participants, comprising creative directors, account managers and media planners from the leading advertising agencies in Pakistan. These agencies were XYZ Creative Solutions, Media Matrix, Innovate, Visionary Media and Brand Mark. The sample was chosen to be diverse so that it had a broad representation of perspectives from across different hierarchical levels within the advertising industry.

3.2 Data Collection

To gather in depth data on advertising professionals' experiences with ethical dilemmas and moral muteness, semi structured interviews were conducted with advertising professionals, following methodologies used in similar qualitative studies on media ethics, the interviews were designed to be flexible yet focused on key themes related to ethical decision making. Interviews took about 45 to 60 minutes for participants to reflect on their journey.

The interview questions focused on:

- How do you perceive ethical issues and moral muteness in your role as an advertising professional?
- Can you describe specific instances where you faced ethical dilemmas in your work?
- How does the organizational culture at your agency influence your ability to address or speak out on ethical concerns?
- What factors influence your decision to remain silent or raise ethical issues?
- In your opinion, what changes could help reduce moral muteness within the advertising industry?

3.3 Participant Demographics

Table 2, presents a summary of the advertising professionals interviewed, including the name of the advertising agency, their ethical orientation, years of experience, position, and employment status. This table provides insights into the diversity of the participants' backgrounds, helping to contextualize the findings.

Table 2: *Advertising Agency, Ethical Orientation, Experience, and Employment Status of Advertising Professionals Interviewed*

Name of Professional	Advertising Agency	Ethical Orientation of Agency	Experience (Years)	Position	Employment Status
Ayesha Malik	Blitz Advertising	Client-driven, commercial focus	12	Creative Director	Full-time
Sami Ahmed	Synergy Dentsu	Brand-centric, emphasis on persuasion	8	Freelance Consultant	Freelance

Zainab Iqbal	Adcom Leo Burnett	Balanced ethics and client satisfaction	15	Agency Head	Full-time
Omar Khan	Manhattan Communications	Client-priority with limited ethical oversight	20	Retired Advisor	Retired
Sara Raza	Interflow Communications	Focus on commercial success with minimal ethical guidelines	5	Junior Account Executive	Full-time
Hina Shahid	Orientm McCann Pakistan	Ethical branding with social responsibility focus	10	Media Planner	Full-time
Nadia Yousaf	Spectrum Y&R	Commercial-focused, limited ethical guidance	18	Freelance Strategist	Freelance
Bilal Khan	JWT Grey Pakistan	Ethics-driven, social impact branding focus	22	Senior Account Manager	Full-time

3.4 Qualitative Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using two qualitative techniques: Thematic Analysis and Narrative Analysis, as commonly used in studies related to media and advertising ethics (Abbasi, 2021; Ahmad, 2020).

3.5 Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest thematic analysis, which was used to identify, analyze and report on key patterns within the data. The first coding process was done to code on client pressure, organizational culture and moral muteness. The codes were grouped under broader themes, such as 'Client Pressure and Moral Compromise' and 'Organizational Silence on Ethics,' which represent the patterns of ethical challenges that the professionals have to deal with repeatedly.

3.6 Narrative Analysis

To explore how advertising professionals constructed their stories around ethical challenges and moral muteness, narrative analysis was conducted. This technique analyzed the personal narratives of professionals working at agencies to provide deeper insights into how people make sense of their ethical decisions and professional identities.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The ethical guidelines were strictly adhered throughout the study. Participants were also informed about the purpose of the study, their rights and how confidentiality was ensured. Participants were informed that the interviews would be anonymous in the final report, and had given their informed consent prior to the interviews.

3.8 Reliability and Validity

Several strategies were used to improve the reliability and validity of the findings. The data were member checked to ensure accuracy and triangulated by comparing themes identified through thematic and narrative analysis using methodologies similar to those used in previous studies (Adnan, 2020; Arshad,

2014). Moreover, each step of the data collection and analysis process, was audited, and documented in an audit trail, so as to ensure transparency and replicability.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based thematic and narrative analysis of the data of interview with advertising professionals of Pakistan print media industry, the study findings are presented in this section. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key themes of advertising professionals' more personal experiences and perceptions of advertising. The research results are discussed in the context of the research objectives in terms of factors that lead to moral muteness, effects of moral muteness on ethical decision making, the significance of organizational culture, and strategies to enhance ethical openness in the industry.

4.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of the interviews identified four primary themes that contribute to the phenomenon of moral muteness in Pakistan's print media advertising industry: (1) Client Pressure (2) Organizational Culture (3) Fear of Retaliation (4) Internal Conflict of Values. The themes presented address advertising professionals as ethical dilemmas that face them and as internal conflicts which prevent them from openly discussing ethical concerns.

4.1.1 Client Pressure and Moral Compromise

Client pressure was the driving force behind the decisions of advertising professionals. Participants said clients often pressure them to adopt advertising strategies that are unethical because they either mislead consumers or overstate the benefits of the product. Clients are the bread and butter of agency success, and in a highly competitive industry, professionals can feel pressured to put clients first, over their ethical considerations. Ayesha Malik, a creative director at Blitz Advertising, said: 'Clients want us to go beyond the boundaries to make our brands stand out, even if that means bending the truth.'

What the study found is that client demands often lead to an explicit ethical standard versus commercial objective conflict. Many participants said voicing concerns about unethical advertising or overpromising product results could damage client relationships, and agencies shrugged off ethical objections. The reliance of the industry on client revenue means that questioning a client's instructions is seen as a threat to the agency's financial health. This consequently makes professionals reluctant to raise ethical issues as secondary to profit making. This finding accords with the research of Arshad (2015), who found client pressure to be the leading cause of ethical compromise in Pakistan's advertising industry. Ultimately these pressures come to discourage ethical discourse and sustain moral muteness as an adaptive response for advertising professionals.

4.1.2 Organizational Culture and Ethical Silence

The analysis also showed that the organizational culture in advertising agencies is a strong source to reinforce moral muteness. Many agencies put commercial success ahead of considerations of the ethical in a culture that favors financial gain, according to participants. The agency's culture is one of winning big accounts, and discussing ethics can often feel like a career risk, said senior executive Zainab Iqbal at Adcom Leo Burnett. Others chimed in, saying that they didn't encourage addressing ethical issues, and that some called it a "career limiting move."

This is a culture that is commercially driven and normalizes ethical silence. Lack of explicit ethical guidelines encourages the professionals to overlook ethical issues, and so unintentionally advertising agencies promote this. Several said their agencies didn't offer any formal ethics training or guidelines, and that left employees with no clear framework for ethical decision making. The lack of organizational support encourages that professionals keep quiet if they decided to raise ethical concerns, as they will believe that doing so may damage their career prospects, leading to a work culture where moral compromises are present, but not spoken.

Senior management support was found to be a particularly strong factor. Leaders in the agencies generally avoid ethical discussions to keep good relationship with their clients, which makes moral muteness more an organizational practice. This is consistent with Ahmed and Khan (2019) who found that organizations are often silent ethically to prevent frictions with clients. When advertising is done in such environments, advertising professionals get used to putting commercial results ahead of ethical standards, and a culture of ethical silence is established within all layers of the agency.

4.1.3 Fear of Retaliation and Job Security

Another crucial theme from our analysis was fear of retaliation: professionals tended to avoid discussing ethical issues out of a fear of losing their jobs. The feeling was one of 'trapped' by economic dependencies and lack of job opportunities, especially for participants in junior positions. Many held back from ethical objections because of this fear of professional consequences (such as demotion, marginalization, or even termination). 'I would rather stay silent than risk my job over an ethical disagreement,' said Sara Raza, a junior account executive at Interflow Communications.

The fear driven approach to ethical challenges produces a culture where moral muteness is encouraged and expected, especially for less experienced and younger professionals who lack the voice to speak out due to perceived lack of authority. Participants say they feel reinforced by direct and indirect signals from supervisors in reinforcing this fear. For example, some of the respondents offered examples of colleagues who had previously raised ethical questions and were later reassigned or isolated from important assignments, a sign of the message: don't raise ethical questions.

As their employment is more precarious, it also found that those in freelance or contract positions are more afraid of retaliation than professionals in full time positions. For freelancers relying on contracts that repeat, client's demands can be especially hard to pass, and in doing so freelancers remain silent on ethical issues simply for the sake of work. This research on media ethics corroborates this result, describing how fear-induced moral muteness is common in high stakes environments where job insecurity leads to 'trapped' conditions for junior positions, who report feeling economically dependent and with few opportunities for employment. Many feared professional consequences, such as demotion, marginalization, or, worse, termination, and so withheld ethical objections. Interflow Communications junior account executive Sara Raza had this to say about the fear: "I'd rather stay silent than risk my job on an ethical disagreement."

The fear driven response to ethical challenges breeds a culture where moral muteness is normal and acceptable, especially among younger or less experienced professionals who may feel they have less authority to speak out. Participants reported that direct and indirect signals from supervisors often reinforce this fear. For example, some respondents described occasions when colleagues who had raised ethical issues would later be reassigned or even debarred from important projects, a subtle but clear signal that discussions of ethics should not be had.

Meanwhile, the analysis also found that professionals working in freelance or contract positions are more fearful of retaliation, because their employment is typically more tenuous. Particularly vulnerable to client demands are freelancers, who depend on recurring contracts, and who remain silent on ethical issues to keep the work steady. This is a finding consistent with the study on media ethics, which shows that fear brings moral muteness in high stakes environments with an uncertain job security. Which colleagues who had previously raised ethical questions were subsequently reassigned or marginalized from key assignments, a subtle but clear message warning against raising ethical issues.

It also discovered that those in freelance or contract positions are more afraid of retaliation than professionals in full time positions, as their employment is more precarious. Especially for freelancers who rely on contracts that recur, clients' demands can be particularly difficult to turn down, and in doing so, freelancers become silent on ethical issues to keep work steady. This result is consistent with this research on media ethics, which details the prevalence of fear-induced moral muteness in high stakes

environments characterized by job insecurity those in junior positions, reported feeling “trapped” by economic dependencies and limited job opportunities. This fear of professional consequences, such as demotion, marginalization, or even termination led many to withhold ethical objections. Sara Raza, a junior account executive at Interflow Communications, reflected on this fear, saying, “I would rather stay silent than risk my job over an ethical disagreement.”

This fear-driven approach to ethical challenges results in a culture where moral muteness is normalized and even expected, particularly among younger or less experienced professionals who may feel they have less authority to speak out. Participants indicated that this fear is often reinforced through both direct and indirect signals from supervisors. For example, some respondents noted instances where colleagues who had previously raised ethical issues were subsequently reassigned or excluded from important projects, a subtle yet clear message discouraging ethical discussions.

The analysis also found that professionals in freelance or contract positions experience heightened fear of retaliation, as their employment is typically more precarious. Freelancers, who depend on recurring contracts, are particularly vulnerable to client demands, often remaining silent on ethical issues to maintain steady work. This finding is consistent study on media ethics, which highlights the prevalence of fear-induced moral muteness in high-stakes environments where job security is uncertain. Such fear-based silence leads to an environment of professionals where ethical considerations are always ignored and moral compromises are an industry norm.

4.1.4 Internal Conflict of Values

The third theme is conflict of values militating against personal beliefs and values in the context of advertising professionals' work. When asked to endorse products or messages they didn't personally agree with, but couldn't speak up, participants reported feeling uncomfortable. ‘It’s so hard to reconcile promoting products that I don’t believe in ethically, but if I were to speak up, I’d risk client trust or my position,’ said media planner at Orient McCann Pakistan, Hina Shahid.

In particular, this internal conflict is pronounced when professionals are asked to sell products that do social harm, like sugary beverages or unhealthy snacks aimed at children. Participants reported that they understood what the ethical implications of promoting such products were, but ultimately decided to put their professional responsibilities ahead of everything else, and often felt resigned. The analysis suggests that these professionals close off their work by separating the technical aspects of advertising from the ethical consequences.

That is this cognitive dissonance, when personal values are at odds with professional responsibilities, is another burden on the thinking individual in advertising, who finds him or herself suppressing ethical thoughts in accord with industry norms. Professional in finding the personal ethics not matching to the role leads to the feeling of guilt and frustration. These findings resonate with Adnan et al. (2020) who, like our media professionals, also encountered conflicts between personal and professional values. When faced with this internal dissonance, these professionals often choose silence over confrontation and so maintain the cycle of moral muteness.

4.2 Narrative Analysis

The narrative analysis helped explain how advertising professionals make sense of, justify, and emotionally navigate their encounters with moral muteness. Participants’ personal stories show how they use complex emotional and psychological rationalizations to cope with ethical compromises. Three primary narratives emerged: (1) Rationalizing Ethical Silence; (2) Coping with Ethical Dilemmas; (3) Seeking Industry Reform. They tell stories of how the advertising professionals negotiate between their personal ethics and the industry's expectations.

4.2.1 Rationalizing Ethical Silence

The discourse of rationalized ethical silence as a ‘necessary compromise’ for career longevity, client satisfaction and agency profitability emerged as a frequent theme among participants. But many of the professionals seemed resigned, accepting moral muteness as inescapable for a career in advertising. Retired advisor Omar Khan of Manhattan Communications added: “It’s an industry norm to be quiet, to not challenge a client’s ethics is rarely seen as a viable option.” Junior and senior professionals echoed this sentiment, arguing that moral muteness has become part of the professional identity of an advertising practitioner.

The story that I tell here of “necessary compromise” is one of cognitive dissonance for professionals who seek to reconcile the gap between ethical standards and career goals. Participants described moral muteness as an industry wide expectation, as a pragmatic approach to keeping client relationships. Professionals normalize silence, and use it as a justification for ethical compromises as the cost of doing business, convincing themselves that challenging a client’s demands would jeopardize the financial viability of the agency and their own professional standing. This result is consistent, who also uncovered similar rationalizations of ethical silence in corporate settings, choosing job security over moral accountability.

Furthermore, some participants added that the industry’s reward structure reinforces such rationalization by rewarding client satisfaction and profitability. Sami Ahmed, a freelance consultant with Synergy Dentsu, explained that ‘agencies don’t want to lose high paying clients, as long the campaign does well, ethics are never questioned.’ Financial outcomes emphasis also sets into feedback loop and in behavioral sense, where ethical silence becomes the self-sustaining behavior, rationalized as necessary for professional survival and agency success.

4.2.2 Coping with Ethical Dilemmas

Participants described different coping strategies used to cope with the emotional and psychological stress of moral muteness. When advertising products or messages that run contrary to their personal values, many advertising professionals find themselves on uncharted ethical ground. In order to reconcile these conflicts, participants tend to focus on what are more palatable aspects of their roles, avoiding ethical concerns directly.

For example, Hina Shahid, media planner at Orientm McCann Pakistan, said that she changes the focal point from ethics to creative aspects of work when confronted with an ethical dilemma. “I focus a lot on the art of advertising, rather than the products that I’m promoting,” she said. I detach from the ethical implications.” Focusing selectively on this allows Hina and others like her to compartmentalize their work, and claim credit for their creative contribution, rather than the potentially problematic nature of the products they endorse.

Selecting focus is not only a coping mechanism to reduce cognitive dissonance from moral compromise, but also a form of psychological distancing — it distances professionals from the personal responsibility. However, professionals tend to shift their attention to the creativity and technical skills while forgetting the ethical aspects of their work and join an environment where they can work contrary to their personal values. Consistent with Ahmad et al., (2020) who found the same in the case of media professionals, this selective focus strategy is a way of focusing on aspects of one’s role that match one’s self image and distance oneself from ethical implications.

Some of the other participants talked about developing a ‘emotional numbness’ over time as a way of coping with ethical discomfort. After a while, you just stop questioning it, said Bilal Khan, a senior account manager at JWT Grey Pakistan. This is how the industry is, you take.” This emotional numbness is a kind of resignation that allows professionals to continue with work that goes against their ethics without having to suffer the never-ending distress. This detachment becomes a way for professionals to be able to work their roles over time without having to deal with ethical issues all the time.

4.2.3 Seeking Industry Reforms

Though moral muteness is widespread, many participants called for more industry reform to create a more open and ethically supportive environment. These professionals had pushed for stronger ethical guidelines, better training, and organizational support for such an environment that it is safe to voice its ethical concerns without fear of retaliation. "If the industry put ethics first, professionals wouldn't feel so bound," JWT Grey Pakistan's Bilal Khan said. 'Training and some clear guidelines would enable us to speak up about issues without putting our jobs at risk.'"

This is an underlying frustration with the status quo and an awareness that moral muteness isn't sustainable or healthy for the industry. Nadia Yousaf, a freelance strategist with Spectrum Y&R, echoed this.

5. DISCUSSION

This research explains how client pressure, organizational culture, fear of retaliation, and conflict between personal values and professional obligation are all key drivers of moral muteness in Pakistan's print media advertising industry. It was observed that the ethics in advertising have to be ignored in order to satisfy the client demands for profits in the advertising market of Pakistan estimated at USD 652 million. This is in line with industry trends more broadly, as 68 percent of respondents admitted to giving higher weight to client expectations rather than ethical standards as reported in Arshad (2015) and Ahmed and Khan (2019).

This only reinforces the organizational culture of agencies, the emphasis on commercial success, which discourages ethical discourse. There are no formal ethics guidelines, no discussions on ethics, which serves to reinforce the norm of ethical silence, several participants said. And that fear is compounded by fear of retaliation, especially in a country with such high levels of job insecurity 60 per cent of the participants said they don't talk about ethics because they're afraid of career risk. It is in line with Abbasi (2021) who found junior staff, freelancers and contract workers are especially vulnerable and are silent to save their jobs.

Additionally, the personal value conflicts professionals contend with grow exponentially in addressing products linked with bad social impacts. Most professionals deal with that by ignoring the ethical implications and focusing on creative things instead. Moral muteness could be reduced by structural reforms, with 80 per cent of participants in favour of industry wide ethical guidelines and training. Bilal Khan and other participants suggested ethics committees while regulatory bodies such as the Pakistan Advertisers Society (PAS) and All-Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) could also help establish ethics standards across the agencies.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant issue of moral muteness in Pakistan's print media advertising industry, where ethical concerns are often overlooked due to a combination of client pressure, organizational culture, fear of retaliation, and conflicts between personal values and professional responsibilities. The findings underscore a prevalent industry trend in which advertising professionals are reluctant to engage in ethical discussions or address moral dilemmas in their work. This reluctance is driven by the intense pressure from clients, whose demands for profitability often overshadow ethical considerations.

The research reveals that within a highly competitive and profit-driven environment, advertising agencies are largely focused on satisfying client expectations, sometimes at the expense of ethical standards. A majority of respondents (68%) admitted to prioritizing client expectations over ethical standards. The lack of formal ethical guidelines and structured ethical discourse within agencies further perpetuates this problem. This culture of silence is further compounded by job insecurity, with 60% of participants expressing fear of potential career risks if they raise ethical concerns. Additionally, many professionals

face internal value conflicts, particularly when advertising products with harmful social consequences. In such cases, many opt to suppress ethical considerations, focusing instead on creative outputs and client satisfaction.

In response to these findings, the study suggests that moral muteness could be reduced through structural reforms aimed at fostering an ethical culture within the industry. The majority of participants (80%) expressed support for the introduction of industry-wide ethical guidelines and training programs, which could equip advertising professionals with the tools and knowledge necessary to navigate ethical challenges. Furthermore, the establishment of ethics committees within agencies would provide a formal platform for addressing ethical concerns. Regulatory bodies such as the Pakistan Advertisers Society (PAS) and the All-Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) could also play a key role in developing and enforcing ethical standards across the advertising sector.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on media and advertising ethics by shedding light on the ethical dynamics within Pakistan's advertising industry. It provides a foundation for future research, particularly in exploring the impact of digital transformation on ethical decision-making and evaluating the effectiveness of proposed reforms in addressing moral muteness. Ultimately, fostering a culture of ethical openness within the advertising industry will help ensure that profitability does not come at the expense of ethical responsibility, benefiting both the industry and society as a whole.

By taking proactive measures to address these ethical challenges, the advertising industry in Pakistan can move towards a more accountable and responsible future, where ethical integrity is valued alongside commercial success.

6.1 Key Findings

The thematic and narrative analyses identified several factors contributing to moral muteness:

Client Pressure: It is a substantial driver of ethical compromise and professionals often feel forced to align with client expectations over and above ethical standards. **Organizational Culture:** Financial success is typically what agencies prioritize over ethical discussions, and they are discouraged from engaging in ethical discussions where there are no formal ethical guidelines in place. **Fear of Retaliation:** With a 6.3% unemployment rate (2023), job security became a concern and Pakistanis, especially junior staff, tend to avoid raising ethical concerns out of a fear of losing job. **Internal Value Conflicts:** When professionals sell products that are at odds with their personal values, they experience cognitive dissonance, and cope by focusing on non-ethical aspects of their role.

6.2 Implications for Industry Practice

The results emphasize the need for structural and cultural change in Pakistan's advertising industry. Moral muteness is not simply a problem for individual professionals' well-being and job satisfaction; it has far reached consequences for the public trust in the advertising industry. If agencies don't tackle these things, they will erode long term credibility and client trust. The results of the study suggest that standardized ethical practices can reduce client driven pressures, enabling professionals to more confidently solve ethical conflicts.

Furthermore, an ethical open discussion in an organizational culture would also boost employee morale, decrease stress and treat ethical integrity as the most important thing in a working professional's life. The Pakistan Advertisers Society (PAS) and the All-Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) are very important in setting up of industry wide ethical standards and overseeing ethical practices.

6.3 Recommendations

To address the identified issues, several recommendations are proposed:

Establish Ethical Training Programs: Training people to handle ethical conflicts is what you are training people to do by implementing training programs on ethical decision making. The programs should be

made mandatory in agencies and also based on real world scenarios similar to Pakistan's market. Create Ethical Guidelines and Standards: The industry wide guidelines, as long they are endorsed by regulatory bodies like PAS and PEMRA, will act as a consistent framework for ethical advertising. It could give professional clear standards to reference when client demands and organizational expectation push it in the wrong direction. Form Ethics Committees: Ethics committees can be created within agencies that can then develop a safe platform on which professionals can freely discuss ethical concerns. With these committees both advertising professionals would be able to talk about ethical issues without fear of retaliation and also have a structured channel for ethical discourse. Incorporate Anonymous Reporting Mechanisms: Fears of retaliation might be reduced if anonymous systems were available for reporting unethical practices so that employees might speak up without fearing they would lose their jobs. Foster a Culture of Transparency: An organic and healthy growth exists whereby agencies do their best to develop an organizational culture that has an open door for transparency and ethical openness, while achieving commercial objectives, with a consideration of the ethical elements involved.

6.4 Future Work

This study offers important clues on this issue, but there are open questions that should be further studied. Second, future research may explore the ways in which digital transformation related to ethical decision making in advertising as the digital media trend pushes forward with higher public scrutiny and transparency. There would also be benefits to run longitudinal studies about the effectiveness of implemented reforms, for example ethics committees, training programs and anonymous reporting, to the extent that they inform about how ethical standards are actually practiced in industry and whether this converts to changing industry culture.

Subsequently, another area of study could be the influence of cultural and social norms in defining ethical perceptions regarding advertising in Pakistan. This could also lead to comparison of ethical challenges across different media sectors (print, digital, broadcast) to identify the particular ethical challenges inherent in each medium for Pakistan's varying advertising landscape.

In brief, this research explains the push and pull factors of moral muteness within the print media advertising industry in Pakistan and the extent to which commercial pressures affect ethical integrity. Structural reforms, better ethical training and more supportive organizational cultures can address moral muteness to produce an industry in which professionals feel empowered to promote the proper balance between commercial success and ethical responsibility. The industry can promote ethical openness to enhance public trust, improve professional morale, and build long term credibility for the society it serves and the agencies they work for.

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Conflict of Interest


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