

# Facebooks' Mood Manipulation Experiment Case Study

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## Background

Facebook is one of the largest technology companies in the world. While Facebook is known for connecting people around the world and changing many lives, they haven't had a clean past. In this case study, we will examine a particular ethical issue that arose when Facebook performed their mood manipulation experiment.

For one week in January 2012, data scientists influenced what almost 700,000 Facebook users saw on their page. Some of these subjects were shown content that had a more positive message, whereas other subjects were shown content that was shown to have a sadder message. Once the testing period had elapsed, subjects were analysed to see if they were more likely to post positive or negative messages based on what kind of information they had been conditioned to over the week.

The experiment performed had been done without consent from participants, raising concerns for user data policies and privacy. Whilst the experiment was legal as stated in the terms of service of Facebook, people had found it unsettling that Facebook would be willing to manipulate the emotions of its users without their own knowledge or consent.

## Ethical Discussions

The experiment conducted by Facebook highlights several ethical issues involved when conducting experimentation using participants. It is important to consider all perspectives regarding this study. The issue at hand is whether it is ethically tolerable to conduct experimentation without user consent if it is legal to do so.

There are several stakeholders to consider when looking at this experiment. The first stakeholder to consider is Adam Kramer and his two colleagues that conducted the experiment. The next stakeholder to consider is the programmers who had made these changes. Finally, the participants and general userbase of Facebook are the last stakeholders to consider.

When looking at Adam Kramer's actions from a Deontological perspective, we can see that he had acted unethically. Kramer conducted this experiment knowing that he would not ask for user consent which is unacceptable. Kant described the categorical imperative as an act that could become a consistent universal law.

Ignoring informed consent goes against the categorical imperative, and if everyone in the world were to conduct experiments in this manipulative manner, it would result in an overall negative utility in the world. In this reality people don't know whether they are in an experiment, leading to the chilling effect, which is where people prohibit their speech and actions, behaving entirely different due to the idea that they are under watch. Consent is essential to any study where participants are involved. Kramer and his team knowingly avoided acquiring consent and chose to instead feign ignorance relying on the legality of the matter.

Looking at the situation from the viewpoint of the general userbase of Facebook and participants of the study, it is evident from a consequentialist perspective that the experiment was unethical. The effect of this experiment and the message that it sends is that people can be under experiment at any time and never know unless the conductors of the experiment reveal this information, which is a distressing notion to consider. This could cause overall less utility as users may be more paranoid and act differently as they might believe they are a part of an experiment secretly. Saying that the manner in which the experiment was conducted is ethical, sets a poor precedent for future studies indicating that they can ignore the important step of acquiring consent for a study.

In contrast to the perspectives above which indicate that the study was unethical, there are also those which indicate it is ethical. From a consequentialist perspective, Adam Kramer can be seen as acting ethically. Kramer had claimed that only a very small percentage of Facebook users were affected by this experiment and for a short timeframe, with the experiment conducted in the pursuit of knowledge. The experiment had shown for the first time in history that social media is able to affect the emotions of people in the real world. It is evident that the small number of users affected in contrast to the population of Facebook users is a negative utility that is outweighed by the scientific discovery shown in the experiment. When looking at the ACM Software Engineering code of ethics, they state that one of their duties is to “extend software engineering knowledge by appropriate participation in professional organizations, meetings, and publications.” It is quite clear that this experiment had extended the knowledge of software engineering, scientifically proving that social media is able to affect the emotions of users.

In support of the argument above, from both a deontological and consequential perspective, Facebook engineers responsible for these changes could have been seen acting ethically, despite manipulating users’ feeds without their knowledge. From a deontological perspective, the Facebook engineers were fulfilling their contract, and when looking at the ACM Software Engineering code of ethics, they say “Software engineers shall act in a manner that is in the best interests of their client and employer, consistent with the public interest.” By making these changes they were acting in the best interest of their client fulfilling their professional duty to the Facebook corporation. From a consequentialist perspective, they can also be seen as acting ethically as the result of these changes had pushed knowledge further for the greater public good, as scientific discoveries arising from through research is what enables society to progress.

One aspect to consider when determining whether this experiment was ethical or unethical, is that of a regulatory perspective. When users click “I agree to the terms of conditions”, part of it states that you agree your data may be used for experimentation purposes. Therefore, Facebook was acting within their legal rights. However, when it comes to ethics, legality is not everything, ethics is about doing the right thing.

When asking whether the researchers at Facebook did the right thing, it's important to look at the context of what happened, and what is and isn't acceptable when conducting experimentation with participants. When looking at other fields of practice that involve participants in experimentation, informed consent is required, and the study information must be presented to the participants in a manner that is understandable. This is the case for all experiments, except those that do not require consent by law or government regulation. Due to the nature of this experiment, user knowledge would affect the outcome of the experiment, so it must have been done in this deceptive manner. However, in these cases, before concluding research, participants should be informed and given the option to withdraw their data. In the case of this Facebook experiment, no evidence has been shown that participants were informed post-study or given options to withdraw their data. From a deontological perspective, Facebook knew the proper steps to take when coordinating experiments

of this nature, however, they had knowingly chosen to conduct the research in this manner. This makes the manner in which the experiment was conducted unethical.

## Conclusions

To conclude it is evident that there are two sides to this coin, it is not black and white. Whilst the utility provided from the experiment helps push society forward and helps us understand the phenomena of social media; the manner in which the experiment was conducted sets a bad precedent for what is and isn't okay for companies to do without user knowledge. What was done goes against the code of conduct of Facebook itself, where they say, "giving people choices about the data we collected or created about them, including access to and control of their data whenever possible and appropriate and honour the choices they have made." Facebook had acted unethically by knowingly ignoring informed consent and using the legality of the situation as a defense. The experiment, in particular, is not the issue rather how the experiment was conducted is. While there were good outcomes from this experiment, experimentation in this manner goes against the categorical imperative. I believe that Facebook acted unethically in this experiment, and with this knowledge, I would not invest if the company continues to practice in this fashion. Despite the positives of this experiment, this behaviour is not acceptable in the professional work field.

## Future Considerations

I believe that there is a simple remedy to resolve this ethical issue, allowing Facebook to conduct the experiment in an ethical manner with informed consent whilst also not affecting the results of the research. The alternative course of action would be to conduct this experiment in the same way, however, once they had collected the data, they should inform the users involved and give them an option to not be involved in this experimentation. To account for a reduced sample size due to people choosing to opt-out, they can simply double or triple the starting sample size of the experiment. This would provide the user control over their data whilst also not affecting the results of experimentation, removing the ethical issue entirely.

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