Data Collection

In 2014, the popular online dating platform OkCupid conducted a series of experiments on their users that sparked a debate on the ethics and morality of such experiments. The reason behind this controversy was the methods used for user data collection; the experiments involved manipulating individual user experiences on the dating platform, such as inaccurately editing match percentages and survey responses. This was done to test hypotheses about subjective human behavior when it came to dating and forming emotional connections. However, the experiment did not take in the user's informed consent and potentially impacted users' emotions through alterations made to the content users were viewing on the site. While attempting to enhance user experience and gain insightful knowledge, the experiments conducted by OkCupid were fundamentally unethical as they violated the principles of informed consent, thus compromising user autonomy and trust.

One of OkCupid's central points of defense in conducting these experiments was that experiments are essential for improving user experience and advancing internal company knowledge. Through these experiments, OkCupid was able to learn as a company what worked and what did not for its users. OkCupid co-founder Christian Rudder says that "the real problem in corporate America is not too many experiments — it is too few" (Rudder). Rudder's logic highlights the belief that experimentation is a tool for learning and development and is ultimately underutilized by most businesses. As researched by Cornelius Puschmann and Engin Bozdag in their article "Staking out the Unclear Ethical Terrain of Online Social Experiments," "[Rudder argues] that experiments are needed to make sure that the current algorithm works better than a random one, and that there is no alternative to such an incremental approach to optimally address user preferences. He also believes that while experiments presently cause controversies, they will be fully accepted in the future" (Puschmann and Bozdag 25). This perspective shows a concerning take in Rudder's reasoning, suggesting a flaw in both ethical judgment and logical coherence, ultimately undermining the professionalism and credibility of his defense. However, the issue is not inherently controversial for this reason alone - companies regularly perform such experiments, but such experiments are conducted with explicit and informed consent of the participants or users.

The ethical breach in OkCupid's approach becomes apparent when considering the total absence of transparency with its users. The users, who trusted the platform to provide genuine and unaltered data for decision-making in a highly personal aspect of their lives, were entirely unknowingly subjects of the experiment. When the experiment data was made public, users naturally had adverse reactions, with one expressing, "'I hope you did not cause me to miss out on a relationship while playing around with the data. It is hard enough for me as it is … people trusting your match percent is what you want, so don't lie to them about it.'" (ABC News). This user's sentiment shows the real-world impacts of the experiments on individual lives. Furthermore, similar to when Facebook conducted similar experiments on their users, OkCupid also received backlash for publishing the results of their data analysis online for the public to see. The idea that users' experiences and emotions can be carelessly manipulated for research purposes runs against the principles of ethical research. The reaction of an OkCupid user 'SteveRestless' to Facebook's similar manipulative experiment follows,"' Facebook secretly manipulated the users of the site, attempting to alter their emotions ... quite possibly at the behest of creepy interests sponsoring this experiment'" (ABC News). This shows a societal discomfort with such research practices and is rooted in the lack of respect for individuals' autonomy and the right to be informed about how their data is being used.

The stance that these experiments were not ethical solely for the manipulation of user data is not unseen. According to The Ethics of Online Experimentation with Unsuspecting Users by Raquel Benbunan-Fich, "[The third experiment conducted by OKCupid is not an instance of A/B testing because it intentionally misleads unsuspecting users about their compatibility percentages to see how they would react. This is not a website design change; it is an instance of algorithmic manipulation and misinformation" (Benbunan-Fich 5). One counter-argument that Benbunan-Fich noted was that OkCupid's user terms of service (TOS) contract for signing up for OkCupid as a service allowed OkCupid to manipulate user data in this way. However, OkCupid and similar TOS contracts were created without the end user in mind, and assumed that the user would agree to the terms even without reading them. “[The length of … OKCupid’s current TOS [is] about 3,700 words. At a rate of 200 words per minute, it would have taken an average reader about 18.5 minutes to read … OKCupid's [TOS]. However, research shows that people spend an average of half a minute before clicking on the agreement box" (Benbunan-Fich 6). Furthermore, Benbunan-Fich found that "due to language complexity and the use of legal terminology, users may not understand which rights they are granting when they post their creative content on these sites, [even] if they take the time to read the terms" (Benbunan-Fich 6). These findings show that OkCupid was most likely attempting to be misleading when conducting their manipulative experiment. This problem is made worse by the reality that most users do not thoroughly read or understand TOS when signing them, agreeing without understanding the extent to which their data is being used and manipulated. Such practices not only ignore the trust between users and the platforms they use but also raise questions about the ethicality of using complex and lengthy legal agreements as a shield for conducting such experiments.

In conclusion, while the rationale for conducting experiments such as those done by OkCupid may be seen as improving user experience and advancing research, the method of execution was ethically flawed. The lack of informed consent ultimately breached the autonomy of the users. Ethical experimentation in digital platforms requires a balance between conducting research and respecting the rights of the platform's users.

Works Cited

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