

COMP4920 Management and Ethics

Company Case Study

Facebook Emotional Contagion Experiment

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Tutorial: Monday 12 pm – 2 pm

Background

In 2012, Facebook conducted a study, and there are significant concerns raised about the ethics of the research. The research was an emotional contagion experiment. A study shows that emotional status which includes positive and negative can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, influencing people to experience the same emotions without their consciousness. In this experiment with people who use Facebook, they test if the same result applies to social network interaction by reducing the amount of emotional content in the News Feed. The outcomes were as expected: when decreased positive news, people wrote fewer positive and more negative posts; when reduced negative expressions, users wrote more positive and fewer negative posts. These results demonstrate that emotional contagion occurs on the social network like Facebook, and non-verbal signs and in-person interaction are nonessential for emotional contagion, the observation of others' experience affect our own emotions (Kramer, Guillory & Hancock, 2014).

The research manipulated 689,003 Facebook users in their News Feed for one week (January 11-18, 2012). Participants were selected randomly based on their user id. Posts were defined to be positive or negative should contain at least one positive or negative word. Two parallel experiments were carried out for positive and negative emotion: one in which reduced showing friends' positive posts in their News Feed, and the other decreased negative content. For each experiment, researchers experimented two dependent variables related to emotionality expressed in users' posts, which is the percentage of words posted by the user that was either positive or negative during the experimental period. The results indicate that for the group of users who had positive posts reduced in their News Feed, a more significant percentage of words were negative in their posts, and a less percentage were positive. Also, when negativity reduced, the opposite pattern occurred (Kramer, Guillory & Hancock, 2014).

Ethical Discussion

Stakeholders

The stakeholders in the Facebook emotional contagion experiment are the researchers, Facebook users, the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The primary stakeholders who were directly affected by the experiment are 689,033 research participants. These users got involved in the study without awareness that the third-party research team had access to their data or their emotions were manipulated. However, the other Facebook users who were not participants also stakeholders. Not only because they were potential participants, but also because their data has been accessed since only the users who viewed Facebook in English were qualified for select on into the experiment (Kramer, Guillory & Hancock, 2014). The EPIC submitted legal documents with the FTC, claiming that Facebook engaged in dishonest trade practices and broke a 2012 Consent Order entered into with the FTC. The complaint asks the agency to begin an investigation and comes in response to the news that Facebook emotion manipulation study (McNeal, 2018).

Ethical issue

The main ethical issue is that Facebook did not ask for 689,003 participants informed consent. The study conducted with little transparency and violate privacy terms, which are

unethical. Although they claimed that when the users sign up to Facebook, they agreed to Facebook's Data Use Policy, which allows Facebook to share their data to the third-party (Hunter, 2014). They should be aware that most people do not read the policy and they hit the 'Agree' button only because otherwise they cannot use the app. Moreover, Facebook did not ask for the informed consent of being participants of an emotional manipulation experiment.

Kant (Duty)

In Kant's view that the only thing that is good without qualification is a good will. When analysing the emotional contagion study through Kant point of view, Facebook's actions would be considered as ethical, since the Facebook spokeswoman said that the research's purpose was to improve their services and to make the recommendations people see on Facebook as relevant and appealing as possible (Booth, 2018). In other words, the reason that they want to collaborate with the research team from Cornell University was Facebook want to provide better information to users and improve their algorithms on Newsfeed according to the result of the research. However, they informed consent was an accident, which was unpredictable. They were willing well, but end up in a negative public influence. Therefore, according to Kant's principle, Facebook's action was ethical since they meant well.

Mill (Consequence-based)

According to Mill's principle, consequences are what matters and utilitarianism principle. The emotional manipulation study was unethical. Facebook did not inform the 689,003 users participated in the research that they used users' personal information for an experiment, which ends up in many of the users involved with the study had their emotions negatively manipulated purposefully (Celentano, 2018). Facebook's ignorance of informed consent makes users like experimental products, and users felt disrespected. Furthermore, Facebook has had plenty of different explanations regarding the use of users' data, which lose trust from the Facebook users and the public. Thus, based on Mill's point of view, the result of the emotional manipulation experiment was not well and turned out that people are very unsatisfied with the way that the experiment conducted. Therefore, the research that did not ask for users' informed consent was unethical.

Code of ethics/conduct

In the ethical principles and code of conduct, the American Psychological Association (APA) defines informed consent as:

"When psychologists conduct research or provide assessment, therapy, counselling, or consulting services in person or via electronic transmission or other forms of communication, they obtain the informed consent of the individual or individuals using language that is reasonably understandable to that person or persons except when conducting such activities without consent is mandated by law or governmental regulation or as otherwise provided in this Ethics Code."(Meyer, 2018)

As the definition said, Facebook claimed that they had included the consent in 'Data Use Policy', they still did not explain to the participants in understandable language. The

Facebook users did not understand the experiment. Therefore, Facebook violated the ethical principles and code of conduct provided by the APA.

Conclusion

I find that Facebook emotional contagion experiment is unethical. Although they list consent in the 'Data Use Policy', they did not explain the detail information of the experiment to the users, which violate the APA code of conduct. For the experiment itself, I do not think it is unethical since the purpose of the study is to feed better news to users and improve the user experience of social media. However, the way that they conduct the study especially did not ask for users informed consent was inappropriate. The reaction of the public, which includes Facebook users' query, and the complaint filed by the EPIC and the FTC affected the reputation of Facebook. Thus, Facebook does not meet expected standards of ethical behaviour.

References

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