

Topic: Scenario #1 – Facebook Psychology Experiment

Thesis: Facebook did what was required to ensure a successful experiment, to provide explicit notification would jeopardize the validity of the experiment. Some may think that what Facebook did was unethical, as most users do not know when they are suddenly part of an experiment, but every user agrees to it when they sign up. The experiment itself would also be useless if every participant knew exactly what was going on, as they may try to skew the results or decide not to participate.

Claim 1: Subjects are required to give consent. Facebook users do so upon clicking “sign up”, as consent is discussed within Facebook’s terms which every user acknowledges they agree with by clicking “sign up”.

- This is explicitly stated on the Facebook sign up page: “By clicking Sign Up, you agree to our Terms and that you have read our data policy[.]”

Claim 2: A psychological experiment requires natural human reaction, if the user was aware they were being tested on for a certain thing, they may try to skew the results. This would invalidate the experiment.

- For example, if given a questionnaire which was designed to test morality, someone who knew the purpose of the questionnaire would try to answer in such a way to give them the best outcome, rather than answering in a way that best reflected their personality.
- The ethical framework for protecting subjects rests on the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice. All of these were upheld by Facebook during the experiment.

Claim 3: Notifying the user would cause loss of data from users neglecting to participate or incorrect data from users trying to skew results. This would cause the experiment to be less effective.

- This is evident in other experiments such as the Milgram experiment on obedience, where subjects were convinced that they were dealing extremely painful shocks to another researcher, though they really were not doing anything. Though the experiment would not be considered ethical today, it shows that without a veil over the actual experiment's intentions, the experiment is likely to fail. Facebook's experiment was nowhere near as damaging to users, they weren't made to believe they were causing harm to others.

Resources:

1. www.facebook.com [Referenced for claim 1, when mentioning the sign up page.]
2. www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html [Referenced for claim 3, an example of an experiment where the subject was unaware of what was truly going on, and it was necessary to the success of the experiment.]
3. Ethical and Legal Aspects of Human Subjects Research on the Internet, Mark S. Frankel, Ph. D. and Sanyin Siang.
(https://nationalethicscenter.org/resources/187/download/ethical_legal.pdf) [Useful for claims 2 and 3]