

Unit 5 - Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys:

The use of online surveys to collect personal data has become increasingly common, yet the ethical, social, legal, and professional implications of such practices remain contentious. One of the most notable cases of data misuse is the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which involved the unauthorised collection of data from millions of Facebook users (Confessore, 2018). This incident raised critical questions regarding privacy, consent, and the broader impacts of data exploitation. This essay examines the Cambridge Analytica case, along with an additional examples of inappropriate survey use, Google's online surveys for personalised advertising.

Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm, harvested data from approximately 87 million Facebook users without their explicit consent. This was achieved through a personality quiz app that collected not only the users' data but also that of their friends (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). While the individuals that responded to the quiz did give their consent to collect their data, their friends did not. The data sharing policy of Facebook that made this access to the users' friends data possible has since been changed. The collected data was subsequently used to influence political campaigns, including the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum by exploiting collected data to tailor political advertisements and this way influence election decisions. From an ethical standpoint, this case exemplifies a violation of user privacy and consent. According to the principles of informed consent, all individuals must be fully aware of how their data will be used and must give their consent, which was not the case for every person on which data was collected (Nissenbaum, 2010). Socially, the misuse of data undermined public

trust in digital platforms and highlighted the vulnerability of personal information in the digital age. Legally, Facebook faced fines and regulatory scrutiny, including a \$5 billion settlement with the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2019).

Professionally, the scandal underscored the need for researchers to adhere to ethical guidelines that prioritise transparency, accountability, and respect for user autonomy. These guidelines should be installed and enforced to protect companies against a loss of reputation and trust caused by such an incident while at the same time protecting individuals against the unethical use of their data by companies.

A similar case of data misuse is Google's pursuit of personalised advertising. Google has faced criticism for collecting extensive user data through online surveys and search behaviour without clear consent. Through tools like Google Opinion Rewards, users provide personal information in exchange for rewards, often without fully understanding how their data is used (Schneier, 2015). This data is then combined with users' browsing histories and location data to deliver highly personalised advertisements to increase Google's profit which is largely dependent on advertising on the Google platform. Ethically, this practice raises concerns about informed consent and the manipulation of consumer behaviour (Zuboff, 2019) as it is not ensured that individuals fully understand what their data is used for. Socially, the collection and use of personal data for profit have contributed to growing public distrust in digital platforms (Acquisti et al., 2015), especially when it comes to advertising. Legally, Google has faced fines from regulatory bodies such as the European Union, which fined the company £44 million for violating the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2019 (BBC, 2019). Professionally, this case highlights the need for greater transparency and ethical data use in digital marketing.

It also stresses the necessity for individuals to get informed about how their data is used before consenting to any online survey, also putting an additional obligation to check for what purpose data is used not only on the collecting company but also on the individuals whose data is collected.

These examples demonstrate the potential for surveys and data collection to be exploited for commercial purposes. These instances highlight the importance of obtaining informed consent, ensuring transparency in data usage, and protecting user privacy. Ethical guidelines must be reinforced to prevent manipulation and maintain public trust in digital platforms. Legal frameworks, such as the GDPR (European Parliament, 2016), are essential to hold organisations accountable, while professional standards should emphasise respect for user autonomy and data integrity. Moving forward, a combination of robust regulations, ethical research practices, and increased public awareness is necessary to mitigate the misuse of personal information.

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