
Unit 5: Interviews, Survey Methods, and Questionnaire Design

e-Portfolio Activity: Reflective Activity 2

Case Study: Inappropriate Use of Surveys

Task:

In 2018, Cambridge Analytica was in the news in the United Kingdom and the USA (Confessore, 2018) for obtaining and sharing data obtained from millions of Facebook users. They obtained the data through innocuous surveys on Facebook (you may have seen this type of survey and probably participated at times). This is probably the highest profile of surveys used for alternative means and, probably, monetary gains. However, this happens often through various media.

Consider how exactly this happened and why it was used. Find one or two further examples of inappropriate use of surveys and highlight the impact of all these examples from the various ethical, social, legal and professional standpoints that apply.

Answer:

Surveys are a common tool for gathering data, often used in academic research, market analysis, and public opinion polling. However, their misuse can lead to significant ethical, social, legal, and professional consequences. The case of Cambridge Analytica in 2018 highlights how surveys can be exploited for alternative purposes, such as influencing political outcomes or generating monetary gains. This essay explores the Cambridge Analytica scandal, provides additional examples of survey misuse, and examines the broader implications of such practices from ethical, social, legal, and professional perspectives.

The Cambridge Analytica Scandal

In 2018, Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm, was exposed for harvesting the personal data of millions of Facebook users without their explicit consent (Confessore, 2018). The firm used seemingly innocuous personality quizzes and surveys on Facebook to collect data, which was then used to create psychological profiles of users. These profiles were leveraged to target individuals with personalized political advertisements during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the UK (Cadwalladr, 2018). While users voluntarily participated in the surveys, they were unaware that their data would be used for purposes beyond the immediate context of the quiz.

The ethical implications of this case are profound. The misuse of survey data violated the principle of informed consent, as users were not fully aware of how their information would be used (Boddy, 2016). Socially, the scandal eroded public trust in both social media platforms and the use of surveys for data collection. Legally, Facebook faced significant repercussions, including a \$5 billion fine from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for failing to protect user data (FTC, 2019). Professionally, the incident raised questions about the responsibilities of data scientists and researchers to ensure the ethical use of survey data.

Additional Examples of Survey Misuse

The Cambridge Analytica case is not an isolated incident. Another example of survey misuse occurred in 2014, when the dating app OkCupid conducted experiments on its users without their knowledge. The app altered user profiles and match percentages to study human behavior, effectively using its platform as a survey tool for research purposes (Rudder, 2014). While the data was anonymized, the lack of informed consent raised ethical concerns about the exploitation of user trust.

Similarly, in 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau faced criticism for allegedly using its survey data for political purposes. Concerns were raised that the data could be used to exclude undocumented immigrants from population counts, potentially affecting political representation and federal funding (Wang, 2020). This misuse of survey data highlights the legal and ethical challenges of ensuring that data collection serves its intended purpose without being co-opted for partisan gains.

Ethical, Social, Legal, and Professional Implications

From an ethical standpoint, the misuse of surveys undermines the principles of transparency, consent, and respect for individuals' autonomy. Researchers and organizations have a moral obligation to ensure that participants understand how their data will be used and to protect their privacy (Boddy, 2016). Socially, such practices erode trust in institutions and platforms that rely on user participation. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, for instance, led to widespread skepticism about the safety of personal data online.

Legally, the misuse of survey data can result in significant penalties for organizations that fail to comply with data protection regulations. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States are examples of legislative efforts to hold organizations accountable for data misuse (GDPR, 2018; CCPA, 2020). Professionally, the misuse of surveys raises questions about the integrity of data scientists and researchers. Ethical guidelines, such as those outlined by the American Statistical Association (ASA), emphasize the importance of using data responsibly and avoiding harm to individuals or society (ASA, 2018).

Conclusion

The inappropriate use of surveys, as exemplified by the Cambridge Analytica scandal and other cases, has far-reaching consequences. Ethically, it violates principles of consent and transparency; socially, it undermines trust in institutions; legally, it exposes organizations to significant penalties; and professionally, it challenges the integrity of data practitioners. To prevent such misuse, it is essential to enforce robust ethical guidelines, strengthen data protection laws, and promote a culture of accountability among researchers and organizations. Only then can the trust and integrity of survey-based data collection be restored.

References

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