

e-Portfolio Activity  
Reflective Activity 2  
Case Study : Inappropriate Use of Surveys

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## **Cambridge Analytica Scandal (2018)**

The Cambridge Analytica scandal is a well-known case of surveys being utilised for unethical and profit-making reasons. Aleksandr Kogan, a researcher at Cambridge University, built a Facebook app named "thisisyourdigitallife" in 2014. The app offered users a personality quiz, collecting their personal information in the process. However, it also harvested data from users' Facebook friends' profiles without their knowledge or consent. At the time, this practice was permitted under Facebook's API policies (Confessore, 2018).

Cambridge Analytica obtained this data, which included user "likes," demographic details, and behavioural patterns. They used it to create psychological profiles of millions of individuals. These profiles were then deployed for targeted political advertising during the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum, aiming to influence voter behaviour by exploiting psychological traits and vulnerabilities.

Following the incident, key figures, including Mark Zuckerberg, were subjected to intense scrutiny. This led to congressional hearings and substantial fines for Facebook. As a result, the company was compelled to revise privacy policies and data governance practices.

The scandal prompted people worldwide to call for stricter rules to protect data. This led to significant changes in the law, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) in the United States.

This incident demonstrated the importance of following ethical standards while safeguarding all users' data. It emphasised the need for transparency in the collection and use of data, as well as the importance of consent and responsibility, particularly on digital platforms and social media.

### **Further Examples of Inappropriate Survey Use :**

#### **a) TikTok "Quizzes" and Data Harvesting (2020–2023)**

TikTok has been criticised for including popular quizzes in the app that gather excessive information, such as location, contact details, and browsing habits. These surveys may seem like innocent fun, but they are reportedly used to share information with third-party advertisers and, in certain situations, possibly even the Chinese government (BBC News, 2022).

#### **b) Health and Fitness Apps Collecting Sensitive Data**

Several free health and fitness apps, including period trackers and mental health apps, have been found to collect sensitive personal information through health surveys. The Flo app, for example, was accused of sharing user data with Facebook and Google despite claiming it was private (Federal Trade Commission, 2021).

### **Ethical, Social, Legal, and Professional Impacts :**

- Ethical breaches of informed consent and user trust; manipulation of individuals' autonomy; lack of transparency in data usage.
- Social erosion of public distrust in digital platforms; polarisation of political views; increased risk of discrimination and bias in targeted messaging.
- Legal violations of data protection laws (e.g., GDPR, Data Protection Act 2018); risk of lawsuits, fines, and regulatory sanctions.
- Professional breaches of professional codes of conduct (e.g., ACM Code of Ethics, BCS Code of Conduct); reputational damage for organisations; increased scrutiny for data professionals.

## Key Lessons

- Transparency and informed consent must be central to any data collection, including surveys.
- Professionals must adhere to legal frameworks (e.g., GDPR) and ethical standards and act in the public interest.
- The professional duty of computing professionals is to safeguard data and ensure that user information is not misused for profit or political manipulation.

## References

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