Two sides exist in every text conversation; a sender and a receiver. In the same way, there exist two sides to the ethical considerations for this project. We will first analyze the ethical issues on the end of the one being analyzed and then analyze them from the angle of the one looking at the results. While this project can offer exceptionally interesting insights into ourselves and others, the massive ethical hurdles cause doubt for a large-scale implementation.

The largest ethical consideration for such a project is obtaining consent from an individual to use their entire conversation. While this seems like a simple task, people are not as willing to give up their conversations for research as we had originally believed. While we have taken many precautions to preserve anonymity, people still do not feel comfortable allowing a computer to analyze the manner in which they text. If we had taken our conversations with people and did not obtain consent from the other parties, we would be violating every single person’s trust. While both parties are an equal part in each conversation, taking their words without their consent would be violation of their rights.

We believe that if we implemented an app for analyzing text conversations, we would apply some barrier that would prompt the other party in the conversation to accept the app to analyze the conversation. In this manner, we would be able to prevent people from analyzing other people’s words without their consent.

Another major ethical consideration of this work is the impact of the results. While we work to preserve anonymity of all participants, it is impossible for us to fully blind the work considering half of the conversations are our own. If results show that a person is generally negative over text, then the researchers could extrapolate their findings and change the manner they behave toward the person. If word got out about the findings, this person could be treated differently. While we are trying very hard to make our system as accurate as possible, the way someone speaks over text does not mean that this person is positive or negative outside of text. Our system should not be a reference point for someone’s sentiment, it could be and is very much wrong. Certain people do not use as much emotion in their texts as others; certain people pour their hearts out. This could lead the program to conclude a more negative/positive sentiment, but the reality could be vastly different. A more novice English texter could use less emoticons and more curt sentences to deliver meaning leading to the system to deliver a negative sentiment result. These cases could hurt a party, when in truth, the system’s result is being extrapolated to the human incorrectly.

Preventing such things from happening is extremely difficult. The most effective way to halt this type of behavior would be to anonymize every step of the process. We believe this would be tough to do given the nature of the program. A fully implemented app would stress to all users that the results do not speak to the sentiment of the person behind the texts per se, but their texts compared to a corpus of data. The results should never be taken as truth and people should not be judged based on the findings.

In an extension of the above point, people could use this tool to negatively hurt someone. For example, if two people had just gone through a nasty breakup and one party could decide to use this tool to show that the other person is a very negative person over text just to “slander” the other’s name.

Situations like the one listed above could be dealt with using a system that requires both parties to accept before an app analyzes the texts of the individuals.