

## **Submission Template for the 2015 OBTC Teaching Conference for Management Educators**

### **1) Title of Proposal:**

Facebook's Emotional Contagion Experiment: A Brief Classroom-Based Ethics Case Study

### **2) Abstract:**

Developing or finding a rich and engaging, yet focused, mini case in ethics is typically difficult. Many full length cases require students to extensively prepare for the discussion outside of the classroom while many mini cases tend to be received by students as sterile and lacking in relevance. This session presents an engaging and versatile, yet brief, case on Facebook's recent "emotional contagion" experiment that can be read and discussed in a single class meeting. This session will present the case, explore debriefing points, and share possible adaptations and uses of the case.

### 3) Keywords:

*Ethics, communities, Facebook, mini case*

### 4) Format

- Activity or exercise
- Discussion roundtable (60 minute only)
- General discussion session

### 5) Time Requested:

- 30 Minutes
- 60 Minutes (*Roundtables must select 60 minutes*)
- 90 Minutes

### 6) Planning Details:

*Does your session have any special requirements for space or materials?*

Access to a projector for connecting a laptop computer to show PowerPoint slides, if possible. If not, just notice in advance that it is not available and either handouts of the case will be brought, or placed on an overhead projector.

### 7) Learning Objectives or Goals for the Session:

*What are 2-4 specific learning outcomes that participants will get from your session?*

- 1) To give students (participants) an opportunity to understand and apply different ethical norms to a real world example
- 2) To give students (session participants) an opportunity to see how ethical decision making can be affected by differences in available information
- 3) To explore how social media networks have become an integral part of our daily lives and how they could possibly be used, shared, and potentially even manipulated.
- 4) To provide some alternative “conversation topics” for instructors who wish to use the case beyond its introduction to understanding and applying ethical norms.

## 8) Management or Teaching Topics:

*Describe what management and/or teaching topics are relevant to your session, and why. Please include theoretical, disciplinary, or theoretical foundations that will help reviewers understand how your ideas fit within the broader field of management.*

This session presents a mini case exploring the ethical implications of the “emotional contagion” experiment conducted by the social media site Facebook (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). It is also presented as such that it could be used to cover topics relating to psychology and emotion in online communities, terms of service agreements, and other potential topics.

First, this session is primarily aimed towards helping faculty deal with the eternal challenge of helping students to develop their ethical reasoning (cf. Baker & Comer, 2012, as a review of the challenges of getting students to learn ethics) and the struggles of giving faculty members the tools they feel they need to do the job well (cf. Lund Dean & Beggs, 2006, for an overview of some of the challenges faculty report upon regarding teaching the ethics). Related to this theme, in a “Facebook” world, where it is often reported that millennial students in general, but business students in particular, express higher levels of narcissism than past generations (cf. Westerman, Bergman, Bergman, & Daly, 2012), the challenge becomes to create engaging learning experiences that our students will feel that have a direct, and concrete bearing on their own lives (Wilson, 2004). Thus, this session attempts to combine the challenges of teaching ethics, both for student and instructor, with an engaging and direct mini case.

Additionally, this case also addresses, both directly and indirectly, the impact of learning and living in communities. The case developed for this session is a result of the enormous controversy that erupted regarding the “emotional contagion” study (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014) that Facebook conducted on its massively popular social networking site. In the study, Facebook deliberately manipulated the feeds of over 700,000 of its users (without their knowledge) to either show more, or less, positively worded feeds (the feeds themselves were not changed, just which ones received more, or less, prominence in the feeds). This controversy erupted in the academic community regarding research ethics (Facebook had university partners in this study) and was present from the start with the accompanying “Editorial Expression of Concern and Correction” from the editor of *JNAS* regarding the experiment (Verma, 2014). The conversation is in many respects a continuation to the research ethics questions first brought to the forefront by Milgram’s (1963) obedience to authority study and the Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). The controversial study was also widely covered in the popular press as well (cf. Albergotti, 2014). Related to this, an additional discussion point emerges regarding the oft-stated

notion that most people never read online terms of service agreements (Cornish, 2014).

For teaching and learning purposes, we see that this exercise is related to questions like instructor efforts to help improve student satisfaction in virtual classrooms (cf. Arbaugh, 2000) and issues revolving around the cognitive and affective issues of virtual teams (cf. Clark & Gibb, 2006).

## **9) Session Description and Plan:**

*What will you actually do in this session? What activities will you facilitate, how long will they take, and how will participants be involved? Reviewers will be evaluating how well the time request matches the activities you'd like to do, and the extent you can reasonably accomplish the session's goals. Reviewers will also be looking for how you are engaging the participants in the session. Include a timeline for your session.*

This session will start with a brief overview of the challenges of teaching ethics cases that are both interesting and relevant to our students. It will provide a rationale for how the presenters developed the case as part of their institution's assurance of learning process during the fall 2014 semester as they have struggled to help students achieve a better understanding and application of ethical theories. (5 minutes)

We will then work our way through the first slide of the exercise, the initial case. We will simultaneously present the slide as a "live case" and as an ongoing dialog with the session participants about the likely discussion topics and teaching points. While we use Cavanagh's (2010) text as the basis of our own classes, most business ethics textbooks present numerous ethics theories. For example, Cavanagh discusses rights and duties, justice, caring, and utilitarianism while Hosmer (2008) covers eternal law, personal virtue, utilitarian benefits, universal duties, distributive justice, and contributive liberty. Likewise, most ethics texts have some form of decision making model (our reference to page 96 of the text)—so we will briefly cover Cavanagh's model, but our point is not to teach Cavanagh's decision model—it is to give instructors an opportunity to use a case that can be adapted easily for their own needs. We will bring a brief handout for the session summarizing the four norms Cavanagh covers for those that want it. (25 minutes)

We will then present part two of the exercise after the part one discussion has completed—the additional information regarding Facebook's terms of service and the role this plays in the ethical decision making process. We will explore teaching points of this section and the typical discussions encountered with the students and the outcomes. (10 minutes)

We will not fully present parts three and four of the exercise (these basically exist for the opportunity to use the case in an extended format, such as a whole evening class, or over several class days). However, we will mention them briefly and discuss some likely issues from them. (5 minutes).

The last 15 minutes will be spent in Q&A and in presenting some of the alternative uses for how the case can be employed in class. For example, we will talk briefly about how this case could be used in a doctoral seminar on research ethics and IRB protocols since the experiment included university partners. We will mention that it could likely be paired as part of a discussion in a number of different management courses where the famous Milgram (1963) and Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo's (1973) Stanford Prison Experiments are covered. We will emphasize some of the student's reaction to their "ownership" of those posts and what they believe Facebook (and likely other social media sites) can and cannot do with their posts. We will discuss the actual findings of the study, and what that implies for how we live and learn in communities, especially online classrooms. We will also talk about our future plans to pair this case up with precursor exercise, Anderson's (2007) Journal of Management Education article, "Why are there so many theories?" A classroom exercise to help students appreciate the need for multiple theories of a management domain." (15 minutes)

## **10) For Activities and Exercises:**

*Attach any materials needed to run the activity and debriefing questions. Evidence for effectiveness may also be included.*

Please see the attached PowerPoint slides that present the mini case.

## **11) Implications for Teaching or for Teachers:**

*What is the contribution of your session?*

Finding ethics cases that students can both identify with and relate to is always a tough process. This is made even tougher by the fact that some cases tend to be too involved to adequately cover in a single class session, while many of the shorter examples tend to be very generic, such as the ethics of hiring an employee of a competitor. This recently developed exercise created an exceptional amount of class conversation with today's always-connected-to-Facebook students (even during class!) It has helped them to better learn and apply a variety ethical norms and in a context that subtly varies.

Additionally, as with many rich cases, we were surprised by what the students knew, and did not know, about Facebook's operations—several were convinced that they "owned" their posts and Facebook was not allow to see that content (besides

ownership, this started a brief conversation on whether Facebook users were the product or the customer, to borrow the language of Apple CEO Tim Cook). Our conversation also touched upon the whole concept of “emotional contagion” and what that means for being a member of a community, even if it is “social media” though this was not a major focus of our case. (Other instructors can develop this even more in their class conversations, especially if they are involved with online teams.) Finally, we did not touch upon the role that Facebook’s university partners had in this process, but we envision that this case could easily be tweaked to talk about research ethics with doctoral students. (This case was used in our ethics class far in advance of our conversations about Milgram (1963) and the Stanford Prison experiment, though it could be used easily in a course where these are topics.) Thus, this mini case also serves as an excellent opportunity to talk about larger issues, such as terms of service agreements, being part of an online community, the nature of sharing in the online world, Institutional Review Boards, and research ethics.

## **12) Application to Conference theme:**

*How does your session fit with the overall OBTC theme of Learning in Community?*

At its core, ethics is about community standards of decision making and behavior. Consider two common definitions found in ethics textbooks. Cavanagh (2010) defines ethics as “the principle of conduct governing an individual or group, and the methods for applying them” (p. 8), while Hosmer (2008) states “the doctrine of Ethical Duties in moral analysis refers to the obligations owed by members of society to other members of that society” (p. 12). Likewise, today Facebook is the dominant online social community of our time, with over 757 million daily active users and 1.2 million active users as of December 2013

([https://materials.proxyvote.com/Approved/30303M/20140324/AR\\_200747/#/6/](https://materials.proxyvote.com/Approved/30303M/20140324/AR_200747/#/6/)). As its “emotional contagion” experiment demonstrates, our online media participation, both social and educational, has the real potential to impact our physical world emotions and feelings.

## **13) Unique Contribution to OBTC:**

*Have you presented the work in this proposal before? If so, how will it be different? Is this proposal under current review somewhere else? If so, please explain. How will your proposal be different for the OBTC conference?*

The work in this proposal has not been presented at an academic conference before—it has only been used as a classroom mini-case exercise at the authors’ home institution. The proposal is not under current review somewhere else.

## 14) References and/or Additional Materials:

- Albergotti, R. (2014, June 30). Furor erupts over Facebook's experiment on users: Almost 700,000 unwitting subjects had their feeds altered to gauge effect on emotion. *Wall Street Journal* (Online).
- Anderson, M. (2007). Why are there so many theories?' A classroom exercise to help students appreciate the need for multiple theories of a management domain *Journal of Management Education*, 31(6): 757-776.
- Arbaugh, J. B. "Virtual classroom characteristics and student satisfaction with Internet-based MBA courses." *Journal of Management Education*, 24(1): 32-54.
- Baker, S. D. & Comer, D. R. (2012). "Business ethics everywhere': An experiential exercise to develop students' ability to identify and respond to ethical issues in business." *Journal of Management Education*, 36(1): 95-125.
- Cavanagh, G. F. (2010). *American Business Values: A Global Perspective, 6th ed.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Clark, D. N. and Gibb, J. L. (2006). Virtual team learning: An introductory study team exercise. *Journal of Management Education*, 30(6): 765-787.
- Cornish, A. (2014, September 1). "Why do we blindly sign terms of service agreements?" *All Things Considered*, Washington, DC: National Public Radio. Radio broadcast. Available online at: <http://www.npr.org/2014/09/01/345044359/why-do-we-blindly-sign-terms-of-service-agreements>
- Haney, C., Banks, W. C., & Zimbardo, P. G. (1973) A study of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison. *Naval Research Review*, 30, 4-17.
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- Kramer, A. D., Guillory, J. E., and Hancock, J. T. (2014). "Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(29): 8788-8790.
- Lund Dean, K. and Beggs, J. M. (2006). "University professors and teaching ethics: Conceptualizations and expectations." *Journal of Management Education*, 30(1): 15-44.

Milgram, S. (1963). "Behavioral student of obedience." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 67: 371-378.

Verma, I. M. (2014). "Editorial expression of concern and correction." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(29): 8787.

Westerman, J. J., Bergman, J. Z., Bergman, S. M., and Daly, J. P. (2012). Are universities creating millennial narcissistic employees? An empirical examination of narcissism in business students and its implications. *Journal of Management Education*, 36(1): 5-32.

Wilson, M. E. (2004). "Teaching, learning, and millennial students." *New Directions for Student Services*, 106: 59-71.

**15) See Next Pages for PowerPoint Slides:**



## Facebook and the Emotional Contagion Experiment

In July 2014, Facebook researchers, in conjunction with professors at two American universities, published the results of a study in the prestigious scientific journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. The study, conducted over one week in January 2012, was designed to test “emotional contagion”—the idea that people’s emotional states could be affected by their friends’ online postings. To test this concept, Facebook secretly altered the news feeds of approximately 732,000 of its users to display either more positively or more negatively worded content (it did not alter the content). The researchers discovered that users whose feeds were exposed to more negative content subsequently made more negatively worded posts while those exposed to more positive content subsequently made more positively worded posts. The measured changes in user emotions, while small, were statistically significant.

The publication of the study ignited a widespread debate about whether Facebook’s actions were ethical. Facebook defended its actions with a two-part argument. First, it asserted that users had agreed to participate in research studies via their acceptance of Facebook’s terms of service when they joined the site. Second, Facebook argued that the impact of the experiment on users’ emotional states was small.

1. What is your instinctive reaction as to whether Facebook’s experiment was ethical or not? Explain why.
2. Which of the four ethical norms (utilitarianism, rights and duties, justice, caring) does Facebook appear to be using to justify its actions? Formally apply those ethical norms to determine whether Facebook actions were ethical or not.
3. Use each of the remaining ethical norms to evaluate Facebook’s actions.
4. Finally, complete the ethical decision making model on page 96 of your textbook to make a final determination whether Facebook’s experiment was ethical.

## **Facebook and the Emotional Contagion Experiment – Part Two**

Shortly after the controversy broke, it was revealed by reporters that Facebook's terms of service *did not* include the research agreement clause during the time of the study. In fact, Facebook had inserted the clause into its terms of service agreement in April 2012 – nearly 3 months after the study had been conducted.

- a. How does this new information impact the answers to questions 1-4 above?

### **Facebook and the Emotional Contagion Experiment – Part Three**

Furthermore, when asked by reporters whether children had been included in the experiment, Facebook indicated that they likely had been. However, the company was unwilling to provide any details about how many children were included.

- a. How the information that children had likely been included in the study impact the answer to questions 1-4 above?

## Facebook and the Emotional Contagion Experiment – Part Four

Several weeks after the Facebook story emerged, the Web site ChristianMingle.com announced that it had also conducted experiments on its users to test the Web site's impact on the interactions between its members. The experiments ranged from disabling all user profile pictures for a day to deliberately telling members that its algorithms had identified strong potential matches with other members when in fact its algorithms had indicated that the members *were not* well matched.

Like Facebook, ChristianMingle asserted that it had done nothing unethical.

1. Apply the ethical decision-making model on page 96 of your textbook to evaluate the ethics of ChristianMingle's experiments.