



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 4, 2017

Facebook Researching Ways to Target Vulnerable Young People

A report from Australia says that Facebook researched how it could target vulnerable teens and young people with predatory advertising practices. According to *The Australian* newspaper, an internal Facebook document demonstrated how the social media platform had learned to exploit the moods and insecurities of teenagers for the benefit of Facebook advertisers.



The confidential research document, compiled by a pair of Australian Facebook executives earlier this year, detailed how Facebook targeted an estimated 6.4 million Australian young people, including nearly two million Australian high-school students as young as 14, monitoring their Facebook posts, comments, and interactions to identify and manipulate youth who were feeling “defeated,” “overwhelmed,” “stressed,” “anxious,” “nervous,” “stupid,” “silly,” “useless,” and a “failure.”

The information, gleaned using a system called “sentiment analysis,” could then be used by Facebook advertisers to target teen Facebook users at their most vulnerable moments.

For example, a young person who is feeling “defeated” because of his or her weight might be targeted with an advertisement for an exercise program or workout machine.

Facebook is second only to Google in online advertising revenue, reaping rich profits in an industry that was worth an estimated \$80 billion in 2016. According to one analyst, Facebook made around \$8 billion on digital advertising in 2015, and is set to reap up to \$33.76 billion from ad revenues, according to eMarketer, a company that monitors online marketing.

According to *The Australian*, Facebook quickly issued an apology over the revelations and said that it would investigate the matter, conceding that it was inappropriate to target youth. “The data on which this research is based was aggregated and presented consistent with applicable privacy and legal protections, including the removal of any personally identifiable information,” Facebook said in a statement to the newspaper.

This is not the first time Facebook has been accused of using research it has harvested from its billion-plus users to increase its profits. *Forbes* magazine reported that the latest allegations are eerily similar to Facebook’s “2014 [study](#) that manipulated users’ emotions and earned a rare Editorial Expression of Concern from PNAS [the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences].”



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Forbes contributor Kalev Leetaru recalled that when Facebook's 2014 study came to light, "I noted that that the negative publicity surrounding its study was not likely to curb the company's conduct of future such studies, but rather that those studies would simply happen in secret and potentially become ever more intrusive, as the focus became solely on the commercial goals of monetizing its users without the limiting constraints of considering the optics of how the research and its findings might be received by the public and broader research community."

In other words, it appears that Facebook is not highly concerned about the public perception over its intrusive marketing and research practices, since the available profits outweigh the damage it would face to its brand.

Additionally, Facebook was sharply criticized in 2012 for similar research on nearly 700,000 users, without their knowledge, as to whether or not Facebook could influence users through positive or negative posts in their news feeds.

Facebook's fine-print data-use policy informs its users that the social media platform "may use the information we receive about you ... for internal operations, including troubleshooting, data analysis, testing, research and service improvement."

It is also widely known that information users provide about relationships, location, age, numbers of Facebook "friends," and the manner and frequency with which they log on to Facebook is sold to the social platform's advertisers. In addition, research has shown that Facebook specifically seeks to sell ads based on insights it has gleaned from users concerned with such issues as body confidence and weight loss.



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