

## Ethical Issues with Social Media Business Practices: Motivation, Consequences, and Character Formation

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**Abstract** Social media business practices are evaluated using duty ethics, utilitarian ethics, and virtue ethics to reveal ethical issues related to the motivation behind its creation, its consequences for users in terms of both pleasure and preference satisfaction, and how it impacts the moral formation of those who develop the applications and those who use it.

**Keywords** social media, addiction, duty ethics, virtue ethics, utilitarianism

Social media has become extremely influential today: over 70 percent of adults in the United States reported using at least one social media platform (Auxier and Anderson 2021). The unprecedented growth of social media over the last decade has caught the attention of many policymakers and politicians, leading them to question the impact of social media in our daily lives. At least once a year since 2017, there have been major Congressional hearings involving social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google; in July of 2020, top executives from several of these companies were asked to testify before the United States Congress and to convince the House Judiciary Committee that their business practices, including targeted advertising, do not harm their users, as policymakers and politicians sought to assess whether further regulations are necessary. An evaluation of targeted advertising in social media using duty ethics, utilitarian ethics, and virtue ethics reveals ethical issues related to the motivation behind its creation, its consequences for users in terms of both pleasure and preference satisfaction, and how it impacts the moral formation of those who develop the applications and those who use it.

A serious problem with social media is the underlying addictiveness of the social environments provided by different companies. Several studies have shown that inconsistent, but occasionally rewarding, features such as retweets, likes, infinite scrolling, and auto-play videos create a similar response in the brain to that of gambling or consumption recreation drugs (Hillard 2021). Social media conglomerates amplify the benefit of these features by employing tactics and algorithms to effectively coerce uninformed users to use their application for

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longer periods of time (Yurieff 2020). While most people believe that they possess the power to fight this addiction if they choose to do so, they do not realize is that social media companies often employ strong psychological techniques to make this very choice seemingly impossible (Schweppe 2019). This deceptive behavior allows us to use ethical theories and their formulations to clearly assess the morality of targeted advertising tactics used by social media companies.

To judge the morality of the motivation behind targeted advertising I employ the duty ethics developed by German philosopher Immanuel Kant. According to Kant's ethical theory, an action that is good in itself, i.e., something we *must* do because of the demands of reason, rather than something done in pursuit of pleasure or self-contentment, is morally right. Moreover, as rational beings, we possess the knowledge of morality that directs us towards ethically right choices (Hill 2017). For example, deeds that are morally altruistic in nature, say, giving money to charity with the intention of helping others, are ethically correct. In contrast, Kant says that it would be unethical to give money to charity with the intention of gaining glory or fame, because even though the money will help people, the motivation behind the deed is insincere and therefore corrupt.

One formulation of Kant's categorical imperative is the Formula of Humanity: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (Kant 1964, Ak. 429). This formulation states that one must always treat other rational beings as an end and never as a mere means. It means that we should not try to benefit from someone without considering their interests and personal goals.

This moral ideal suggests a problem with the business practices of social media companies. Their services do add value to users, but their primary goal seems to be to sell their users' attention to advertisers, regardless of the interests of their users. They employ persuasive technologies that take advantage of the innate curiosity of humans and in turn get users to spend more time on their platforms, where users view advertisements and the companies collect data. Here, humans are being used as a mere means and as a source of profit.

For example, when Instagram sends a notification informing its users that a follower has posted after a long pause, their curiosity is piqued causing them to check the application because the notification itself does not include the image. These prompts are determined by algorithms to maximize application use thereby allowing the company to take advantage of the psychology of addiction (Liu 2020). This kind of technique is also used by Snapchat and Twitter. The motive is to lure users back onto the application. These notifications could have been designed to be customizable or present enough information so that the user could use his or her time most efficiently, and alleviate this moral concern. But current functionality suggests that most social media companies do not foreground their users' personal interests when it comes to achieving their business goals, and therefore their actions are morally unethical.

Another way to judge the morality of actions according to Kant is to determine whether the autonomy of rational beings is being respected. Autonomy is the

ability or capacity of a rational being to create goals and practice self-governance and self-determination to achieve them. Moral autonomy, according to Kant, is the potential of an individual to carefully consider, debate and give oneself a moral law that is not merely an assimilated law of others: “we must act under the idea that moral agents legislate or will for themselves universal laws, as rational beings, independently of their particular desires as sensuous human beings” (Hill 2017, p. 326). For Kant, autonomy of decision-making is essential for a decision to be moral, and one must respect this autonomy in others. He believed a decision is autonomous only if it is unaffected by external factors such as an inaccurate representation of facts and peer pressure. For example, telling a lie in order to deceive another individual is unethical because, by doing so, the rational being is denied the right to make an informed decision. However, an individual who has been honestly presented with all the facts is equipped with all the knowledge to make an informed decision.

These moral principles apply to the context of social media, where most users are unaware of how deliberately addictive the apps are designed to be because companies position their applications as a way to build and maintain social connections. This lack of transparency by the social media companies creates a situation wherein the users are denied their right to make an informed decision. Since people are being deceived, their moral autonomy is not respected, which is contrary to Kant’s formulation of autonomy.

Having established that there are problems with the motivation behind targeted advertising, I now consider the consequences of targeted advertising on their users using utilitarian ethics. According to this ethical theory, one must always act in a manner that results in the greatest overall good for the greatest number of people (Driver 2014). The meaning of “greatest overall good” is disputed, and many options have been proposed leading to different kinds of utilitarianism. In hedonistic utilitarianism, the phrase is understood to refer to people’s pleasures and the absence of pain, whereas in preference utilitarianism, greater overall good is associated with the actions that are most closely aligned with people’s preferences. The decisions that social media users make mirror those of a person indulging in smoking, an industry where companies spread misinformation about the harm caused by their products for decades (GGTC 2019). A hedonistic utilitarian should conclude that smoking is unethical because of the health risks that it poses to both active and passive smokers, and therefore not smoking brings about the greatest pleasure in the greatest number of people. Similarly, a preference utilitarian would not support actions grounded on deception because they would distort people’s preferences thereby making the agent unable to determine what is morally correct. For example, some people might take up the act of smoking because they believe that they have the ability to quit whenever they want, but because of the addictive substances in tobacco products, many are unable to quit, or at least fail on their first try. Therefore, in this situation, a preference utilitarian would conclude that smoking is not morally correct because people’s preferences are misinformed.

Much like cigarette smokers who take many extensive smoke breaks, social media users unwittingly end up spending copious amounts of time on these applications due to how they are designed, unintentionally losing out on productive time. A former platform operation manager at Facebook said “It literally felt like I was quitting cigarettes” when he tried to quit using the platform (Andersson 2018). We see a similar sentiment from former employees of other prominent social media companies. For example, a former lead technology engineer at Pinterest compared the user interface of the platform to cocaine because of its addictiveness (Andersson 2018). Spending long hours on social media might provide momentary pleasure for the user, however, in the long term, it distracts their attention from work and results in procrastination, leaving an overwhelming number of real-life commitments left untouched or unfinished. Even if some users believe they prefer to use social media, their preferences are distorted by the illusion of choice presented by social media platforms – that one can stop using the platform if one chooses to. Therefore, a preference utilitarian would conclude that the consequences of the engineers’ actions do not result in the greatest overall good for their users in terms of preferences satisfied and are therefore morally wrong. A hedonistic utilitarian would also arrive at the same conclusion since the amount of stress and overall unproductive feeling brought about by excessive social media usage does not lead to the greatest pleasure among users. Moreover, it might also affect their relationship to close family members and friends further impacting the pleasure of those indirectly involved.

After looking at motivation and consequences, I now argue that social media business practices are immoral from a virtue ethics perspective. Virtue ethics states that an individual is considered to be moral when they practice virtues such as honesty, kindness, generosity, compassion, and fairness (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018). There are no concrete rules to be followed; instead, the emphasis is placed on the individual’s character. It is the individual’s character and its development that is central to resolving ethical dilemmas. To achieve *eudaimonia* – the state of ultimate happiness – one must act in accordance with virtue (*arete*) that will lead them to become the best person they are able to be. By doing so, one can obtain a *telos* – a purpose or “end” goal in life – proper for a human.

With regards to the ethical dilemma that is faced in the context of social media, one should question the virtuousness of the programmers and the business model. An ideal social media company’s end goal or *telos* should be to inform, connect, and empower individuals across the globe. Social media companies create algorithms designed to manipulate user behavior without disclosing their true workings. They promote character traits like deception and greed, which will not lead the engineers and the company as a whole to fulfil their purpose. Therefore, the end goal of these companies has deviated from connecting people to preying on their psychology of addiction in order to make more money. In addition, some would argue that the usage of social media has suppressed the development of certain social virtues that users would have otherwise developed in a purely non-technological society. For example, the immediate escape routes from social

interaction available when using social media and the ability to selectively portray one's best traits via their online profile do not promote character traits like patience and honesty that most virtue ethicists would consider essential to the good life (Vallor 2012).

In conclusion, the actions of social media companies are not morally correct when assessed through Kant's Formula of Humanity because it benefits from users without respecting or considering their personal interests. Moreover, it disrespects their autonomy by having ulterior motives with certain application features. Additionally, the consequence of these actions when considering the preferences of the users along with their pleasure are also not maximized. And finally, these actions do not lead to the greatest wellbeing of the companies or their users because they don't exemplify virtues that would allow social media companies to be the best version of themselves.

All this being said, social media still is an incredible tool in our life. It allows people from all over the world to connect with one another. However, because of the business tactics used such as targeted advertising, the goals of social media platforms are drifting further away from their original intent, i.e., to provide a platform of connectivity. We need a radical change in the way social media companies design and moderate their applications. An obvious change would be to mandate a review by an independent body such as an ethics committee that overlooks medical clinical trials. This would ensure that inadvertent unethical mistakes are avoided by any significant algorithmic changes in social media platforms.

Another more concrete solution that would hold companies accountable to users is the creation of a decentralized social media. In this situation, users' connections and friend circles would be dissociated from any particular platform and they would have the freedom of choice to use the application with which they are most comfortable. Users who realize that they are uncomfortable with the addictiveness of a particular application would easily be able to switch over to another one and still retain all their connections. Therefore, companies would be forced to provide a compelling tool for users to stay in touch with rather than competing to see who can get more attention and, therefore, more screen time from users. This would result in greater focus on fostering and building connectivity and also strengthening existing relationships as well as give birth to new ones.

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