The Ethics of Informal Social Experiments

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The dissemination of informal social experiments via social media videos may have consequences on formal social marketing research and society overall. This discussion paper explores the ethics of informal social experiments and hypothesizes on societal outcomes arising from potential ethical breaches. A purposively chosen sample of six social experiment campaigns are assessed against relevant ethical themes embodied within the Marketing Research Association's Code of Marketing Research Standards. The social experiment campaigns reviewed exhibit a pattern in the areas of the profession's ethical code that are contravened. This exploratory evaluation is limited to a small sample. Future research to systematically validate whether potential ethical violations concern viewers and assess the impact of these violations is suggested. This work may provide a basis for marketing industry groups to explore initiatives to regulate disclosure of informal social experiments. This paper provides a basis for reflective evaluation by both informal and formal social marketing researchers.

Social Experiments

Concerns about false news and the inability of media targets to distinguish the contrived from the authentic is growing. Whether in finance (Ullah, Massoud, and Scholnick, 2014), journalism (Hidalgo and Barrero, 2012), medicine (Kwok, 2011), or marketing (Neff, 2009), false news can set off a ripple of negative effects. Informal social experiments, such as having child actors portray

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a scenario of bullying in order to ascertain the reactions of people passing by, is one example of the forms that false news can take. In this case, the news "event" is constructed and the reporting of it is intended to achieve a non-obvious end of increasing the degree to which these videos can be monetized. Contemporary informal social experiments fundamentally differ from Andreasen's (1993) view of social marketing. In formal social marketing, commercial marketing techniques are adapted to realize the end goal of improving the target's wellbeing as well as that of society. Conversely, today's informal social experiments represent an adaptation of social marketing techniques to support the producer's commercial ends.

Experimental investigation of social problems has a long history in formal research. These efforts inform public policy development in areas such as nutrition, mental illness, housing, education, and public welfare, amongst others. Defensible experimental design, including what may be both expensive and time-consuming pilots, guide the researchers' understanding of the problem and expectations of the feasibility and usefulness of implementing potential solutions. Riecken and Boruch (1978, p. 520) suggest that ethical challenges of social experiments often center on "the basic premise that it is unconditionally unethical to conduct an experiment in which the harm of the treatment outweighs its advantages; the principal ethical issues in experimentation are privacy and confidentiality of information, (and) informed consent". Privacy involves the relationship between the person conducting the experiment and the respondent, and considers protections needed when research questions asked are intrusive or disturbing. Confidentiality is a matter of who has access to information resulting from the experiment. Clear notice and an allowance for choice regarding participation (two key elements of informed consent) often come before any intervention; deviations from this are exceptions to standard formal practice. Ethical standards on informed consent and to ensure protection of privacy and confidentiality are set by organizations such as a university's research ethics committee, the American Marketing Association, or Marketing Research Association.

Modern times have seen a proliferation of informal research done using what is termed as "social experiments." While these informal efforts address social issues such as child safety, self-confidence, and treatment of the homeless and poor, there is no apparent goal to use results to shape policy-based solutions as much as, ostensibly, they are about raising problem awareness or, covertly, they are about driving viewers to a particular web-

site. Videos of these social experiments are placed on and shared via social media. The far-reaching scale calls into question confidentiality as anyone clicking on one of these videos has access to the producer's view of what results are in the production company's best interest to disseminate. There appears to be no explicit relationship between the "researcher" and the respondent; questions posed appear to be chosen precisely because they are intrusive or disturbing. The opportunity for viewers to provide qualitative feedback is afforded by the comments sections accompanying the videos or simple "Thumbs Up" or "Thumbs Down" votes. These videos regularly feature a call to action involving subscribing to the video producer's social media channel.

An increase in a channel's number of subscribers is a path towards obtaining advertising revenue. Metrics of success may include the number of views, shares, and channel subscriptions. The link between views and revenue comes by virtue of the viewer watching or clicking on an advertisement, with a portion of total advertising total revenue being paid to content developers seeking to monetize their work. Given their informal nature, developing these experiments may be relatively inexpensive in terms of finances as well as time for planning, evaluation and dissemination. A lack of informed consent to participate in the experiment precludes much of the potential for biasing responses to the "treatment"; participants give the impression of being unaware that they are reacting to constructed scenarios. While formal research allows for limited circumstances of passive user data collection in which no opportunity exists for respondents to refuse to participate, this appears to be the norm in informal social marketing experiments. These informal experiments often take place where respondents would not reasonably expect information to be collected.

With the ease that videos are placed on social media sites, conducting and disseminating versions of social experiments abound (see Table 1 for examples). Similarities exist between both producers (many also produce videos of pranks) and subjects (many have actors posing as victims who are from vulnerable populations).

Examples such as these lead to the need to question the ethics of informal social experiments as they may shape society's reaction to more formal social experiments conducted as part of social marketing programs.

This discussion paper examines the ethics of these informal research efforts through the lens of a professional ethical code and identifies the potential to

Table 1: Examples of Social Experiment Videos

Topic	Social Researcher / Affiliation	Nature of Video	Number of Views (43/12/16)
Child predator social experiment	Coby Persin; Damn.com, Pranksters.com.	Contact made with child via social media. Child lured to meet researcher. Parent confronts child.	48,147,619
Freezing homeless child	Ock TV, Damn.com, Pranksters.com.	People filmed walking by a boy wearing a t-shirt during 5 degree F weather.	22,507,213
"The Suicide Experiment"	fouseyTUBE	Experimenters ordered a cab, explained to driver that they were depressed. Had cab leave them on a bridge and then moved as if to commit suicide. Driver response was recorded.	21,400,303
Child abduction	Joey Salads	Parents are asked whether they believe that their child will go with a stranger to see puppies. Child is filmed leaving the park with the researcher.	12,067,146
Baby and dog left in hot car	TwinzTV	Both a dog and a baby left in a hot car to see how differently people react.	3,812,071
Child Abuse	NormelTV	Child actors are apparently abused in public. Bystanders' reactions filmed.	2,835,204
Child Smoking	PrankNation	Adults approached to see whether they would give a child a lighter for a cigarette.	1,150,714

compromise the well-being of participants and other unintended societal consequences. In other words, it explores whether the harm of these types of treatments' outweigh potential advantages. The work also lays a basis for further research seeking to ascertain whether ethical breaches are noted by the viewers of these videos. Since regulatory codes are specific to nations and the nature of social media is largely global, we will not consider violation of legal regulations in this analysis. Discussion of the implications for practice follows. Studies such as these are necessary to develop more responsible and socially beneficial marketing practice.

Ethical Codes

Various yardsticks of ethics exist. At the fundamental level, marketing techniques must be lawful and therefore exhibit a level of adherence to societal values of morality. Non-maleficence (the concept of "Do no harm") resonates in many ethical frameworks as does "The Golden Rule" to treat others the way one wants to be treated oneself.

The responsibility to not lie or misrepresent reality is phrased in many ways. These include Ross' (1930) prima facie duty of fidelity which views honesty as an implicit promise agreed to as part of the act of entering into conversation (to which he adds "at any rate by civilized men"). Relating to the Golden Rule (and other ethical tenets) Kant (1964) ranks honesty as a Categorical Imperative applicable at all times in all situations. Lying to another compromises one's autonomy as that party is prevented from making rational decisions if, unknowingly, they are basing decisions on false information. Dunfee, Smith, and Ross Jr (1999) applies the term "hypernorms" to what Kant referred to as a Categorical Imperative and adds a specific element to the definition that these are norms transcending global borders. In marketing, the obligation to not make misrepresentations through the commission or omission of key parts of information allows consumers to be sufficiently informed regarding the products being sold and at what price. In social marketing terms this could be that there is transparency in the process of developing communications about the behavior being sought. Consumers may not be forced into a transaction, including through the reduction of alternative transactions (or, in the case of research, be coerced or refused the opportunity to opt out of participation). One test of whether an action is ethical or not relates to

transparency by asking whether the party in question would be comfortable explaining their action publicly. At the other end of the openness spectrum, marketers have an obligation to not disclose confidential information gained from the research effort. A focus on the consequences of action drives the utilitarian call to provide the greatest good, or the least harm, to the greatest number affected. Overall, there are many tests to evaluate whether a marketing action is ethical or not (Gaumnitz and Lere, 2002; Kant, 1964; Laczniak, 1983; Laczniak and Murphy, 1991; Holley, 2002).

Normative ethical ideals are embodied in recognized professional standards of conduct. Such standards, or codes, seek to ensure that perspectives on "right" and "wrong" are consistent. In the case of social experiments, this means that ethical indicators may be relevant to both those conducting social marketing research and those portraying themselves as conducting social marketing research. Economist Arrow (2001, p. 113) states that "code(s) may be of value to the running of the system as a whole, it may be of value if all firms maintain it, and yet it will be to the advantage of any one firm to cheat". Such is the situation of informal social experiments. While those holding themselves out as "social experimenters" are not in the profession, they are in the marketing system, especially as viewers may not be differentiating between authentic and contrived research. As part of the system, we (according to Arrow) have a duty to consider how stakeholders "cheating" the code affect the system.

The American Marketing Association code of ethics is one such set of standards that takes into account different tests of ethics and is easy to both access and understand; both professionals and non-professionals alike could easily be aware of and comprehend these guidelines. Another code that applies specifically to marketing research is The Marketing Research Association's (MRA) Code of Marketing Research Standards. The MRA code of standards is comprised of 42 principles set out to help marketing professionals protect respondents and the field itself; 17 of these principles specifically relate to responsibilities to research participants. While the full code can be found on the MRA website (see MRA code standards), the current research will focus on ethical indicators of privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent relevant to both formal and informal social experiments alike and directly observable through the media used to disseminate informal social experiments.

Methods

A case study research methodology consisting of two parts will be used to conduct the current study. The aim of this first part is to explore the degree to which contemporary informal social experiments diverge from ethical standards for formal research, extrapolate what the implications of any noted differences may be, and inform future exploratory qualitative and quantitative social marketing research examining attitudes and behaviors associated with exposure to these types of social experiments. Evidence of potential breaches of the ethical codes in relation to any of the themes is identified and will serve as the basis for the next research step. In part two, content analysis examining the feedback on these videos will be conducted to identify whether video viewers expressed concerns with any of the ethical breaches suggested in the first step of the analysis.

A selective sampling technique was used to identify exemplars of contemporary informal social experiments. Six cases were chosen from different producers with variation in subject matter (mental health, child safety and abuse, racism, honesty, and homelessness). The classification of "contemporary" was defined as videos made available for viewing within the last five years (between 2011 and 2016) and the benchmark of the societal scope of the video was for it to have at least a million views on a common social media platform (YouTube). Each case is examined in relation to themes chosen from the universe of 42 ethical principles set out by the MRA Code of Marketing Research Standards. The subset of principles was chosen based on whether they related to 1. Privacy, 2. Confidentiality, and 3. Informed Consent, and were directly observable from the media (including both video footage and any accompanying explanation of the social experiment provided by the producers). For example, because of video editing it would not be observable whether the precept of allowing consent to be withdrawn by the respondent at any point during the contact was followed or not and, therefore, that particular precept was not used in the evaluation. Where names of the content creators were available, information on their backgrounds was investigated to the degree possible through a simple Google search. Table 2 sets out this subset of the MRA's normative ethical principles. It is recognized that categorizations are not mutually exclusive.

Table 2: Evaluation subset of MRA's ethical principles

Principle	Possible Manifestations
Privacy (including disclosure of relationships and respondent protections)	Responsive to request identify self and/or the research organization involved
	Accurately represent marketing research role, qualifications, experience, or skill
	Research organization contact information is available (phone number, email or Web address, mailing address to which questions or comments may be submitted)
	Any conflict of interest, real or perceived, is avoided
	Respondents evidence no adverse reactions as a result of their participation
	Respondent information collected is not be used for legal, political, sales, solicitations, or any other non-research purpose
	Non-research activity is not represented as research
	Passive user data collection remains unobtrusive and does not interfere with people's lives
	Special care is taken with vulnerable populations, including but not limited to children, elderly, cognitively impaired persons, or others with medical issues
	Valid data is not falsified or omitted in reporting
Confidentiality (including access to data and treatment of Personally Identifying Information)	Research organization maintains an easily accessible, concise and easy to understand (by the public without a research background) privacy or terms of use policy that describes data collection, use, disclosure and management
	Those having access to data understand their responsibilities for protecting respondents' confidential information
	When researchers are made aware of instances of improper interpretation, they respond to their duty to advise of the proper understanding
	All information that could identify respondents to third-parties without the respondents' consent is kept confidential
	Respondents are informed at the outset if audio or video recording is being used
Informed Consent	Respondent agreement to participate obtained prior to start of research
	Any explicit opt-out requests are respected
	Consent is granted freely, without coercion
	Statements made to secure cooperation are factually correct
	Limits on the amount of the time the data will be retained are explicit

Findings

This section describes the six social experiments evaluated in terms of ethical precepts under consideration. The table is abridged to reflect only those precepts that were observable from the media. Not all precepts initially explored yielded evidence in the videos viewed.

Table 3: Findings (CS: Child Safety; R: Racism; MH: Mental Health; CA: Child Abuse; H: Honesty; HM: Homeless)

Ethical Responsibility	Examples of Violations
1. Accurately represent marketing research role, qualifications, experience, or skill	No name given (R)
	First name given to video viewers (CS, CA)
	Name given in reference to a persona versus an authentic name (MH, HM)
	Roles expressed as social experimenters / pranksters with no distinction made between the two (CS, R)
	No evidence given that experimenters have marketing qualifications (all)
2. Research organization contact information is available (phone number, email or Web address, mailing address to which questions or comments may be submitted)	Sponsoring organization's web address (CS), logo (CS, R, MH) available
	Channel section "About" has email address for those interested in business sponsorship (CS, R, MH) or post office box (HM)
	Sponsoring organization's website allows for submitted correspondence only (no email, physical address, or phone number) (CS)
	Contact via other social media platforms (all)
3. Any conflict of interest, real or perceived, is avoided	Advertisement precedes video (CS, CA, H) or given as static overlay on video (R, HM)
	Call to action: "subscribe to me" or "subscribe for new pranks," (all); suggestion made to go to another social media channel (R)
	Call to share video (all)

Table 3 – continued from previous page

Ethical Responsibility	Examples of Violations
	Sponsoring organization offers special promotions or deals to those with a certain volume of subscribers (i.e. >100k) if video is linked back to sponsor's website (CS)
	Thanks given to sponsoring organization for prizes offered for viewing a subsequent video (R)
4. Respondents evidence no adverse reactions as a result of their participation	Child respondents jump, cower, cry, scream, and/or struggle to get away (CS)
	Respondent is sworn at (R)
	Respondent pleads with actor to not jump off bridge, pulls actor off side of bridge (MH)
	Video states that 35% of those viewing intervention walked by, implying that 65% reacted to protect children from abuse (CA). After reacting, respondents were argued with to, apparently, see the degree to which they would go to protect the child in the scenario. One respondent mentions that he has a right to shoot the abuser as he is an off-duty police officer.
	Some evidence of attempt to mitigate on-going harm by informing respondents that they were reacting to a scenario (CA)
	Respondent shows surprise when told "You're lying and you're on tape" (H)
	Researcher pushed by respondent (H)
	Upset respondent throws away sign of girl begging (HM)
5. Non-research activity is not represented as research	The nature of informal social experiments are that they are presented as research

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Ethical Responsibility	Examples of Violations
6. Passive user data collection remains unobtrusive and does not interfere with people's lives	Parental involvement suggests that respondent may experience on-going repercussions from involvement in the experiment (CS)
7. Special care is taken with vulnerable populations, including but not limited to children, elderly, cognitively impaired persons, or others with medical issues	Use of child respondents explicitly (CS) or children were accompanying respondents (CA) Use of seemingly economically disadvantaged respondents (H) Use of child actors (CA)
8. Valid data is not falsified or omitted in reporting	Extent cannot be estimated because of editing One video (R) includes the researcher explaining that three attempts were made to get the desired response and that filming was shared of the one that did so
9. Research organization maintains an easily accessible, concise and easy to understand (by the public without a research background) privacy or terms of use policy that describes data collection, use, disclosure and management	Privacy policy refers to website access and not a process guiding data collection (CS) No other guidelines found References to being able to access "behind the scenes" information was not valid
10. Those having access to data understand their responsibilities for protecting respondents' confidential information. Respondent information collected is not used for legal, political, sales, solicitations or any other	Sponsoring organization encourages other viewers to submit similar content. No guidance given regarding confidentiality; focus is on ensuring that content has ability to go viral (CS)

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Ethical Responsibility	Examples of Violations
	In comments section, viewers may be solicited to visit other sites
11. When researchers are made aware of instances of improper interpretation, they respond to their duty to advise of the proper understanding	In few instances, evidence is shown of respondents being debriefed
12. All information that could identify respondents to third-parties without the respondents' consent is kept confidential	First name, avatar, and social media platform given (CS) Faces shown, voices audible (MH, H. HM) Face screened or pixelated but clothing visible (CS, R, CA) Parents' voice and image shown (CS) Voice accents and license plates suggest state location (CS) Occupation made known (MH) Location explained as being close to respondent's house or was filmed at respondent's house (CS), signage indicative of location (R), city given (CA)

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Ethical Responsibility	Examples of Violations
13. Respondents are informed at the outset if audio or video recording is being used	Nature of these experiments precludes informing respondents of recording at outset of research Respondents told after intervention they were filmed although not consistently (MH, HM). One experimenter mentions that one respondent was never told about cameras "because of how much he was affected" (MH)
14. Respondent agreement to participate obtained prior to start of research	Nature of these experiments precludes obtaining informed consent prior to the intervention Parents' permission obtained (CS)
15. Any explicit opt-out requests are respected	May be excluded during editing Inconsistencies in facial blocking in some videos suggests that respondents may have made explicit requests to not be shown
16. Consent is granted freely, without coercion	Parents' permission obtained (CS)
17. Statements made to secure cooperation are factually correct	Overall, nature of informal social experiments uses subterfuge to force cooperation Fake Facebook profile used to lure participation (CS)
18. Limits on the amount of the time the data will be retained are explicit	Explicit calls made to share video "to make people aware of this issue" suggests on-going circulation if video is downloaded

Conclusions and Limitations

Findings demonstrate gaps between ethical precepts and informal social experiment executions being done under a noble facade of raising awareness of pressing social problems. Different stakeholder groups may experience

different effects resulting from these deviations. We define stakeholders to this situation as members of the marketing profession, informal researchers, respondents, viewers, and society overall.

It is hoped that society values and continues to value the social marketing research function. The work of members of the marketing profession and relevant industry bodies is threatened if the trust that research is honestly and responsibly performed is compromised. Although the types of informal social experiments reported here may be easily discounted as "fake," skill level in being able to assess the credibility of online information is variable (Hargittai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino, and Thomas, 2010). The sheer number of views recorded for the small number of videos evaluated by this current research suggests that the potential problems posed here cannot be ignored by those in the profession. The findings also may have implications for social marketing practitioners seeking to be self-reflective in their own formal executions of social experiments. On the one hand, they may want to revisit their understanding of ethical best practice. On the other, interesting questions may arise based on a consideration of informal practice. Could the types of techniques used to gather millions of views be adapted to the legitimate practice of social marketing and thus embrace the (uncomfortable) issue questioned by Spotswood, French, Tapp, and Stead (2012) and Gordon (2011) that "if evidence shows it works, let us consider using it" (p. 167)? Would additional threats to the profession arise from an increase blurring of such distinctions between that which is informal and that which is formal practice?

The informal researchers themselves may realize both income and a degree of celebrity from these videos, but they also face physical threat given the nature of the topics chosen and emotions evoked. Their actions have been responded to by being escorted off planes (Chan, 2016), being convicted of crimes such as racial harassment (Mills, 2017); and receiving death threats (Scott, 2016).

Respondents, those accompanying them at the time these experiments are taking place, and video viewers may experience an increasing inability to recognize that which is real from that which is constructed. A recent study published by a team of researchers at Stanford offers that "Our "digital natives" may be able to flit between Facebook and Twitter while simultaneously uploading a selfie to Instagram and texting a friend. But when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, they are easily duped" (Stanford History Education Group, 2016, p. 4). This could lead

to avoidance to react in situations where social support is critical (such as the case of intervening in the abuse of a child) or doubting authentic social experience. Respondents in the current research showed evidence of having negative emotional reactions to the interventions used and relief in the few cases where the effort to debrief respondents was shown. In other words, they are having real reactions to faked situations. Given the nature of social media, it is expected that the number of those exposed to these informal experiments goes beyond the reported number of views. Videos can remind viewers of personal tragedies in their lives, in addition to personal triumphs (such as evidenced in comments on the videos given).

Society is negatively affected when the topics chosen and selective reporting of responses heightens existing social tensions. Exceptional social reactions to an intervention are reported as if they were typical, as was the case in the race-baiting video ostensibly offered to highlight the problem of racism. On a societal scale, the number of hours spent watching 'fake news' may be staggering. For just one four minute video examined in this paper, the 7,686,489 views represents 511,962 hours, or 58 years, of viewing time.

There are additional implications from this paper for both macro- and social marketing scholars as findings can be used to shape future research. As a first step in this, content analysis of the comments sections of social marketing experiments could use the ethical violation themes uncovered in this current work to discover the degree to which viewers recognize and are concerned with the ethics of these experiments.

How might consumers of the emotions portrayed in these videos become better informed? On the supply side, perhaps video producers can be nudged into an awareness of relevant ethical standards and the reasons behind them as a first step to adoption of these precepts. Given the low barriers to entry, the feasibility of this producing results is highly questionable. On the consumption side, efforts to design consumer education efforts or, in the attempt to protect the cognitively vulnerable, lobby social media platforms to have disclaimers attached to videos in the same way that advertising currently is may be worthwhile.

The findings from this study are poised to contribute to the evidence base in an under-researched domain yet, as the sample frame is small, it should not be regarded as representative of the scope of the problem.

I propose that the use of informal means to conduct social experiments is not unequivocally bad. For example, there may be a heightened sen-

sitivity towards the social issues addressed in these videos by viewers and this may lead to them wanting to gain further knowledge regarding these issues. Child safety experiments may encourage parents to not assume that their child is aware of the danger posed by online predators. Experiments on racism or homelessness may encourage someone to reflect on whether they have treated people differently based on race or their residential status. Yet, based on the research done to date, it appears that the harm of informal social experiments outweighs these potential advantages. One of the recognized fathers of utilitarianism, the philosophy based on these types of positive ends justifying the means to achieve them, drew a line when it came to misrepresentation of the truth: "Since reasoningâĂęthe principal subject of logic, is an operation which usually takes place by means of wordsâĂęthose who have not a thorough insight into both the signification and purpose of words, will be under chances, amounting almost to certainty, of reasoning or inferring incorrectly" (Mill, 1874, p. 26). At the time of Mill, the focus was on the power of words to misrepresent truth and thus have reality misinterpreted by the cognitively vulnerable. Today's media adds video as a potential tool that can bring about doubt or misunderstanding of the authentic state of the world.

The economic motivation behind these 'research' efforts suggests that these videos will continue to proliferate and, given their scope, can undermine both societal well-being and society's view of formal social marketing. This issue has relevance to discourse around the interaction between society and marketers and, therefore, may contribute to the discipline of macro-marketing.

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