

Facebook told advertisers it can identify teens feeling 'insecure' and 'worthless'

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Leaked documents said to describe how the social network shares psychological insights on young people with advertisers.

An internal report produced by Facebook executives reportedly states the company can monitor posts and photos when young people feel 'stressed', 'defeated' and 'useless'.

Facebook showed advertisers how it has the capacity to identify when teenagers feel "insecure", "worthless" and "need a confidence boost", according to a leaked documents based on research quietly conducted by the social network.

The internal report produced by Facebook executives, and obtained by the Australian, states that the company can monitor posts and photos in real time to determine when young people feel "stressed", "defeated", "overwhelmed", "anxious", "nervous", "stupid", "silly", "useless" and a "failure".

The Australian reported that the document was prepared by two top Australian executives, David Fernandez and Andy Sinn. It was said to describe how the social network gathers psychological insights on high schoolers, college students and young working Australians and New Zealanders. Sinn is an agency relationship manager for the company.

The presentation, which the Australian has not published, was reportedly written for one of Australia's top banks and stated that the company has a database of its young users – 1.9 million high schoolers, 1.5 million tertiary students and 3 million young workers.

Facebook has detailed information on mood shifts of its young users based on "internal Facebook data" that is not available to the public, the document stated.

Facebook, which has faced severe criticism in the past over research in which it sought to alter the emotions of users, without their consent, provided somewhat contradictory statements in response to the story in the wake of its publication on Sunday.

In its original statement to the Australian, Facebook apologized and said it had "opened an investigation to understand the process failure and improve our oversight", adding: "We will undertake disciplinary and other processes as appropriate."

However, by Monday, Facebook released a second statement that made no mention of the apology or disciplinary measures. Instead, Facebook described the newspaper article as "misleading", claiming that the company does not "offer tools to target people based on their emotional state".

The documents, Facebook said, were based on "research done by Facebook and subsequently shared with an advertiser" and were "intended to help marketers understand how people express themselves". Facebook declined to rule out whether similar research on the emotional vulnerability of teenagers had been conducted for advertisers in markets outside of Australia.

In an internal Facebook message thread seen by the Guardian, a Facebook Australia executive dismissed the report and criticized the reporter who broke the story, saying the article was “written by a journalist who writes inflammatory articles ... every Monday”.

According to the Australian, the data available to advertisers includes a young user’s relationship status, location, number of friends on the platform and how often they access the site on mobile or desktop. The newspaper reported that Facebook also has information on users who are discussing “looking good and body confidence” and “working out & losing weight”.

Facebook can further analyze how users are “representing emotion and communicating visually”, the Australian said. The report also claimed that Facebook is able to understand how emotions are communicated at different points during a young person’s week.

“Anticipatory emotions are more likely to be expressed early in the week, while reflective emotions increase on the weekend,” the document said, according to the Australian. “Monday-Thursday is about building confidence; the weekend is for broadcasting achievements.”

The revelations come three years after the company faced significant backlash after it published the results of a vast experiment in which it manipulated information posted on 689,000 users’ home pages and discovered it could change people’s feelings through an “emotional contagion” process.

The company secretly conducted the research – which critics said was unethical given that its filtering purposefully exposed some to “negative emotional content” – and Facebook apologized and issued a new set of guidelines for research projects.

In its second response to the Australian report, Facebook said it “has an established process to review the research we perform”, adding: “This research did not follow that process, and we are reviewing the details to correct the oversight.” The company said the research was “based on data that was anonymous and aggregated”.