

Trust Lost, Ethics Found? Rethinking LinkedIn's Algorithmic Marketing Practices

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Abstract

The study conducted explains the moral responsibilities of algorithms involved in the view count notifications of LinkedIn profiles while placing emphasis on the variation caused during or after buying a premium. Utilizing the Trust model by Mayer et al. (1995) and dark patterns theory as a foundation, the study employs longitudinal surveys, qualitative interviews, and comparative analysis to assess LinkedIn's practices against Facebook, TikTok, Netflix and Spotify. The findings indicate that the platforms have serious ethical issues that stem from algorithmic manipulations and trust issues. This research advocates for increasing user knowledge of enhancement of algorithms, improvement of ethically designed AI, and ensuring compliance to such laws as GDPR. The study proposes algorithmic audits, transparency dashboards and user empowerment tools. Finally, this section concludes with future avenues for research aimed at increasing fairness and trust on digital platforms.

Keywords: LinkedIn, unethical marketing, algorithmic transparency, dark patterns, social media ethics, premium subscriptions.

Introduction

With over 950 million users, LinkedIn is a global leader when it comes to professional networking sites (LinkedIn, 2025) and selling or purchasing professional services. By offering users such features as InMail messages and detailed notification profile view messages through a premium subscription, LinkedIn helps users with their important and strategic business goals. However, the ethicality of the fluctuating notification complaints has been troubling especially considering the ethical concerns of the subscriptions. Many claim that once a subscription period starts, they are highly expecting notifications but instead they have to endure a decline which later surges when the subscription period ends. This possibly suggests an attempt at renewal algorithm.

These patterns serve the goal of so-called “dark patterns”, which are directed at user's manipulation based on their psychology into making a particular decision (Brignull, 2020). For instance, engagement of users on social media entertainment platforms can potentially be impacted by such tactics, however due to LinkedIn being more focused on getting people employed, the negative impact is substantially larger, as users need to utilize the site to further their careers. This article illustrates these issues via theoretical, empirical, and comparative perspectives and outlines practical policy suggestions to solve ethical problems.

Literature Review

Mayer et al.'s Trust Model in a Marketing Context

According to Mayer et al. (1995), an Integrative Model of Trust highlights three facets that are vital in establishing a trustworthy relationship in any organizational system: ability, integrity, and benevolence. Ability, integrity and benevolence are such dimensions that are relevant to LinkedIn practices. From a marketing point of view, ability involves understanding what LinkedIn is capable of doing, like accurate and useful notifications that the website promises to provide. Integrity, on the other hand, encompasses the honesty and transparency of LinkedIn's marketing practices. This includes whether promotional content is clearly labeled, whether subscription terms are fair and understandable, and how the platform manages user expectations. Any misleading tactics, such as sending deceptive notifications to trigger upgrades or exaggerating profile views, can severely damage perceptions of integrity. Lastly, benevolence speaks of LinkedIn's turning strategy towards taking care of user's best interests instead of money-making

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strategies. When users sense that the platform is designed more to extract revenue than to support professional growth, benevolence is called into question.

These theoretical elements are supported by the findings of Morgan and Hunt (1994), who emphasized that trust is a central determinant of customer retention and loyalty. In this light, if LinkedIn engages in exploitative or manipulative marketing tactics, it risks undermining the very trust that sustains user engagement. Such breaches not only reduce user satisfaction but also damage the platform's credibility as a professional network. In an environment where alternatives are growing and digital reputations matter, trust becomes a key strategic asset—and a potential liability when mismanaged.

Dark Patterns and User Manipulation in Marketing

According to Brignull (2020), dark patterns are design strategies that have the potential to leak information regarding a user's interaction with a product or service and these strategies are found in abundance in the realm of online advertising. These tactics are prevalent in online advertising and subscription services, where user behavior is subtly influenced to serve business goals. Furthermore, Cialdini's (2001) principle of loss aversion and scarcity effect can be used in behavior modification through the use of dark patterns to influence clients' behavior. These principles are applied to influence consumer behavior by heightening emotional responses to potential loss or missed opportunities. LinkedIn practices have been associated with this principle, wherein through the integration of technology, user timelines are supplemented with alerts for the sake of starting a purchase, and then when purchased, notifications become scarce only becoming frequent when the subscription is at an end, which spurs the fear of missing out. The sense of fear and urgency is created to manipulate clients to go for renewal. In other words, that rhythm of active pressure followed by intentional silence creates an urgency based on fear rather than on the obvious utility of the service.

The deliberate imposition of psychological strain on consumers has sparked fresh debate about the ethics of marketing behavior on digital interfaces. Mathur et al. (2019) frame the issue by noting that many so-called dark patterns contravene a basic principle of marketing: that strategic choice should not forfeit moral reason. Even so, the same aggressive ploys often backfire by undermining the very brand loyalty and customer satisfaction that sponsors reclaim as key performance indicators. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) argue instead that durable relationships hinge on transparent practices, suggesting that trust must anchor any long-term strategy. Repeated display of manipulative cues, therefore, carries the risk of driving users away, tarnishing a firm's public image, and sacrificing sustainable engagement for a fleeting revenue spike. As consumers chart the recurring tricks, pressure mounts—from scholars, designers, and policymakers alike—for rules and standards that prioritize ethical interface design.

Algorithmic Transparency and Ethical AI

Algorithm transparency forms a foundation of AI ethics and trust in the digital space. Pasquale (2015) portrays algorithms as “black boxes”, which operate with complete secrecy, making it impossible for users to comprehend the process through which decisions are made. In marketing, the information regarding algorithmic activities is accurate as it promotes fairness and motivates users. For example, Spotify and Netflix are transparent by making it clear how often and why they recommend certain things to users, which builds trust in their services.

On the other hand, LinkedIn's algorithms tend to be less trustworthy, since the time and the rationale behind shifts in notifications are hidden. The service may be chasing engagement stats or nudging members toward paid tiers, yet that motive is cloaked, leaving recipients to wonder whether a ping signals genuine interest or merely corporate strategy. Such silence permits suspicion to grow, chips away at personal agency, and sits uneasily with the original tenets of ethical artificial intelligence.

Nearly all contemporary AI ethics charters, from the European Commission's latest guidance to the OECD's principles, hold up explainable AI as a cornerstone. When a model is genuinely transparent, users can grasp its reasoning, lodge informed objections, and pursue meaningful remedies after an automated

judgment lands. That level of clarity is especially vital in high-stakes fields like job hiring, credit scoring, or medical diagnosis, where the stakes are personal and immediate. If online services disregard that demand for algorithmic openness, they will gamble away customer trust and invite sharper oversight from regulators and advocacy groups alike.

Consumer Trust and Perceived Fairness in Subscription Models

Consumer confidence stands out as a cornerstone of the subscription economy, especially on digital platforms where members routinely weigh the price against their perceived returns. Subscribers repeatedly ask whether the monthly or annual charge feels proportionate to what they actually receive, and that ongoing, internal dialogue shapes their sense of trust (Bachman and Inkpen, 2011). When shoppers conclude that a service takes fairness seriously, that positive assessment often blossoms into loyalty that lasts for years.

The judgment of fairness itself pulls in two different ideas lifted straight from social-psychological literature. Distributive justice, answering the blunt question of whether features or products match the dollar amount to the penny, is one thread. Procedural justice, the quieter question of whether billing, renewal, and cancellation steps unfold openly and without surprises, is the other. Services that score well on both fronts tend to hold subscribers because those subscribers feel respected, not exploited, with their money, time, or personal data (Gefen, 2002).

Problems emerge when online platforms drift away from the ground rules audiences instinctively accept. Take LinkedIn, for example; observers have repeatedly spotlighted the site's secretive methods for cashing in on member data and the lopsided feeling that arises when people hand over life stories and ideas yet receive comparatively little in return. Many users label that gap exploitative, a judgment that chips away at their sense of fairness and chips away even more directly at the trust that holds the relationship together. Once trust diminishes, complaints rise, participation slackens, and the risk of members simply walking away spikes.

The same dynamic plays out in subscription-based services, perhaps even louder. Fairness stops being a polite ethical whisper and turns into a hard-nosed question of survival; reputations punctured by perceived injustice do not heal overnight, and they tend to stumble first through the revolving door of cancellations. In crowded digital marketplaces where less demanding rivals stand by with open arms, loyalty, the waiving of that cancel button, depends on the belief that the give-and-take is at least roughly even.

Comparative Analysis of Ethical Marketing Practices

The ethical nature of any marketing undertaking is vastly different when dealing with subscription based platforms Facebook has been noted to stay transparent by marking recommended content with 'sponsored' tag (Matsakis, 2019). On the other hand, TikTok has an engagement-driven algorithm which facilitates user satisfaction. Sun et al., (2021) highlight that this explains the reason why TikTok does not resort to subscription renewal type tactics. Unlike Netflix and Spotify, upselling methods which are feature driven and focused on user experience have been avoided due to their organic nature. In contrast, these companies' practices are benign as compared to those practiced by LinkedIn and their manipulation of professional opportunities which can be termed as the most worrisome.

Methodology

Longitudinal Survey Analysis

A longitudinal study of twelve months duration was carried out involving 500 LinkedIn users. Subjects rated their experiences with a five level Likert scale, monitoring the number of notifications they received with respect to active and out-of-date subscriptions. As part of the analysis, correlations between out-of-date and active subscriptions and changes in the number of notifications were assessed. Through regression analysis, the correlations of these variables were examined.

Qualitative Interviews

This study conducted a semi-structured interview of 10 participants, who gave insights about their trust in algorithms along with their fairness and transparency. Their interviews were analyzed by employing thematic analysis and scrutinizing recurrent themes such as feelings of manipulation, distrust, and dissatisfaction (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Comparative Industry Analysis

A comparative assessment of associated issues related to LinkedIn practices was juxtaposed with other social media platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, Netflix, and Spotify, was undertaken by giving a detailed explanation of each social media platform.

Findings and Discussion

Notification Fluctuations and User Perceptions

According to the results of the survey conducted, 78% of the users noticed a decline in notifications during the use of active subscriptions, while an increase in notifications experienced (62%) after the expiration of the subscriptions. Such a tactic plays upon the fear of missing out (FOMO), which constitutes a powerful motivator that has been widely employed in the business world (Cialdini, 2001). These approaches undermine the overall confidence of users in the business in the long term.

Ethical Implications of Algorithmic Manipulation

As per the findings, LinkedIn has been using dark patterns as a means to increase subscriptions which goes against the ethical marketing principles set (Brignull, 2020). Due to lack of transparency, the individuals are unable to contest against the decisions set by the platform which increases the distrust.

Comparative Insights on Trust and Transparency

The comparison of ethical practices between LinkedIn and other social media platforms like Netflix, TikTok or Spotify reveals lack of transparency, discrimination and fairness in the operations of LinkedIn. For instance, TikTok has made it a priority to recommend the establishment of a Transparency Center to enhance user trust by providing important explanations about the content moderation model and their respect for users' data privacy (TikTok, 2021). In addition, TikTok now reports to receivers of the reports using several principles and these principles include enforcement of community guidelines to users and law enforcement agencies (TikTok, 2021). Netflix, too, revises the ethical issues in the Code of Ethics such as Conflict of interest, Legal Compliance, Accountability, and Confidentiality (Netflix, 2023) to ensure compliance with laws and regulations such as anti-bribery law and corruption. As such, these measures, which can be described as quasi-self-regulating measures enhance the trust in users, stakeholders, and even regulators on Netflix.

In sharp contrast, LinkedIn's approaches regarding algorithmic decision making in its notifications and how its subscriptions work is somewhat unclear. Such confusion can reduce the level of trust users place in the app as registrants on social networks are in opposition to registrants on TikTok and Netflix. However, it is hoped that LinkedIn will take this opportunity and publish reports indicating the operation of their algorithms more or less. Similar changes should facilitate the restoration of trust between the site and its users.

Marketing and Trust in Professional Contexts

Trust is a vital part of professional networks where users use LinkedIn for job searches and career growth. Professional networking sites like LinkedIn, in contrast to entertainment sites like Facebook and TikTok, must always uphold integrity and openness in order to preserve user trust.

The factors that contribute towards the erosion of trust, including manipulative marketing practices, have wide range implications. Trust-based marketing research indicates that integrity and fairness are critical to the long-term success of building sincere client relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In the case of LinkedIn, the changes in notifications reduce trust in the services offered on the platform and in the business intention of their users, as these notification changes are perceived as abuse. One of the participants' remarks illustrate this sentiment: *"When I stop seeing my notifications increasing during the subscription, I find myself being treated as a sales tool rather than someone who uses the platform on a professional basis."*

Additionally, the absence of perceived fairness impacts users negatively. Professional platforms should guarantee that they treat all users the same and the same way every time with the specific purpose in mind and that is prioritizing the welfare of the users. LinkedIn's focus on increasing short-term revenues through utilizing anti-competitive algorithms is counterproductive as it diminishes its professional reputation and causes long-term harm. Not only that, but the perception of unfairness drives users further away from the platform. To reiterate, professional platforms are expected to be fair and equal with their users at all times and offer them a good user experience.

Ethical marketing solutions ought to be adopted by LinkedIn if they wish to regain and retain trust of their users. Employing XAI technologies is one way to gain user trust by promoting transparency. Another way is standardizing how notifications are sent out for replacement. Allowing more customizable options also helps in restoring the user's faith on the platform. The feeling of trust is more than just a feeling, it is a strategy that ensures clients retain and engage themselves on professional networks.

Recommendations

To solve the ethical issues raised above with LinkedIn's notification algorithms, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

Enhance Algorithmic Transparency

To ensure the retention of their clients in the platform, LinkedIn needs to adopt a transparent dashboard with the implementation of suitable strategies that work best for a particular region and restore trust. For these strategies to be effective an explanation of how engagement metrics are calculated and factors strategizing for visibility should be provided. Such support would ensure clients are informed of whether making subscriptions is a necessity or not.

Standardize Notification Practices

Fear and mistrust on this platform are consequences of the inconsistent notification patterns, some may call it manipulation. Such mistrust can be averted by ensuring that LinkedIn notifications and all subscriptions on the platform appear to have a consistency that is used across all platforms. Notifications should project the real user activity rather than manipulated algorithms. Transitioning towards these practices would serve to limit fairness issues and allegations of manipulations.

Implement Third-Party Audits

For responsibility purposes, LinkedIn should force third-party audits on a regular basis; going through these audits, it would be determined whether the policies prevailing in the platform are abiding by the principles of ethical AI and other regulatory requirements such as GDPR. Third party involvement would assist in exposing and eliminating coercive policies while at the same time assuring the platform's handing over of power over to the people.

Foster User Empowerment

A piece of notification that would involve frequency and kind of messages users would like LinkedIn to send would be a means of assuring users that their trust will not be broken. Users should be able to specify in detail whether they wish to receive type of message they are receiving as well what measures have been put in place to allow them to opt out from receiving such notification. Providing a notification that reads ‘this is how your information is used’ should be a common practice as it will level up the people’s control and their contentedness.

Collaborate on Industry Standards

Cooperation and collaboration between various groups of stakeholders, such as other platforms, regulators, and academic circles, should be important in the actions of LinkedIn; in this case, the mission of the company will be to develop industry self-regulatory ethics in AI and algorithmic transparency. This could relate to the work of ensuring fairness in notification guidelines as well as adhering to the ISO standards for ethical AI.

Future Research Directions

Cross-Platform and Cross-Cultural Analysis

Different social and professional networks may embed unique set of ethics. For practice, there is a need for research on cross-platform approaches that should be conducted on platforms such as Glassdoor or Indeed or even Xing. Multi-cultural issues also need to be highlighted regarding users’ perspectives toward the trust towards the algorithms.

Psychological Impact of Manipulative Algorithms

There should be a need for longitudinal research focusing on extended analysis into how push or manipulative notifications affect the psychology of an individual over a prolonged duration especially in a professional environment. Amongst others, the impact that such tactics have on key decisions such as careers, the confidence exercised in the profession, sanity of the users and so forth should be investigated.

Emerging Technologies in Algorithmic Transparency

There is the need to investigate the role of explainable artificial intelligence and blockchain in improving algorithms especially in social platforms. Users can be told the reasons for the decisions taken by algorithms with the use of explainable AI while blockchain can maintain the records of an algorithm’s activities in a manner that ensures accountability.

Regulatory Effectiveness

Further research should be done on the ability of GDPR, CCPR and other regulatory policies in dealing with the manipulative algorithms. Differences in regulations can be useful in pinpointing the best measures or arguments to be used, as well as existing loopholes in regulatory enforcement which results in inappropriate policies development. These comparative studies can bring out the necessary measures to be implemented as well as existing policies to be discarded, all contributing to a better policy development to address the rapid changing innovations in the field.

Trust Restoration Strategies

There are platforms, such as LinkedIn, that may require future research in terms of how users lose trust in them and how they can rebuild that trust. Studies on how to rebuild trust can provide insights for practitioners in the field, especially those that own platforms like LinkedIn, in order to prevent the same mistakes and implement the measures that enhance trust in clients.

Conclusion

This research finds ethical justification for manipulative offers on the renewal of subscriptions by LinkedIn with a crucial caveat that its users are warned on the nature of the tactic being used. Private and public relations businesses function under trust and fairness which the study finds in the algorithms employed by LinkedIn. So this raises a concern for algorithmic understanding, user control, and AI business design ethics.

For LinkedIn to regain credibility and have sound ethical stand in digital marketing, it has to adopt the pre-specified measures such standard as regulated use of notifications and third-party examination of its activities. Additionally, seeking compliance to regulations and formation of new standards across the industry would make LinkedIn the first mover that promotes compliance and fairness across all professional networks.

Having trust is the right thing to do but it is also a competitive edge that enables active and satisfied users thus driving business performance over time. These measures offered will allow LinkedIn to operate within the current demands of users and broaden its reach within the professional networking industry.

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