

An app too far?

New study reveals which transgressions would provoke consumers to delete apps

Within the current media storm where we have seen tech companies being accused of sexism, racism and other immoral or unethical behaviours, a new study reveals the dubious actions most likely to cause users to permanently delete an app, which apps would be the first to go, and the apps safest from deletion.

The new study surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,000 respondents in both the US and the UK to explore the impact of transgressions on tech companies and mobile apps. The study also explored the levels of trust in tech companies.

Top line findings:

- Overall, consumers are far more worried about their personal data than they are concerned about unethical actions, the environment or discrimination in society: the biggest reasons consumers will delete an app are 1) if the company sold their data 2) if their data was not secured properly and 3) if the company tracked their behaviour without permission.
- 91% of US and 86% of UK respondents agree that businesses have a responsibility to behave in an ethically responsible manner.
- Facebook tops the list of apps consumers could live without if the company behaved unethically or immorally. Up to 54% of US and UK Facebook users would delete the app based on any of the transgressions, more than any other app.
- In the US, Amazon and Google followed, with banking/financial apps also high on the list.
- In the UK, both Facebook and Google were marked as the apps most eligible for deletion, followed by Amazon and banking/financial apps.
- On the other hand, in the US Airbnb was the app least likely to be deleted (as few as 2% of users would delete Airbnb based on any of the transgressions), while dating apps followed a close second. Food delivery apps are also less likely to be deleted in the US.
- In the UK, dating apps are the least likely apps to be deleted (again, only as little as 2% of users would delete their dating apps based on any of the transgressions), followed closely by LinkedIn and Airbnb.
- 15% of people in the US (and 8% of people in the UK) have already deleted a mobile app because the maker of the app behaved unethically or immorally. Examples of these include Facebook, Skype, Instagram, Snapchat, Google, Netflix, WhatsApp, YouTube, Amazon, Airbnb, food delivery apps and Kindle.

A consumer view of business purpose and ethics

77% of US and UK consumers agree that the primary responsibility of a business is to make a profit, while only 5% strongly disagree. At the same time, 91% US and 86% UK respondents somewhat or strongly agree that businesses have a responsibility to behave in an ethically responsible manner.

What unethical acts and transgressions will lead consumers to delete their apps?

The research resulted in a ranking of the transgressions most likely to provide grounds for consumers to permanently delete an app:

UK

1. Selling personal data (67% of users say they are very likely to permanently delete an app)
2. Not securing personal data properly (65%)
3. Tracking your behaviour without your permission (63%)
4. Spamming you with services (57%)
5. Intellectual property theft (46%)
6. Supporting oppressive regimes (40%)
7. Discriminating on the grounds of race (38%)
8. Poor customer service (37%)
9. Discriminating on the grounds of sexual orientation (32%)
10. Mistreatment of employees (32%)
11. Discriminating on the grounds of gender (31%)
12. Tax avoidance (31%)
13. Inappropriate behaviour by the company CEO (22%)
14. Not showing care for the environment (18%)
15. Supporting a political party which you didn't (15%)

US

1. Selling personal data (64% of users say they are very likely to permanently delete an app)
2. Not securing personal data properly (61%)
3. Tracking your behaviour without your permission (58%)
4. Spamming you with services (55%)
5. Intellectual property theft (53%)
6. Poor customer service (46%) – moved up two spaces
7. Supporting oppressive regimes (43%)
8. Mistreatment of employees (41%)
9. Discriminating on the grounds of gender (40%)
10. Discriminating on the grounds of race (39%)
11. Discriminating on the grounds of sexual orientation (38%)
12. Tax avoidance (32%)
13. Inappropriate behaviour by the company CEO (32%)
14. Not showing care for the environment (28%)
15. Supporting a political party which you didn't (22%)

So mobile app makers are nowhere near safe if exposed to any of the listed transgressions, although there was a hard core of 2-9% of consumers who stated that any of the above transgressions would be 'very unlikely' to persuade them to delete an app. But of these transgressions, companies are more likely to get away with supporting a political party which the consumer didn't, not showing care for the environment, and inappropriate behaviour by the company CEO.

What can you live without? Facebook, Google or dating apps?

When US respondents were asked which apps they would delete based on the listed transgressions, Facebook was noted as the first app to go - where up to 49% of users said they would delete

Facebook in all cases besides “selling personal data,” where Amazon would be deleted first. Amazon and Google followed as second and third most likely to be deleted, with banking/financial apps also following close behind.

In the UK, Facebook (54%) and Google (48%) were marked as the apps most likely to be deleted first, followed by Amazon and banking/financial apps (more strongly in the UK than in the US). YouTube was more likely to be deleted if it was to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation, while banking/financial apps were more likely to go if there was inappropriate behaviour on the part of the company CEO.

Meanwhile, Airbnb is the app people in the US cannot live without, while dating apps follow a close second. Just 2% of users say they would delete Airbnb based on any of the transgressions, and as few as 3% would delete their dating apps. Food delivery apps are also less likely to be deleted by US consumers. However, in the UK, dating apps were least likely to be deleted at 2%, followed by LinkedIn and Airbnb. Kindle was also lower on the list. Uber was listed as safer when it comes to spamming with services, and Groupon is safer in particular when it comes to supporting a political party which you didn't like.

So why delete Facebook and Google, but not dating apps? Consumers seem to be more likely to delete apps that play a bigger part in their lives, but these apps do not solve a specific problem, they are generic. Specific offers like Uber or Airbnb are seen as the best way to get a taxi or accommodation, whereas Facebook does many things that other apps or sites do as well.

Consumers have already been driven to delete apps due to immoral or unethical actions

15% of people in the US (and 8% of people in the UK) say they have already deleted a mobile app because the maker of the app behaved unethically or immorally, with Facebook and other social media sites having taken most of the hit.

Of those people who have deleted apps, the following have been deleted in ranking order:

UK

1. Facebook, Skype, Snapchat (11%)
2. Google, Instagram, Netflix, WhatsApp, YouTube, Airbnb (5%)

US

1. Facebook, Instagram (38%)
2. Amazon, Netflix, WhatsApp (29%)
3. Skype, Snapchat, YouTube, (17%)
4. Food delivery, Google, Kindle, (8%)

*percentages are based on those who have answered yes to deleting an app based on a transgression

What does this mean for tech companies and mobile apps?

Trust is an asset that technology and app providers must continually work on and it must be re-earned with every new innovation. The study showed that mobile app providers are slightly less trusted than technology companies; only 20% of US respondents completely trust mobile app providers and 25% completely trust technology companies. In the UK it's much lower, with only 4 and 6% respectively. To increase public levels of trust, there must be a strong sense of transparency in actions, supported by ethical and moral behavior and vastly improved communication management around rogue developers or CEOs.

As the survey shows, the general public in both the US and UK believe that while businesses should be aiming to make a profit, they should be equally focusing on behaving in an ethically moral manner.

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