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## Press Release

### **Study Shows How Facebook Users Affected by Data Breaches Reacted**

**A new study by Mannheim Business Administration professor Hartmut Höhle examines the reactions of actual victims of the Cambridge Analytica scandal at Facebook over a longer period of time. Its key finding is that despite being affected by data fraud, users remain on the platform.**

Data breaches cause outrage, shake people's trust, and regularly lead to calls for more data protection measures. But how do people actually react when they find out that their own data is affected—and how long do these effects last?

A research team led by Professor Hartmut Höhle from the University of Mannheim has been researching this question with regard to one of the most prominent data scandals in the past years: the Cambridge Analytica scandal at Facebook. At the time, data from more than 80 million Facebook users had been used for political purposes without their knowledge.

What is special about this study is that while prior research often used hypothetical scenarios, this current study is the first one to analyze how the attitudes of people actually affected change over time. The study initially included a total of 380 Facebook users, 183 of which participated in another survey six months later. The corresponding paper was published in the journal *Information Systems Research*.

The results show that—as expected—people who learn that their data is affected initially react much more strongly than those not affected. Immediately after an incident becomes known, trust in and loyalty toward the platform decrease, while feelings of anger and disappointment increase. What is surprising, however, is that these differences have largely disappeared again six months later. In the later survey, the attitudes of the users affected had almost returned to their original levels.

According to the study, this development can primarily be explained by psychological adjustment and internal justification processes. For one thing, anger and mistrust appear to decrease automatically over time. For another, many users affected remain on the platform despite the incident, because their social contacts, the contents they have saved, or a lack of alternatives make it difficult for them to switch to another platform. Reactions to data breaches therefore not only depend on the incident as such but also on how much users are tied to the relevant platform.

“At first, data breaches severely affect people’s trust and their relationship with digital platforms. However, our study also shows how quickly people adapt their behavior and attitudes to new realities,” Hartmut Höhle says.

“Nevertheless, our results are not to be understood as a free pass for companies, regulatory authorities, and platform operators,” Höhle continues. These actors’ communication should not only focus on mere damage control—even though users tend to remain on platforms after data breaches.

**Original publication:**

Schlackl, F., Pethig, F., Höhle, H., & Sabherwal, R. (2026). *Reactions by Actual Data Breach Victims over Time: Evidence from Facebook’s Cambridge Analytica Breach*. Information Systems Research: <https://pubsonline.informs.org/doi/10.1287/isre.2023.0391>

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