

Internet search process affects cognition, emotion

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"Web site sponsors might consider increasing their advertising on pages that tend to be accessed via search engines," said Kevin Wise, assistant professor of strategic communication and co-director of the Psychological Research on Information and Media Effects (PRIME) Lab at the University of Missouri. Credit: MU News Bureau

Nearly 73 percent of all American adults use the Internet on a daily basis, according to a 2009 Pew Internet and American Life Project survey. Half of these adults use the Web to find information via search engines, while 38 percent use it to pass the time. In a recent study, University of Missouri researchers found that readers were better able to understand, remember and emotionally respond to material found through "searching" compared to content found while "surfing."

"If, as these data suggest, the cognitive and emotional impact of online content is greatest when acquired by searching, then Web site sponsors might consider increasing their advertising on pages that tend to be accessed via search engines," said Kevin Wise, assistant professor of strategic communication and co-director of the Psychological Research on Information and Media Effects (PRIME) Lab at the University of Missouri.

In the study, the researchers examined how methods for acquiring news — searching for specific content versus surfing a news Web site — affected readers' emotional responses while reading news stories. They monitored participants' heart rate, skin conductance and facial musculature to gauge their emotional responses to unpleasant news. The researchers found that unpleasant content triggered greater emotional responses when readers sought the information by searching rather than surfing. In future studies, Wise will study the effects of acquiring pleasant content on readers' emotional responses.

"How readers acquire messages online has ramifications for their cognitive and [emotional response](#) to those messages," Wise said. "Messages that meet readers' existing informational needs elicit stronger emotional reactions."

The researchers also found that information was better understood and remembered when individuals conducted specific searches for information. In a previous study, Wise tested the effects of searching and surfing on readers' responses to images and found similar results.

[More information:](#) The study, "The Effect of Searching Versus Surfing on Cognitive and Emotional Responses to Online News," was recently published in the *Journal of Media Psychology*.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia ([news](#) : [web](#))

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