

# Study: Users mistakenly trust higher positioned results in Google searches

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An eye tracking experiment published in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* revealed that college student internet users have an inherent trust in Google's ability to rank results by their true relevance to the query. When participants selected a link from Google's result pages, their decisions were strongly biased towards links higher in position, even if that content was less relevant to the search query.

“Despite the popularity of search engines, most users are not aware of how they work and know little about the implications of their algorithms,” says study author Bing Pan. “When websites rank highly in a search engine, they might not be authoritative, unbiased or trustworthy.”

According to Pan, this has important long term implications for search engine results, as this type of use, in turn, affects future rankings. “The way college students conduct online searches promotes a ‘rich-get-richer’ phenomenon, where popular sites get more hits regardless of relevance,” says Pan. “This further cements the site’s high rank, and makes it more difficult for lesser known sites to gain an audience.”

The author says users need to be aware that search engines have tremendous influence on what and how information is accessed. An effort on the part of search engine developers to provide users with information on how the algorithms function could help to raise user awareness.

Source: Blackwell Publishing

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