# The joy is in the social hunt

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The popularity of social networking websites has grown dramatically in recent years. One of the most popular sites, Facebook.com, now boasts more than 350 million users worldwide. With so many people interacting with each other online daily, an MU researcher is interested in the cognitive and emotional implications of social browsing versus social searching.

Kevin Wise, an assistant professor of strategic communication at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, studied people's habits when they navigate Facebook. Wise says previous studies on social networking sites involved merely surveying study participants. Wise conducted his study differently.

"Rather than asking people to report their uses of Facebook, we wanted to see them in action," Wise said. "We wanted to see if there is a way to categorize Facebook use, not based on what people say about it, but what they actually do when they are using it."

During the study, participants were seated at a computer and told to navigate Facebook for a determined amount of time. Participants could view anything they wished during that time, as long as they stayed on the Facebook website. Using screen-capturing software, Wise was able to view every action that each participant made while on the site. The researchers attached sensors to various parts of the participants' bodies to measure potential emotional responses as the participants navigated Facebook..

Wise categorized participants' actions into two different groups: social browsing and social searching. He defines social browsing as navigating the site without a targeted goal in mind. Wise says people use social browsing when they survey the general landscape, such as their newsfeed or wall, without looking for specific information. Wise defines social searching as searching the social networking site with the goal of finding certain information about a specific person, group, or event.

Wise found that participants tended to spend much more time on social searching than social browsing. Not only did participants spend more time on social searching, but they seemed to enjoy it more as well.

"We found a more positive response from participants during social searching, or when they had homed in on a particular target," Wise said. "Ultimately, it appears that Facebook use is largely a series of transitions between browsing the environment, then focusing in on something interesting or relevant."

Wise says that this was an exploratory study to move past how people say they use Facebook in favor of studying their actual behavior. He says that there are many more questions about how people use social networking sites that he hopes to study in the future.

This study was published in the *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking.*

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