McAfee
The Web's Most
Dangerous Search Terms

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Introduction

Unless you work for or own an online business, chances are you've never heard the terms "search engine optimization" (SEO) and "search engine marketing" (SEM). Yet these two phrases—SEO (the effort by site owners to get their website ranked higher by search engines) and SEM (the use of paid advertising to gain prominent placement on search engines) are increasingly important vocabulary for businesses that seek to prosper on the web. Unfortunately, legitimate businesses are not the only ones gaining fluency with this new language.

The scammers—from solo operators to organized criminals—have quickly realized that the same search engines that enable legitimate businesses to reach more consumers can also be used by criminals to separate more victims from more of their money.

The scammers—from solo operators to organized criminals—have quickly realized that the same search engines that enable legitimate businesses to reach more consumers can also be used by criminals to separate more victims from more of their money.

This paper examines a new phenomenon—the use of search engines as a conduit for profit-driven hackers—by analyzing the risk of searching for more than 2,000 of the most popular words and phrases ("keywords") used in search engines in 2008. From "Jonas Brothers tickets" to "game cheats" to "Viva la Vida lyrics," these keywords represent a broad slice of what search expert John Battelle calls our "database of intentions."

Along with our "intentions," this database also reveals how much risk we expose ourselves to each and every time we put our favorite search engines to use. How much risk? For some keywords like "popular screensavers" and "descargar google" and certain of their resulting pages, the risk can be pervasive—75% or more results (three out of four) can lead to increased web security risk.

This should not be surprising to observers of security trends. Since hacking for fame has given way to hacking for profit, malicious players have grown increasingly sophisticated in their ability to find large pools of potential victims. By measuring the relative risk of popular search terms, this study confirms that scammers continue to target the largest pools of victims.

But this study also found some interesting evidence to the contrary. Previous McAfee® studies of web safety have shown about 4% of sites to be risky. This is a broad measure of the overall risk we face when we use the web. By contrast, the average risk level of all results pages we studied was just 1.7%.

This study is broad and directional. New tools and research methods need to be deployed to allow us to better understand the mechanics of how search is being misused. We hope this study helps pave the way for other studies that take on these important questions.

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Key Findings

McAfee searched for more than 2,600 popular keywords. For each keyword, we examined the first five pages of results across each of five major search engines. On average, each keyword generated a little more than 250 results. Overall, we examined more than 413,000 unique URLs (web addresses). We assigned each keyword a category and a country and then ranked them by the risk of their resulting URLs. In addition, using data from Hitwise, a search intelligence company, we conducted much deeper dives into specific keywords.

Keywords were ranked in two ways: 1) the average risk of all results and 2) the maximum risk of the riskiest page of results.

- Overall, the average risk level of all results pages was just 1.7%. In other words, in a list of 250 results, just over four were risky.
- However, when we averaged the most risky pages (the page from each keyword search that had the most risky results), the average risk shot up to 10.0%. In other words, in a list of 250 results, just over 25 were risky.
- The categories with the worst maximum risk profile were lyrics keywords (26.3%) and phrases that include the word "free" (21.3%). If a consumer landed at the riskiest search page for a typical lyrics search, one of four results would be risky.
- The categories with the worst average risk profile were also lyrics sites (5.1%) and "free" sites (7.3%).
- The categories with the safest risk profile were health-related search terms and searches concerning the recent economic crisis. The maximum risk on a single page of queries on the economy was 3.5% and only 0.5% risky across all results. Similarly, even the worst page for health queries had just 4.0% risky sites and just 0.4% risk overall.
- We used Hitwise to generate a detailed list of keyword variations for 12 search terms. As defined by McAfee, the riskiest set of keyword variations was "screensavers" with a maximum risk of 59.1% and an average risk of 34.4%, substantially higher than the study averages of 10.0% and 1.7%. Surprisingly, searches using the keyword "Viagra," a popular keyword that is a frequent "visitor" in our spam filters, yielded the fewest risky sites.
- Keywords popular in non-U.S. countries were significantly riskier than those popular in the United States. 14 countries had keyword lists that exposed users to a higher maximum risk than average, including the Czech Republic (14.2%) and Brazil (12.1%). And 12 countries were overall riskier than the average, including Mexico (1.9%) and India (1.8%). These findings may prove to be anomalies, but if subsequent studies confirm them, this could be early evidence of a troubling new trend of scammers targeting non-U.S. victims.

Hackers are most successful when they can attract a large number of victims. One way to target big crowds online is to track current events—everything from celebrity meltdowns and natural disasters to holidays and popular music.

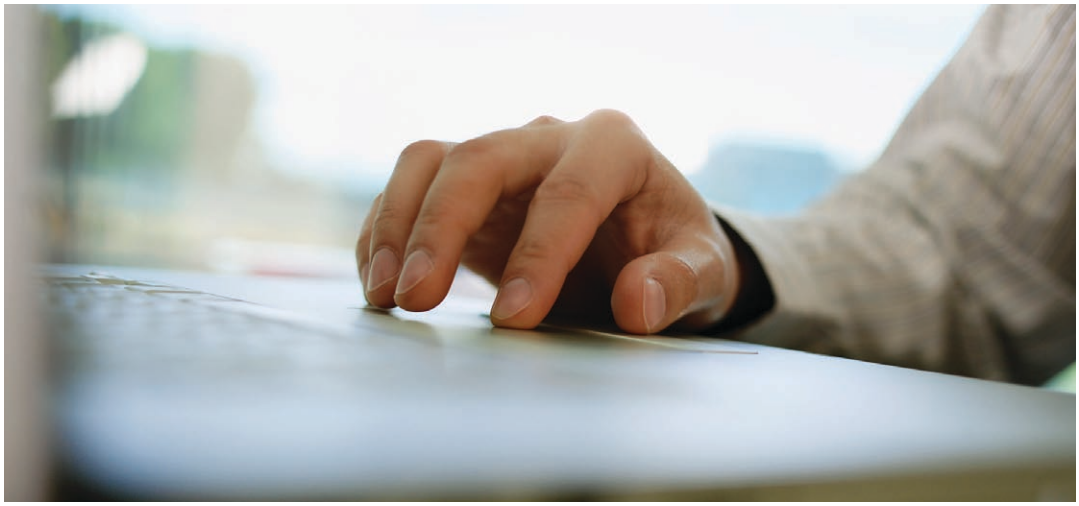
What Makes Certain Search Terms Risky?

Why are certain keywords or search terms riskier than others? While it's not always possible to understand the minds and motivations of today's sophisticated hackers, McAfee can provide some insight based on known techniques employed by cybercriminals.

Hackers are most successful when they can attract a large number of victims. One way to target big crowds online is to track current events—everything from celebrity meltdowns and natural disasters to holidays and popular music.

One key tool cybercriminals use to snare victims is to get them to download a computer file or program that comes with a malicious payload.

With these two concepts in play, let's take a look at one of our riskiest search terms: free music downloads. On average, 20.7% of results were risky (compared to just 1.7% of all search terms) and on one results page out of the 25 search engine pages we rated, we found a whopping 42.9% of results risky. As consumers continue to convert their music libraries to digital formats like MP3 files, they also struggle with the cost of buying music they may already own in cassette, LP record, or other formats. Caught between those two needs, many consumers have heard that the web can be a source for free



music. If the consumer is already looking for music, then they already have the mindset of being willing to download something—and that makes the malware author's work easier.

A website's subject matter or type of content can also affect its riskiness. Two such examples are lesser known pornographic and gambling sites that can be used to host malicious software such as exploits, dialers, Trojans, and other malware. This type of content can lead consumers down the dark alleys of the Internet, and consumers expose themselves to more risk when they attempt to search for these terms.

When determining "market size" for their scams, cybercriminals may look at the total number of website links a search term yields. Googlebattle.com is a good tool for illustrating this. McAfee found "Brad Pitt" more dangerous to search for than "Hugh Jackman" (14.3% maximum risk to 9.1%). Similarly, Googlebattle produces 26.4 million hits for "Brad Pitt" and just 5.5 million for "Hugh Jackman."

It's important to note that the number of website links is just one factor a cybercriminal might use when weighing whether to target a keyword. For example, Googlebattle finds Olympics soccer has more links than Olympic swimming, but for U.S. audiences in particular, "Michael Phelps" was a more popular—and riskier—search term.

Similarly, spikes in news coverage can also drive even consistently popular keywords out of the "most risky zone." For example, three popular female celebrities are Angelina Jolie (8.3% maximum risk) Oprah Winfrey (10%) and Beyonce Knowles (10%). But searches for Zuma Rossdale, the daughter of Gavin Rossdale and Gwen Stefani, can be as risky as 25%, suggesting that malicious or unscrupulous players do pay significant attention to news events.

Study Methodology

Each phrase and keyword was searched for in five major U.S.-based search engines—Google, Yahoo!, Live, AOL, and Ask. We looked at the first five pages of results for each keyword and counted the number of red and yellow rated sites on each page (as determined by McAfee SiteAdvisor®) and compared them to the total number of rated sites. We did not count sites for which we did not yet have a rating. We counted both sponsored and organic links and we weighted them equally. McAfee SECURE™ sites that undergo daily vulnerability testing were counted as green-rated sites for the purposes of this study.

We then ranked the riskiness of a particular search term in two ways. Average risk is the total number of red- and yellow-rated sites divided by the total number of red-, yellow-, and green-rated sites on the 25 search pages we examine. Maximum risk is the single page with the highest percentage of red- and yellow-rated sites.

For example, a keyword which generated ten rated results per page would yield 250 total rated sites. The average risk would equal (red- plus yellow-rated sites / red- plus yellow- plus green-rated sites). Ten red- plus 15 yellow- and 225 green-rated sites would yield an average risk of 10% (25/250). If one page displayed two red- plus two yellow- and six green-rated sites, the maximum risk would equal 40% (4/10).

SiteAdvisor website rankings are determined by the following security risks and concerns:

- *Risky downloads*
- *Browser exploits*
- *Email practices*
- *Phishing*
- *Excessive popups*
- *Linking practices*

McAfee SiteAdvisor rating methodology

Our site safety opinions come from the McAfee SiteAdvisor site rating database. This database includes ratings for more than 20 million sites that together account for approximately 95 percent of the trafficked web. Website ratings are based on tests for the following security threats and concerns:

- *Risky downloads*—Downloadable files that contain viruses, spyware, or adware or make unrelated changes to the downloading computer
- *Browser exploits*—Also known as a driveby download, this type of malicious code enables viruses, keystroke loggers, or spyware to install on a consumer's computer without consent and/or knowledge
- *Email practices*—Registration forms and other sign-ups that result in high volume email, highly commercial email or both. We also test for difficultly unsubscribing.
- *Phishing*—Scam sites that try to trick visitors into believing the site is legitimate
- *Excessive popups*—Sites that engage in aggressive popup behavior or display large numbers of popups
- *Linking practices*—Sites that aggressively link to other red- or yellow-rated sites

The vast majority of tests are conducted by test computers. In some cases, McAfee staff augments this automated testing with manual examinations.

Red ratings are given to websites that fail one or more of these tests. Yellow ratings are given to sites that, in our opinion, merit caution before using. Green ratings are given to sites with very minor or no risks found.

Sources of data

This study examined the relative risk of searching for approximately 2,658 unique popular keywords and phrases across 413,368 unique URLs. In all cases, adult filters were on. The data was created by collecting search terms from the following sources:

2008 Year-End Google Zeitgeist
http://www.google.com/intl/en/press/zeitgeist2008/

Yahoo! 2008 Year in Review
http://buzz.yahoo.com/yearinreview2008/

AOL 2008 Year End Hot Searches
http://about-search.aol.com/hotsearches2008/index.html

Ask Top 2008 Searches
http://about.ask.com/en/docs/2008/topqueries.shtml

Hitwise
http://www.hitwise.com/
For each of 12 keywords, we used Hitwise to generate the 25 most popular variations for the 12 weeks ending December 27, 2008.

Wordtracker Top 1000
https://www.wordtracker.com

For non-US keywords and phrases, we used a single source—Google Zeitgeist's Around the World list.
http://www.google.com/intl/en/press/zeitgeist2008/world.html

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Rankings

For convenience, we have grouped the keywords we studied by category and by country of popularity.

Category-specific risk summary findings in the United States

Category	Maximum Risk (Average)	Category Risk (Average)
Lyrics	26.3%	5.1%
Free	21.3%	7.3%
Web	13.9%	2.1%
Gear, Gadgets and Games	12.5%	2.7%
Olympics	12.4%	2.1%
Videos	12.3%	1.7%
Celebrities	10.7%	1.4%
Music	10.7%	1.7%
News	8.6%	1.3%
Miscellaneous	8.3%	1.1%
Travel	7.4%	1.2%
Food and Drink	7.2%	0.7%
Showbiz	7.1%	1.1%
Election 08	6.9%	0.5%
Shopping	6.8%	0.7%
How Do I?	6.5%	1.0%
Astrology	5.4%	0.4%
Sports	5.3%	0.6%
Destinations	5.1%	0.8%
Health	4.0%	0.4%
Economic Crisis	3.5%	0.5%

Country-specific risk summary findings

Country	Maximum Risk (Average)	Category Risk (Average)
Czech Republic	14.2%	2.4%
Finland	13.1%	2.3%
Chile	13.0%	2.2%
France	12.8%	2.1%
Spain	12.6%	1.8%
Poland	12.2%	1.9%
Brazil	12.1%	1.5%
Colombia	11.9%	1.8%
Denmark	11.6%	1.9%
India	11.3%	1.8%
South Africa	11.2%	1.7%
The Netherlands	11.1%	1.6%
Sweden	10.4%	1.6%
Mexico	10.3%	1.9%
Italy	9.7%	1.1%
Malaysia	9.6%	1.5%
Singapore	9.5%	1.1%
Canada	9.4%	1.3%
Belgium	9.4%	0.9%
Argentina	9.2%	1.4%
Philippines	9.1%	1.5%
New Zealand	7.9%	1.1%
Australia	7.7%	0.9%
Austria	7.7%	0.8%
United Kingdom	7.4%	0.8%
Switzerland	7.0%	0.9%

Top 50 riskiest search terms in the United States

Keyword	Maximum Risk	Average Risk	Category
word unscrambler	50.0%	16.1%	Gear, Gadgets and Games
lyrics	50.0%	14.8%	Lyrics
myspace	50.0%	2.9%	Web
free music downloads	42.9%	20.7%	Free
phelps, weber-gale, jones and lezak win 4x100m relay	40.0%	9.5%	Sports
free music	36.4%	12.1%	Free
game cheats	36.4%	16.3%	Gear, Gadgets and Games
printable fill in puzzles	36.4%	7.6%	Miscellaneous
free ringtones	33.3%	7.4%	Free
solitaire	33.3%	9.1%	Gear, Gadgets and Games
miniclip	33.3%	5.6%	Gear, Gadgets and Games
make money	33.3%	3.0%	How Do I?
viva la vida (coldplay) lyrics	33.3%	10.2%	Lyrics
touch my body lyrics	33.3%	5.2%	Lyrics
love song lyrics	33.3%	4.8%	Lyrics
lollipop lyrics	33.3%	4.6%	Lyrics
my life (lil wayne) lyrics	33.3%	2.6%	Lyrics
weather.com	33.3%	2.3%	News
lowes	33.3%	9.6%	Shopping
the price is right	33.3%	10.6%	Showbiz
kimbo slice	33.3%	6.7%	Sports
metacafe	33.3%	7.2%	Web
hotmail.com	33.3%	6.2%	Web
bebo	33.3%	2.6%	Web
msn.com	33.3%	1.3%	Web
music downloads	30.8%	13.5%	Music
dailymotion	30.0%	7.8%	Videos
limewire	30.0%	13.2%	Web
paper planes (m.i.a.) lyrics	28.6%	5.6%	Lyrics
no air lyrics	28.6%	4.9%	Lyrics
with you (chris brown) lyrics	28.6%	4.8%	Lyrics
snopes	28.6%	3.2%	Miscellaneous
wallpapers	28.6%	17.8%	Web
free e-cards	27.8%	15.9%	Free
text twist	27.3%	10.8%	Gear, Gadgets and Games
bleeding love lyrics	27.3%	4.6%	Lyrics
no air by jordin sparks feat. chris brown	27.3%	6.5%	Music
kijiji	27.3%	3.6%	Shopping
mixed wrestling	26.7%	2.1%	Sports
zuma rossdale	25.0%	5.7%	Celebrities
paris hilton	25.0%	3.6%	Celebrities
pamela anderson	25.0%	2.7%	Celebrities
free compatibility reports	25.0%	9.9%	Free
free people search	25.0%	9.1%	Free
song lyrics	25.0%	11.3%	Lyrics
coupons	25.0%	10.8%	Miscellaneous
newgrounds	25.0%	2.6%	Miscellaneous
mp3	25.0%	8.1%	Music
casey and caylee anthony	25.0%	7.0%	News
costco	25.0%	4.8%	Shopping

According to Google, the phrase "www google com" was searched approximately five million times on Google itself!

Deep dive with Hitwise data

Most of the keyword lists we used for this study are simplified by the people compiling these lists. The lists group together related search phrases under a single representative word or phrase. For example, "Miley Cyrus" is undoubtedly a popular search term. But so are "Miley Cyrus lyrics," "Miley Cyrus videos," "Miley Cyrus and Nick Jonas," and "Miley Cyrus pictures." For Yahoo! and AOL, the only search term to make their year end lists was the first—"Miley Cyrus."

We also know that people pick search words and use search engines in sometimes unusual ways. According to Google, the phrase "www google com" was searched approximately five million times on Google itself!

To better capture this variety, McAfee used keyword variations from data company Hitwise[1] to get a more detailed picture of the nature of risk for certain keywords. If we look more closely at one phrase and its variations, we can begin to understand more about search risk. These deep dives looked at the 25 most popular search word variations for 12 popular keywords in the United States.

Category	Maximum Risk (Average)	Category Risk (Average)
Screensavers	59.1%	34.4%
Free Games	24.7%	6.8%
Work From Home	15.6%	3.1%
Rihanna	12.6%	2.4%
Webkinz	11.4%	1.9%
Powerball	9.3%	1.5%
iPhone	7.9%	1.2%
Jonas Brothers	7.9%	1.2%
Twilight	6.8%	0.9%
Barack Obama	6.2%	0.7%
Taxes	4.9%	0.4%
Viagra	1.6%	0.1%

1 Disclosure: McAfee is a customer of Hitwise. We pay for access to their data.

Work from home scams

The chance to make good money while you "work from home" lures many people to their first run in with Internet scammers. Work from home schemes are so popular, the Federal Trade Commission has a consumer bulletin on it. And with the economic crisis, even more unwitting consumers are tempted to give these scams a try.

But that is a huge gamble. According to Hitwise, these are the most popular variations of that search, ranked by their maximum risk as defined by McAfee.

Keyword Variations	Maximum Risk (Average)	Category Risk (Average)
free work from home	40.0%	11.4%
work from home for free	40.0%	9.7%
work from home free	40.0%	11.2%
work from home ideas	25.0%	5.6%
free work from home jobs	20.0%	4.0%
legit work from home	20.0%	2.6%
work from home stuffing envelopes	20.0%	3.2%
work from home opportunities	15.4%	1.8%
work from home data entry	14.3%	2.6%
online jobs work from home	13.3%	2.3%
work from home jobs	13.3%	1.3%
work from home online jobs	13.3%	3.0%
work from home moms	12.5%	1.4%
best work from home jobs	10.0%	1.1%
real work from home jobs	10.0%	1.0%
work from home	10.0%	1.2%
envelope stuffing work from home	9.1%	1.2%
how to work from home	9.1%	2.5%
work from home no fees	9.1%	1.9%
data entry work from home	8.3%	1.6%
legitimate work from home	8.3%	1.0%
researcher work from home positions	8.3%	1.7%
work from home online	8.3%	2.2%
legitimate work from home jobs	6.7%	0.9%
legit work from home jobs	6.3%	0.5%

Work from home searches can be as much as four times more risky than the average for all popular terms. And on average, these searches are 50% more risky than other popular terms. What kinds of risk do users expose themselves to when they search for work from home opportunities?

Rebateprocessorjobs.com makes guarantees about income that can be earned simply by filling out forms, after paying the site owner a $39 fee. We rate the site yellow (use caution) for making misleading claims. One of our user reviewers alleges that in order to collect the rebate, "You must first sell a product, then offer a rebate on your own product. You process your own rebate, and then you get paid." In other words, you will spend more money than the rebate you receive is worth.

Work from home searches can be as much as four times more risky than the average for all popular terms. And on average, these searches are 50% more risky than other popular terms.

Picmoney.com is a similar site, but is rated red for linking to an affiliated site called jobslover. When we visited jobslover, we found a download infected with the Fujacks virus. Left untreated, the virus can turn victims' computers into bot slaves or enable identity theft.

This search term yielded another site called learnhomebusiness that we rated red for breaching browser security. This is one of the worst kinds of security risks a consumer can face because the infection does not require any action on the part of the user.

Study Limitations

The study is limited by the source data and the methods it uses.

As noted, the year-end "top searches" lists simplify search terms by lumping related keywords under a single word or phrase. Yes, people searched for lots of lyrics in 2008, but more likely than not, people added the song name or artist to the word "lyrics." Yet Google lists "lyrics" as a popular search for seven countries. Likewise, Olympian Usain Bolt was undoubtedly a popular figure to search for, as was video of his races. But it is unlikely that many people searched for "Usain Bolts WR Breaking Win in 200m Final," yet this is an AOL search term for its "Live video moments" category.

A number of prominent web writers have criticized these lists for a variety of reasons. TechCrunch concluded:

> *"If at the end of the day Google is taking the top few thousand searches, subjectively picking a handful that are interesting and then redetermining the order based on velocity of growth rather than overall rankings, we end up with a list that is, in the end, completely meaningless."*

In 2006, one search engine, Google, responded:

> *"[W]e do not simply retrieve the most frequently-searched terms for the period—the truth is, they don't change that much from year to year. This list would be predominated by very generic searches, such as 'ebay,' 'dictionary,' 'yellow pages,' 'games,' 'maps'—and of course, a number of X-rated keywords. These are constants, and although unquestionably popular, we don't think they actually define the Zeitgeist."*

Below are links to interpretations and analyses by a variety of critics:

- Search Engine Watch: http://blog.searchenginewatch.com/061219-105250
- Rough Type: http://www.roughtype.com/archives/2006/12/dweebs_horndogs.php
- CenterNetworks: http://www.centernetworks.com/top-searches-compared
- GigaOM: http://gigaom.com/2006/12/28/google-explains-wack-zeitgest-criteria/

We acknowledge both sides of this argument, but note that our study uses the search engine rankings as a *starting* point that gives us our collection of keywords. Whether a word is ranked fifth or fiftieth most popular is not important for the purposes of our study. What's important is simply that it is popular. In this sense, we believe these lists are useful.

Our findings for non-U.S. countries are limited in two ways. We used Google as our single source for keywords popular in non-U.S. countries. As noted, these lists appear to be somewhat generalized. Also, we used the same search engines for all searches. For example, we used google.com, not google.fr, for French searches.

Discussion of Related Work

McAfee is not the only company or institution to find scammers using popular culture and trends to reach larger pools of potential victims. This past May, for example, security company Sophos found Trojans in celebrity-related email attachments.

In 2006, a study by University of Washington researchers found game and celebrity sites that " … appeared to pose the greatest risk for piggybacked spyware, while sites that offer pirated software topped the list for drive-by attacks."

That same year, Microsoft filed suit against a company it alleged was using celebrity screensavers to distribute spyware, saying,

> *"Many of these programs are presented as screen savers showing pictures of well-known celebrities such as Jessica Simpson. However, defendants' programs included much more than pretty pictures. Once installed, the software would 'call home' and surreptitiously download numerous other programs that bombard users with unwanted pop-up advertisements, track users' Internet activity, redirect their Internet browsers to unwanted pages, add icons to the Microsoft Windows desktop, and change the users' Windows Registry settings. Microsoft alleges that these programs were downloaded and installed without appropriate notice to or consent from users. Notably, defendants' software installs even if users try to stop installation by choosing the appropriate options."*

More recently, Trend Micro reported finding scams targeting job-seekers. Given the difficult global economy, we are not surprised that scammers would zero in on this growing pool of victims.

Scammers consider popular trends when deciding which victims to target. ... If hackers are now motivated largely by profit, the biggest profits can be wrung from the largest pools of potential victims.

Likewise, Gary Warner, a computer forensics researcher, found scammers using the U.S. economic stimulus to target victims. Symantec also found stimulus come-ons in email that, if answered, could lead to loss of personally identifiable information and identity theft.

And in February, Digg, the very popular news site, was reportedly the victim of hundreds of thousands of fake comments that drove visitors to websites hosting malware.

An independent security researcher named Shanmuga analyzed a file that promised new video of Paris Hilton but was in fact a lure to inject viewers.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, this study confirms that scammers consider popular trends when deciding which victims to target. This makes common sense. If hackers are now motivated largely by profit, the biggest profits can be wrung from the largest pools of potential victims. And on the web, popular trends and visitor traffic are highly correlated.

That said, we do not know why a particular popular keyword is more or less risky than any other popular keyword. And we have only a limited understanding of the ways scammers operate. Yes, we know they use spam, set up websites, infect others and so on. But web security issues move as quickly as the web itself. For example, a few years ago, scammers grew adept at using "Google bombing" techniques to gain prominent search engine placement:

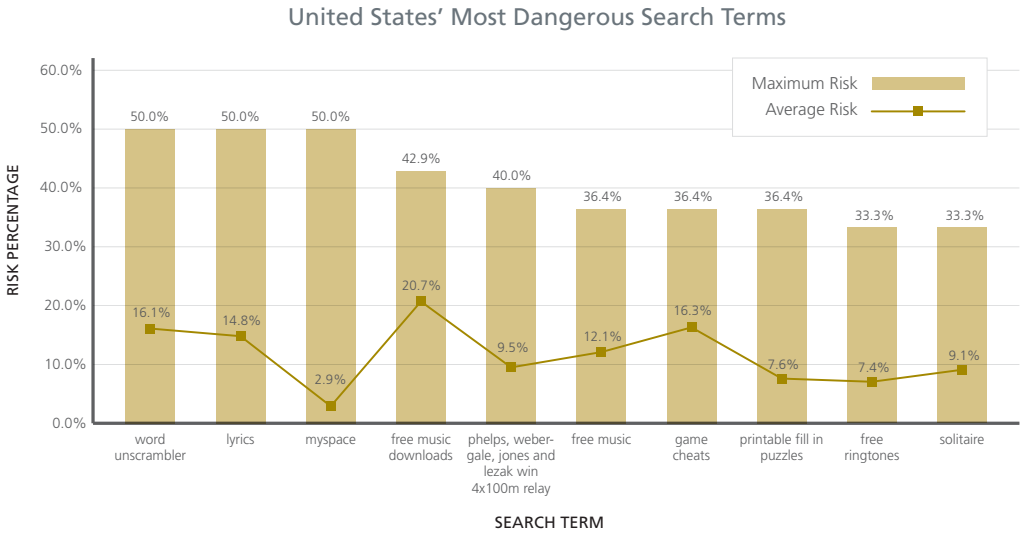
> *"Fraudsters hoping to steal money intended for a … (tsunami) charity have manipulated Google's page rankings to ensure that their fake site appears higher than the charity's official website."*

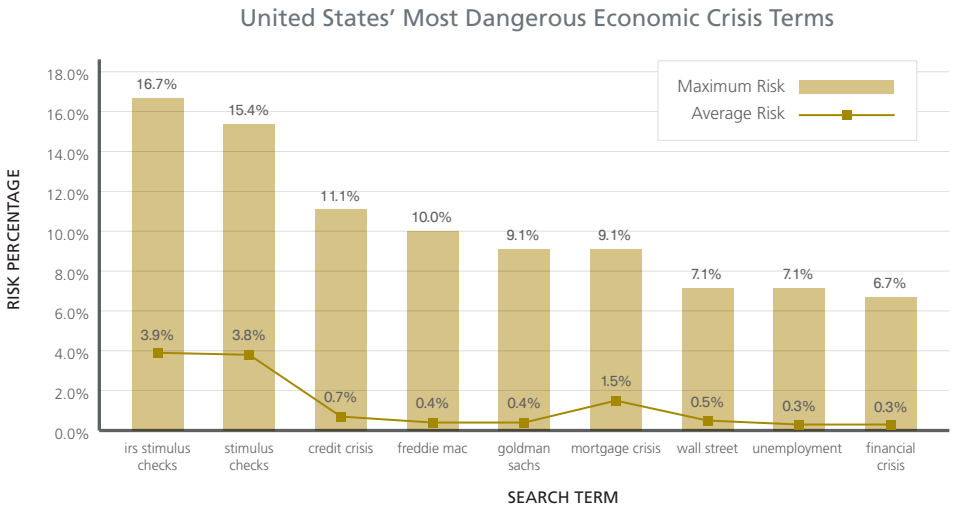
The search engines responded and this kind of attack is less common and less effective today than it was in 2005. But new scams are emerging every week to take the place of the old. And thus the arms race continues.

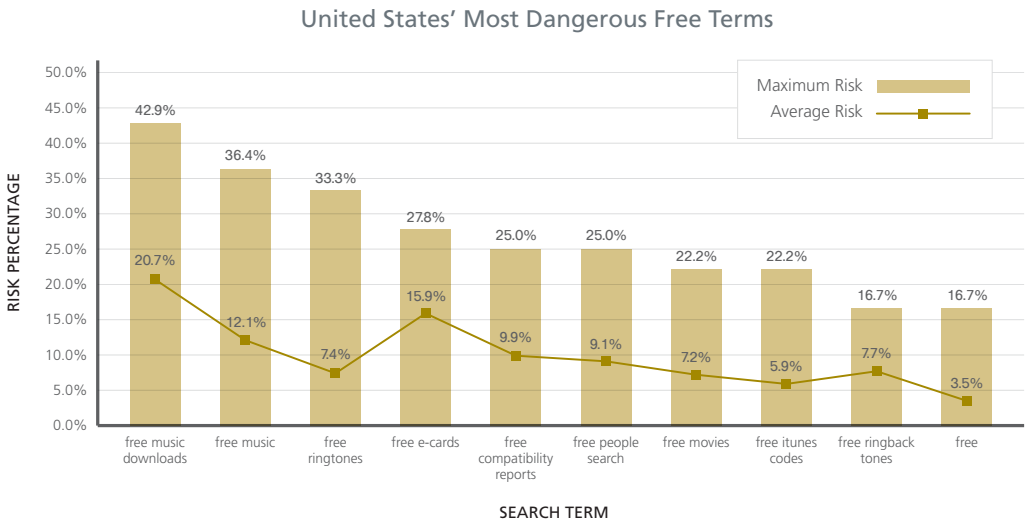
For consumers, this means that reliance on intuition, or knowledge of past risks, is not enough to stay safe when using the web. Even more technically sophisticated users are at risk. The best protection is to install a computer security suite and keep it up to date and to use a safe search tool like McAfee SiteAdvisor software.

Most Dangerous Search Terms by Country

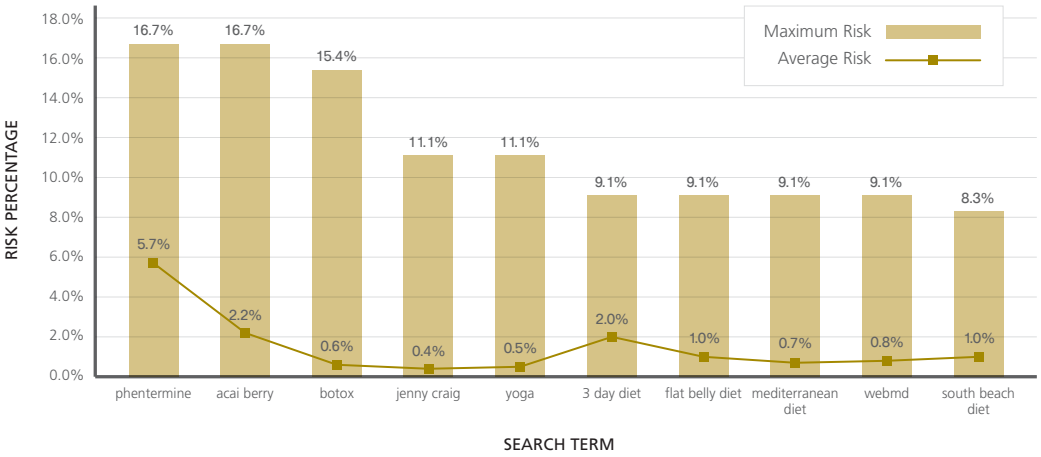
North America



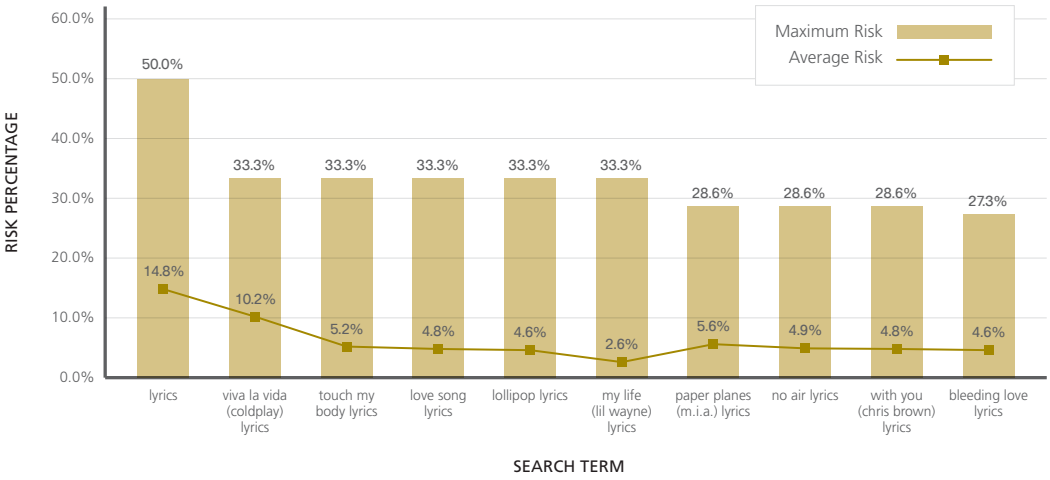




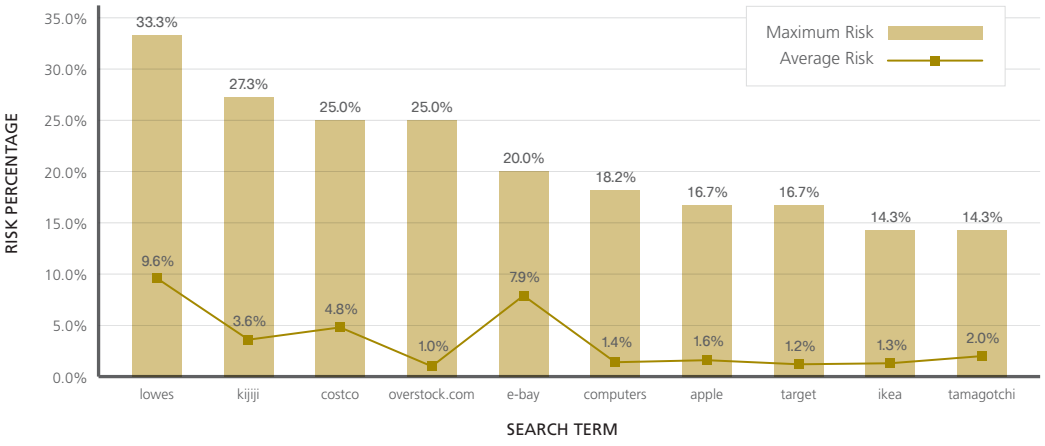
United States' Most Dangerous Health Terms



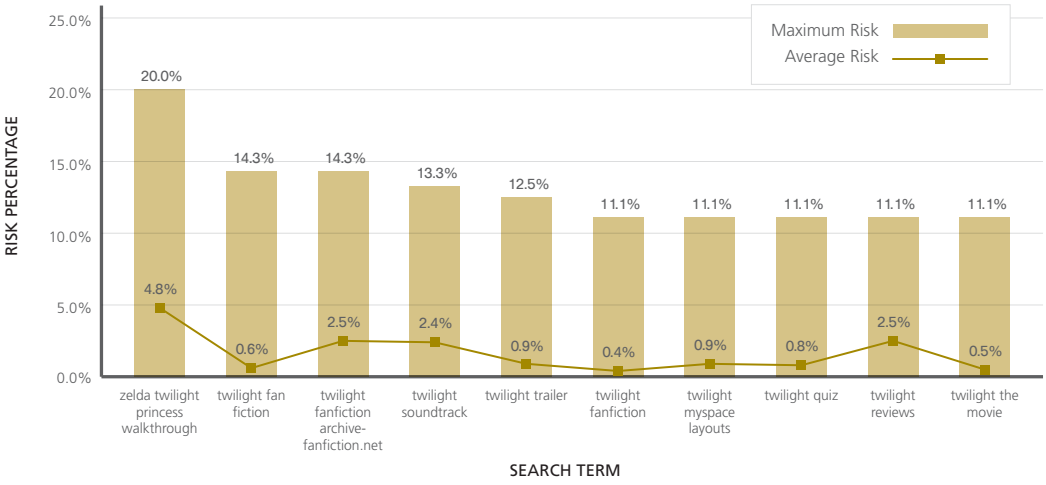
United States' Most Dangerous Lyrics Terms



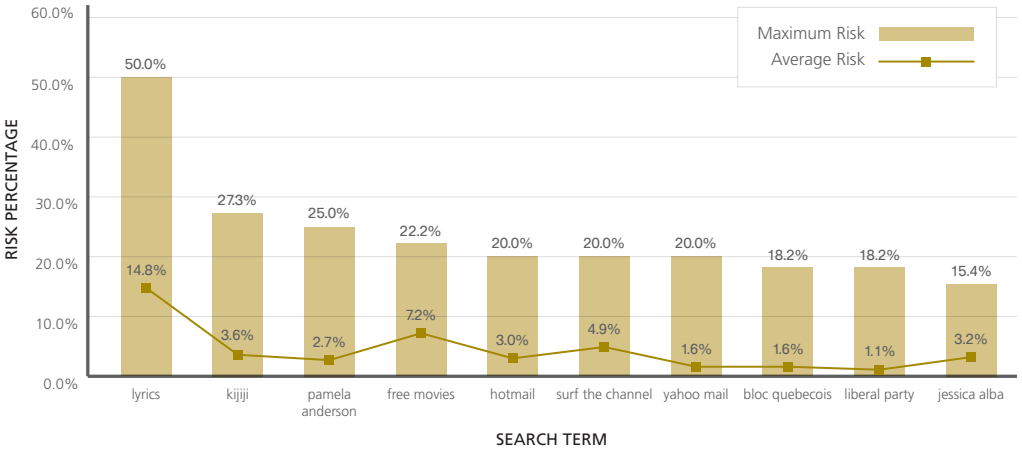
United States' Most Dangerous Shopping Terms



United States' Most Dangerous Twilight Terms

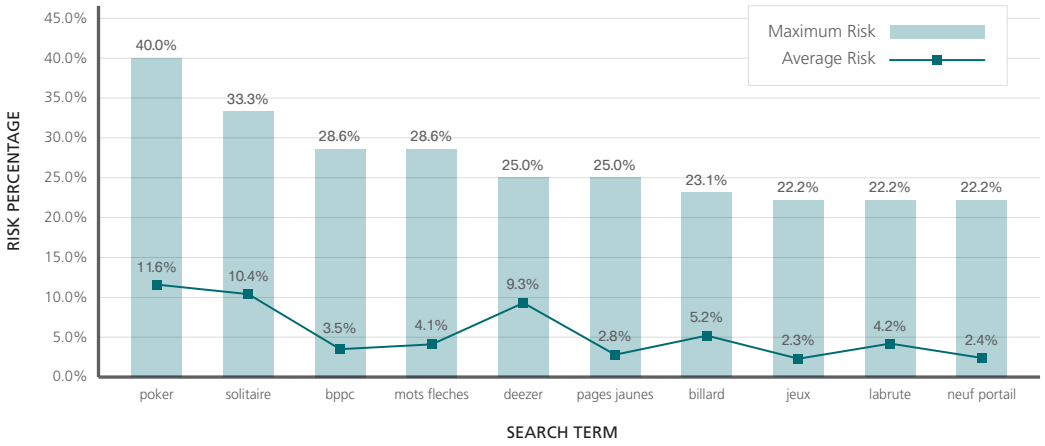


Canada's Most Dangerous Search Terms



Europe

France's Most Dangerous Search Terms



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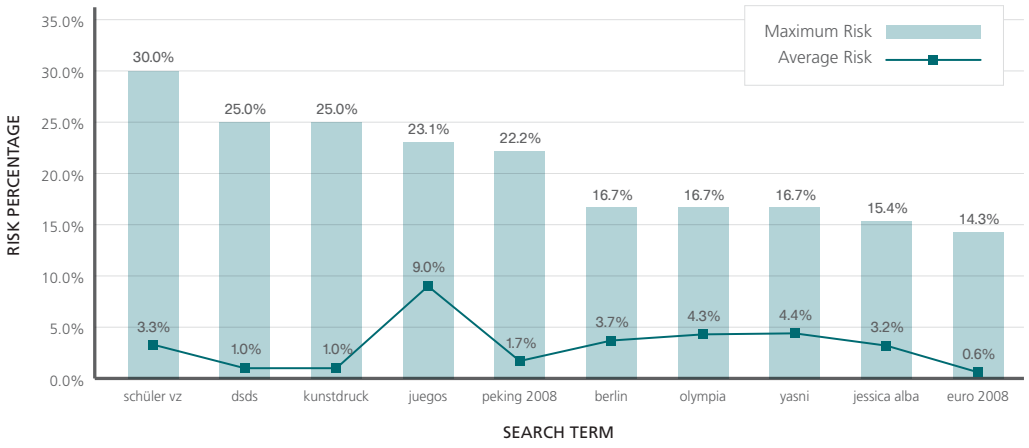

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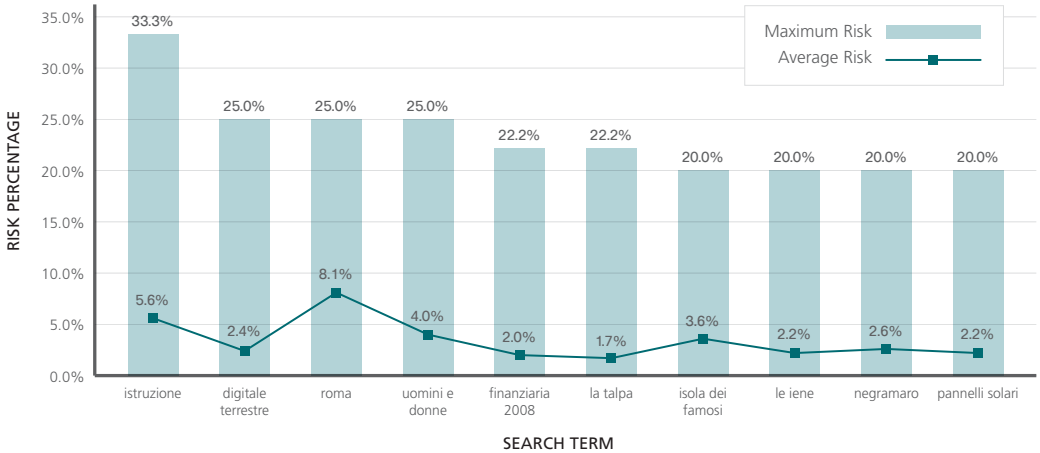
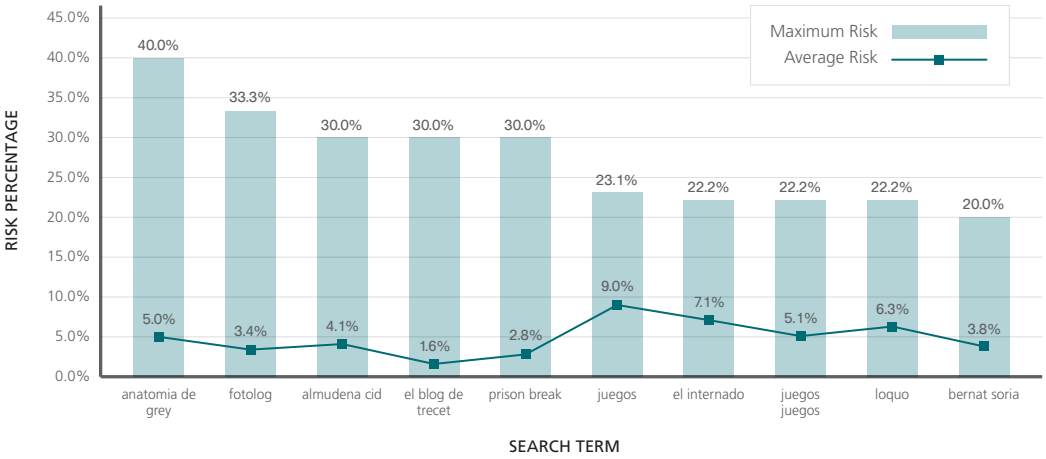
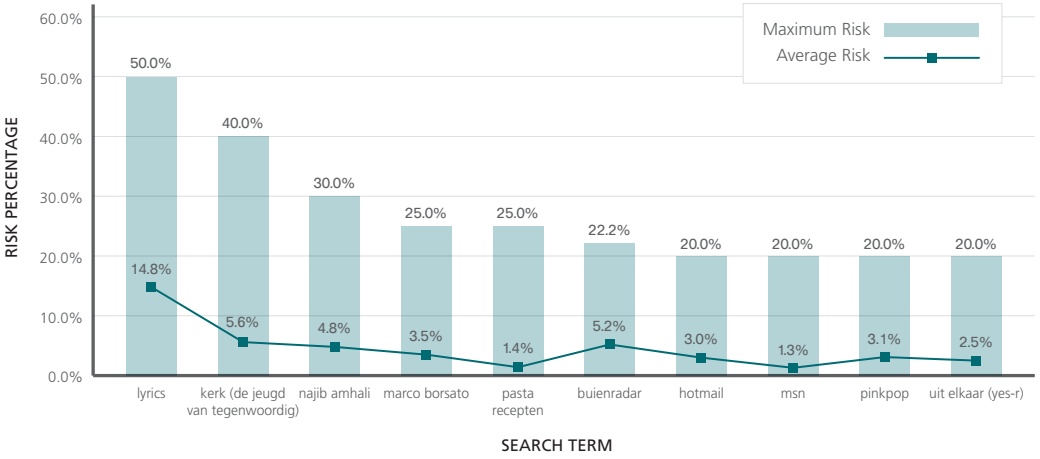


Spain's Most Dangerous Search Terms



The Netherlands' Most Dangerous Search Terms



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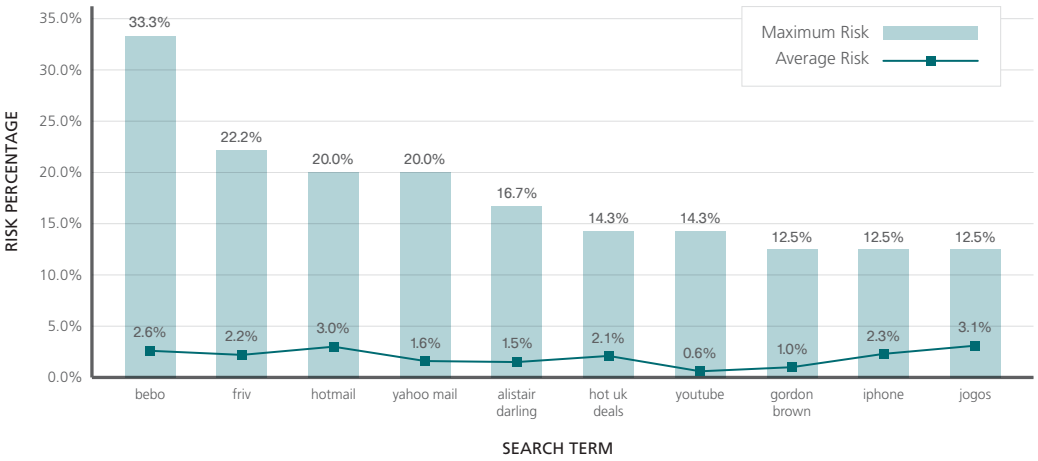
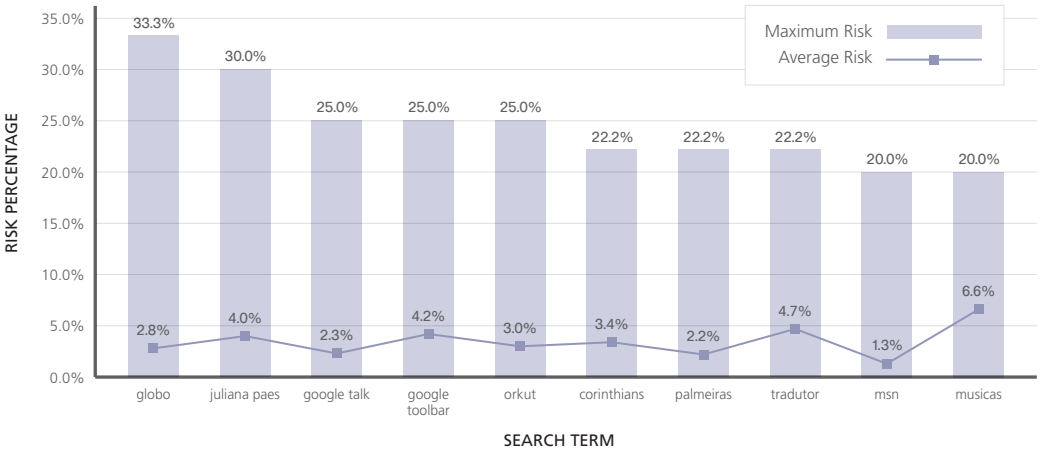
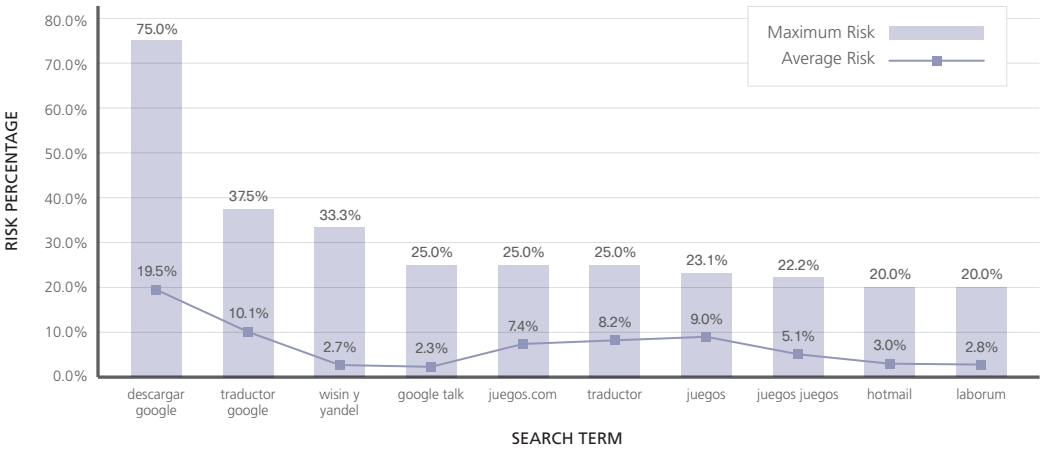


Latin America

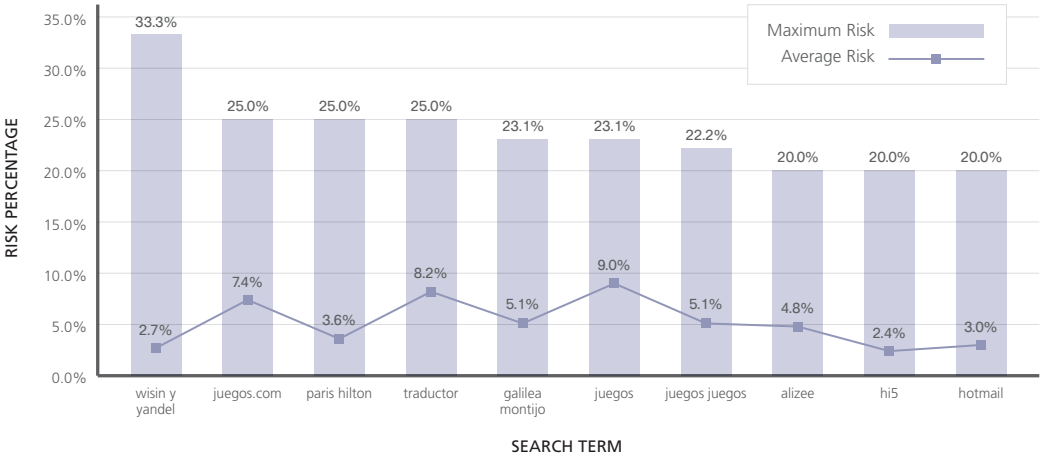
Brazil's Most Dangerous Search Terms



Chile's Most Dangerous Search Terms

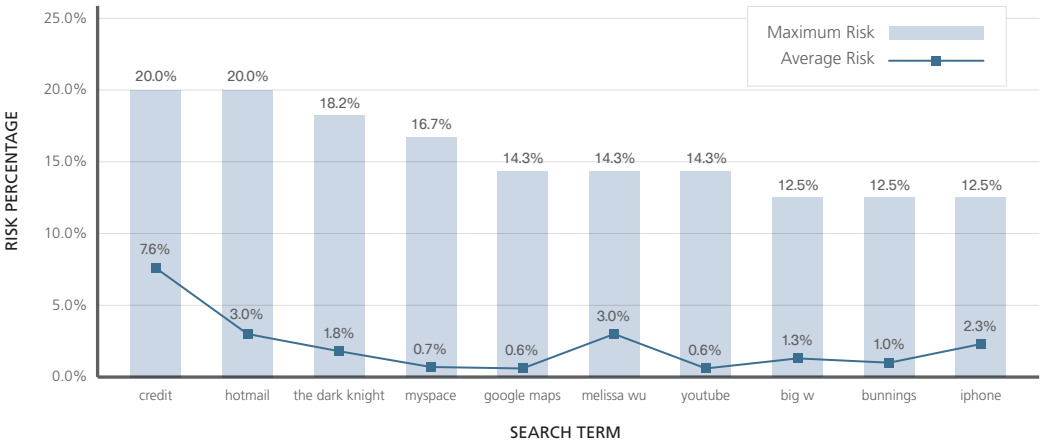


Mexico's Most Dangerous Search Terms

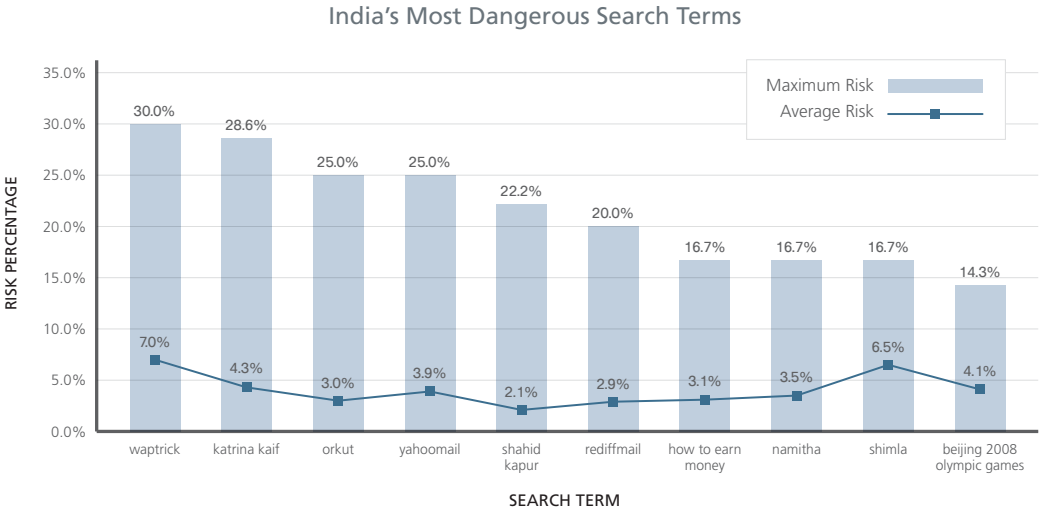


Asia-Pacific

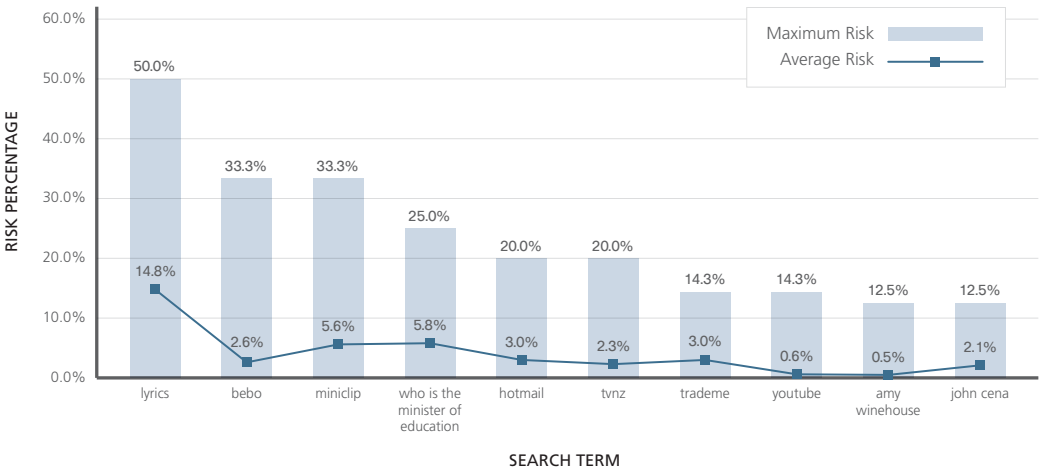
Australia's Most Dangerous Search Terms



India's Most Dangerous Search Terms



New Zealand's Most Dangerous Search Terms



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