

28 May 2009

By: Lucian Constantin, Web News Editor



McAfee analyzes the risk level of popular keywords
Search Page One

McAfee Reveals the Riskiest Search Keywords

“Screensavers” variations are the most dangerous terms one could search for

Given the increasing trend of cybercrooks using black-hat SEO techniques to push their malicious pages higher on search result pages, security researchers from global antivirus vendor McAfee decided to determine the most dangerous popular search keywords for 2008. According to their recently released report ([PDF](#)), combinations and variations of screensavers, lyrics and free have the highest risk rating.

In order to perform the study, McAfee chose 1,600 search keywords, popular amongst Internet users from the U.S., as well as other countries. Search results from five major engines, Google, Yahoo!, Live, AOL, and Ask, were analyzed using the company's SiteAdvisor product, which identifies malicious websites.

The keywords were grouped by categories and popularity in certain countries. Furthermore, search intelligence company Hitwise was contracted to generate popular variations for each popular keyword, which provided a much better insight into the risk factor of each category of keywords. McAfee researchers ranked keywords both by the number of malicious links found on the riskiest result page, and by their overall percentage spanning all results.

"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 experts conclude. On the other side of the barricade are medical terms and those related to economy, with a 4.0% and 3.5% maximum risk on a single page of results.

When it comes to keyword variations, the "screensavers" category was the winner with a maximum risk rating of 59.1% and an average of 34.4%, followed by "free games," with under half the danger level of the first, 24.7% maximum and 6.8% average.

The study also revealed some surprises. For example, "the phrase 'www google com' was searched approximately five million times on Google itself." Meanwhile, variations of "Viagra," a highly popular spam keyword, surprisingly scored very low in terms of risks.

Another strange, but nevertheless important, find was that, "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%)." The researchers concluded that, "This could be early evidence of a troubling new trend of scammers targeting non-U.S. victims."