Research Shows Google AI Mode Sends Less Clicks & Is A Poor User Experience via @sejournal, @martinibuster

New research published in August confirms that Google's AI Search reduces clicks to publisher websites and presents a user experience that is so bad it makes them seek out alternative search engines like Duck, Duck, Go, Bing, and Yahoo.

The findings directly contradict Google's assertions that people love AI search and that it is sending more traffic than ever.

A draft paper titled *AI in Search Reduces Publisher Referrals Without Improving User Experience: Experimental Evidence* was published in August 2026. The paper was produced by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and Northeastern University, Massachusetts.

The main findings from the research paper were:

- Google's AI search features reduce traffic to websites.
- Google's AI Mode provided a poor user experience and made users less satisfied with Google Search.
- Removing AI Overviews had the effect of increasing clicks to websites without any detectable decline in users' Google Search experience.
- AI Mode keeps users inside Google's search experience longer and sends them to websites less often than without AI Mode.

- The conclusions reached by the researchers were derived from an actual randomized field experiment that tracked real Google searches.

Methodology

The researchers conducted a field experiment that enrolled 1,444 people of which 1,100 people's searches were tracked during the seven day long experiment. It is these users' activities that were used for the experiment. Of the 1,100 people tracked, 956 completed a post-experiment survey.

The researchers tracked exactly how the test participants used Google search through a browser extension that recorded their search behavior. The researchers collected browsing history and snapshots of Google search results pages. This enabled them to see searches, clicks, whether AI Overviews appeared and whether or not people clicked through to websites.

The researchers also randomized what the study participants saw in order to gauge their behavior to three different search experiences:

- **Forced Regular Google Search**
  AI Overviews were hidden and AI Mode searches were redirected to the regular Google Search.
- **Natural Google Behavior**
  Google worked normally, including AI Overviews when Google chose to display them.
- **Forced AI Mode Search**
  Searches were redirected into AI Mode.

The research paper explains some of the difficulties they encountered:

> *"During the experiment period, 94.7% of searches in the AI Mode group were successfully routed to AI Mode. In the No AI condition, 90% of AI Overviews were successfully hidden on*

> *the first intervention day, but the success rate declined to 0% as the experiment progressed. The cause of this breakdown was a change to AI Overview HTML rolled out by Google during the study period that broke our extension's logic for identifying and hiding AI Overviews.*
>
> *Overall, 51.1% of AI Overviews were successfully hidden and the median participant in this condition had 50% of AI Overviews hidden."*

AIO Makes Users Go To Other Search Engines

The researchers showed that Google's AI search features have a direct effect on what users do. Google's AI Mode keeps users trapped within Google's AI search experience, reduces their interaction with websites and in cases when users were forced to use AI Mode many of them perceived that the user experience was so bad that it caused them to try other search engines.

The researchers observed:

> *"Assignment to AI Mode Search significantly increased the fraction of users searching on a competitor engine (Bing, DuckDuckGo, or Yahoo) and intention to switch to Bing…"*

Click-Through Rate: AI Search Reduces Clicks To Websites

Experiment subjects who were redirected to AI Mode were substantially less likely to click to external websites. When AI Overviews was removed clicks to external websites increased. These results clearly show that Google's AI Search features are a substitute to visiting websites and do the opposite of helping users discover the external sources of

information.

AI Mode Caused People To Reduce Usage Of Google Search

The researchers had predicted that AI Mode would cause users to increase their search activity, but the exact opposite happened. People who were randomly assigned to use AI Mode conducted fewer search sessions.

They also noted:

> *"We do not find evidence that exposure to No AI Search impacted search sessions per day."*

What that means is that exposure to AI Mode impacted users' search activity, and exposure to No AI Search had no impact (neither increased nor decreased).

Effects on User Perceptions

AI Mode generally made users feel worse about Google Search. It also reduced trust, led to a decrease in users' perception that search was useful or satisfying, and it felt less personally relevant. These findings directly contradict Google's official position that users love AI Mode.

As already mentioned, removing Google's AI features did not produce a detectable change in how users perceived Search.

News Related Searches

The study did not find any clear difference in user perceptions when they compared AI Mode with regular Google Search for news-related searches.

AI Mode’s Negative Effect On Heavy Users

The research showed that the effects of AI Mode were broadly similar across all users except for heavy users of Google Search. AI Mode reduced search activity more strongly for heavy users of Search than it did for lighter users.

The overall takeaway is that AI Mode generally worsened how users perceived Google Search. Removing AI features did not make users perceive Search either better or worse.

Is Google Lying About AI Mode?

Google, from Liz Reid to CEO Sundar Pichai consistently say that users are delighted with Google AI Mode, that they engage with it strongly, and that they prefer it. The evidence from this study, AI in Search Reduces Publisher Referrals Without Improving User Experience: Experimental Evidence, strongly suggests that the opposite is true, that the user experience is notably worse with AI Mode.

Google CEO Sundar Pichai has also said that Google’s AI Mode is sending more users to the open web than ever before. The results of this study directly contradict that statement as the research shows that AI Mode traps users on AI Mode and results in less click to external websites.

This just adds to the pile of overwhelming experience of publishers big and small that Google’s AI Search is sending less clicks to the web ecosystem. This raises the reasonable question: Is everything that Google claims about AI Mode a lie?

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