

Attention web designers: You have 50 milliseconds to make a good first impression!

An executive summary based on a study conducted by Gitte Lindgaard, Gary Fernandes and Cathy Dudek and J. Brown of the Human-Oriented Technology Lab, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada as released in the journal Behaviour & Information Technology.

Abstract

Three studies were conducted to ascertain how quickly people form an opinion about web page visual appeal. In the first two studies, participants rated the visual appeal of web homepages presented for 500ms (1/2 second) each.

Study 3 again replicated the 500ms condition as well as adding a 50ms (1/20 second) condition using the same stimuli to determine whether the first impression may be interpreted as a 'mere exposure effect'. Throughout, visual appeal ratings were highly correlated from one phase to the next as were the correlations between the 50ms and 500ms conditions. Thus, visual appeal can be assessed within 50ms, suggesting that web designers have about 50 ms to make a good first impression.

Highlights

- 1/20th of a second is roughly equal to the time it takes to read a single word.
- The "single word" comparison does not suggest that participants actually read a word on the web sites used in the study. In fact, the responses were based purely on the exposure effect.
- Halo effect is evident. The data suggest that aesthetics, or visual appeal, factors may be detected first and that these could influence how users judge subsequent experience.
- Positive Halo. A person with a positive first impression may disregard or downplay possible negative issues encountered later. Potentially negative aspects such as errors may be generously overlooked.
- Negative Halo. Along similar lines, a confirmation bias occurring in the context of a negative first impression will lead to failure to revise the initial hypothesis, even in the presence of strong positive evidence. Even if a website is highly usable and provides very useful information presented in a logical arrangement, it may fail to impress a user whose first impression of the site was negative.
- The positive or negative impression increases with number of exposures.

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