Online search ads expose racial bias, study finds

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The Google search page appears on a computer screen in Washington on August 30, 2010. Ads pegged to Google search results can be racially biased because of how certain names are associated with blacks or whites, according to a new study.

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Harvard University professor Latanya Sweeney found "statistically significant discrimination" when comparing ads served with results from online searches made using names associated with blacks and those with whites.

The study contrasted online searches using names such as "Ebony" and "DeShawn," with those such as "Jill" and "Geoffrey."

Ads posted alongside search results for names likely to belong to blacks tended to suggest criminal activity with offers along the lines of background checks for arrests, according to the study.

Searches using white-sounding names prompted results with neutral ads, the Sweeney's research indicated.

The findings raise "questions as to whether Google's advertising technology exposes racial bias in society and how ad and search technology can develop to assure racial fairness," Sweeney said in a blog post.

Advertisers bid on terms, or key words, with high bidders getting their ads posted alongside corresponding search results. Google defends the process as race-neutral, saying outcomes are driven by decisions by advertisers.

The study dated last week was funded in part by the National Science Foundation and a grant from Google.