

Commenters exposed to prejudiced comments more likely to display prejudice themselves

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Comment sections on websites continue to be an environment for trolls to spew racist opinions. The impact of these hateful words shouldn't have an impact on how one views the news or others, but that may not be the case. A recent study published in the journal *Human Communication Research*, by researchers at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, found exposure to prejudiced online comments can increase people's own prejudice, and increase the likelihood that they leave prejudiced comments themselves.

Mark Hsueh, Kumar Yogeeswaran, and Sanna Malinen (Canterbury University) published their findings in *Human Communication Research*. The researchers surveyed 137 adults (aged 18-50) they brought in under the guise of a different experiment. The [participants](#) were then asked to read an online article that described a proposal being considered by the education commission. The proposal was to increase the number of small scholarships to support [international students](#), specifically targeting students from East Asia. However, due to recent claims that some Asian students were caught cheating in their studies, the proposal's future was uncertain.

After reading the article, participants were invited to offer their own feedback to the proposed policy. However, in order to post their own comments, they needed to scroll past what they believed were other people's comments. The researchers randomly exposed participants to

either a dozen fairly prejudiced comments about Asian students or a dozen anti-prejudiced comments defending Asian students and cautioning against generalizing [negative feelings](#) toward all Asians. These comments were taken directly from actual comments posted in response to the news stories described earlier. Participants then posted their own comments.

Participants then completed a reaction-time task that measures people's implicit or unconscious feelings toward Asians as a group. They also completed some questionnaires measuring more conscious or explicit negative feelings toward Asians as a group. The data found that people who were exposed to prejudiced comments posted by other users showed an increase in their own levels of prejudice toward Asians by both reaction-time tools and in their written questionnaire responses. These individuals also tended to post more prejudiced comments about Asians themselves relative to when they had been exposed to anti-prejudiced comments.

"In such an era, it is important to understand how other people's online comments can influence our own feelings and behavior toward others. Although it is unclear how long lasting such effects may be, it appears that other people's bigoted comments can influence even our more implicit unconscious prejudice toward a group," said Yogeeswaran. "However, on the flip side, anti-prejudiced comments can have a more beneficial impact in reducing racial bias. These findings suggest that a prejudiced and anti-prejudiced online environment can both be influential in changing an individuals' own level of bias. Our research offers insight into some of the pros and cons of the participatory Internet and shed light on how our online [comments](#) can carry over to influence others."

More information: "Leave Your Comment Below": Can Biased Online Comments Influence Our Own Prejudicial Attitudes and

Behaviors?" by Mark Hsueh, Kumar Yogeeswaran, & Sanna Malinen;
Human Communication Research, [DOI: 10.1111/hcre.12059](https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12059)

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