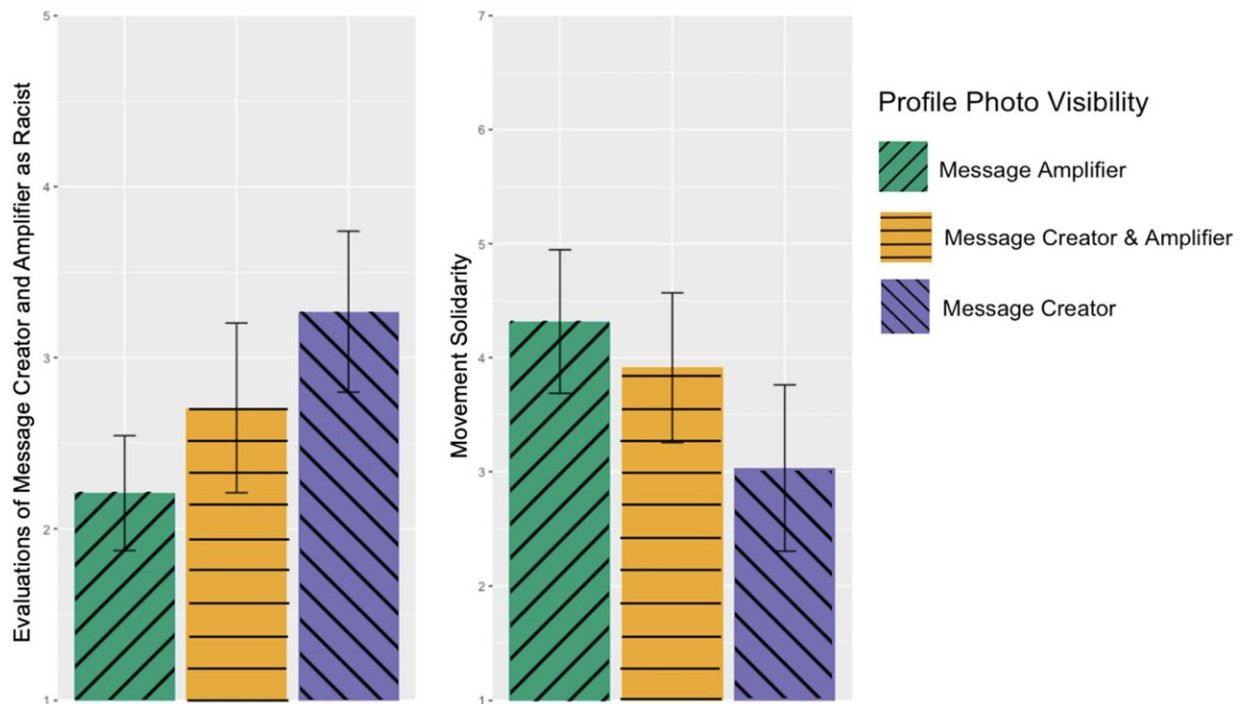# White people found to react positively to racial justice messages from white allies

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The study 1 effects of profile photo visibility on evaluations of the message creator and amplifier as racist and movement solidarity, only for the threat plus accountability message. Note: this figure is shown with 95% CIs. Credit: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (2022). DOI: 10.1093/jcmc/zmac032

Social media sites that show a white person sharing a message about racial justice are more likely to convince other white people of the benefits of the cause, but they also limit the visibility of Black activists.

That was the conclusion of a new University of Michigan study that analyzed racial justice messages from Black activists that were shared by whites on Twitter and Instagram.

When white allies share these messages, Twitter users see the Black activist's photo, whereas Instagram users see the image of the white ally. Researchers found that when users see the white ally instead of the Black activist, it keeps them from learning about the Black activist.

However, it's helpful for the messenger to be white when the words are considered threatening and holding white people accountable for racial injustices, said Jessica Roden, the study's lead author and U-M graduate student in communication and media.

"White people react more positively to racial justice messages from white allies," she said. "This is only the case when the message calls out white people for not doing enough to end racism."

Twitter retweets show the profile photo of the person who created the original tweet. Shared posts on Instagram stories show the profile photo of the person who shared the post.

White allies have to find a balance between using their persuasive appeal for good and keeping Black voices at the center of the movement, Roden said. For example, if a white person were to amplify a Black activist's message by sharing it to their story on Instagram, by default, followers would see the white ally centered in the message—not the Black activist. On the other hand, platforms like Twitter do the opposite and center the message creator, Roden said.

The new research involved two studies each with 328 white participants who were informed that they were going to read and evaluate social media messages about social movements.

In the first study, participants saw a social media message supportive of Black Lives Matter, in which a white person reposted a Black person's message: "Black women deserve better #SayHerName," "All lives won't matter until Black lives matter" and "White silence is violence #BlackLivesMatter."

These messages were either displayed on Instagram stories or Twitter, with different profile photo visibility. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the nine conditions that varied the message type (no threat, threat, threat plus accountability) and profile photo visibility (message creator, message amplifier, message creator and amplifier) of the message. After exposure to one of these messages, participants answered questions assessing attitudes about the messenger and the movement as well as message attribution.

Seeing the Black message creator, as opposed to the white message amplifier, increased perceptions of speaker racism and decreased BLM movement solidarity, the research showed. Speaker racism in this context means the white participants felt they were being discriminated against by the racial justice posts. This was only the case for the threat plus accountability message.

In addition, the research showed that participants were almost five times more likely to attribute the original message to a Black person when exposed to the message creator compared to the message amplifier, and about three times more likely when exposed to the message creator compared to both the message creator and amplifier.

In the second study, the results again demonstrated that exposure to a Black message creator, as opposed to a white message amplifier, increases perceptions of speaker racism. Roden said this study highlights how social media designs used for message amplification that prioritize either the message creator or message amplifier impact racial justice

message reception.

Whereas white audiences respond more positively to a post critiquing white silence when the white message amplifier vs. the Black message creator is in the spotlight, this kind of presentation also reduces the likelihood of the Black activist behind the post gaining visibility for their work, the research indicated.

"White allies should think critically about their message amplification and which platform should be used for which messages in order to educate their white friends without doing more harm," Roden said.

Roden and colleagues said they were surprised that there were no effects of the message on its own.

"We thought that messages that were more threatening and held white people accountable would lead to more negative evaluations of the messengers and less movement support," said Roden, noting that the message type only ended up mattering when interacting with profile photo visibility.

"In the end, it wasn't that just the message was threatening or just the profile photo showed a Black person, it was both together that made white people react negatively."

The findings are published in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*.

**More information:** Jessica Roden et al, Retweet for justice? Social media message amplification and Black Lives Matter allyship, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (2022). DOI: 10.1093/jcmc/zmac032