

Negative online reviews from Black people perceived as less credible, according to new study

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Consumers are less likely to perceive a negative review from someone of a Black background as credible, according to a first-of-a-kind study which explored the impact of showing race in online profile pictures and

avatars.

Carried out by researchers from Nottingham Trent University, University of Glasgow, University of Dundee, and Edinburgh Napier University, the project consisted of two parts and involved 500 users of [review](#) sites such as TripAdvisor.

In the first part of the study, 200 participants from a range of racial backgrounds were asked to read mock hotel reviews—some featuring a Black race profile image and others with no image at all. They then completed a questionnaire which measured source credibility and information adoption.

Results showed that they perceived the credibility of reviewers with profile pictures reflecting Black race as more favorable when they posted positive reviews compared to negative reviews.

The credibility of reviewers with no profile picture was perceived as higher when they posted negative rather than positive reviews.

In terms of information adoption, findings revealed that readers unfavorably adopted the Black reviewers' positive and negative reviews.

Babak Taheri, Professor of Marketing at Nottingham Business School, part of Nottingham Trent University, said, "Previous research has shown that people give more credence to negative reviews when there is a profile picture attached. We did not see this in our study where negative reviews from Black reviewers were not well-received either in terms of credibility or adoption. This shows us that racial cues inferred from profile pictures of reviewers, compared to absent profile pictures, influence other consumers' positive or negative perceptions of the review."

The second part of the study aimed to compare consumer reactions across different races and 300 participants were presented with mock hotel reviews featuring a range of avatars where the only difference was White, Black or Asian race.

While the credibility of the three reviewers was still higher when they post positively, they did not carry the same weight. White reviewers had higher perceived credibility than either Black or Asian reviewers, while Black reviewers had lower perceived credibility than Asian reviewers. When posting [negative reviews](#), Black reviewers had lower perceived source credibility than either White or Asian reviewers.

Regarding information adoption, positive reviews posted by Black, White and Asian consumers were all favorably adopted by their readers, but not equally. Both positive and negative opinions of Asian reviewers were favorably adopted, although not to the same degree as those of White reviewers.

Readers tended to adopt negative opinions expressed by White reviewers more than those of Asian or Black reviewers. In particular, Black reviewers prompted the least information adoption by readers when the review was negative.

The study offers understanding not only of how race shapes consumer understandings of marketplace content but also how it negatively detracts from the perceived value of consumer reviews by decreasing perceived source credibility and information adoption.

Professor Taheri said, "Overall, these results reflect the existence of White supremacy in the marketplace, but these views do not necessarily represent the values of the research participants. It is more likely that they demonstrate unconscious bias in society."

"Therefore, we recommend the development of consumer education programs to make [consumers](#) aware of the main trigger points and enable self-correction of biased behaviors. This is likely to reduce [racial bias](#) and, as such, is an important tool that should be used at scale in connection with a raft of other measures to address racism in society."

This research also recommends that product and service firms, and managers should be made aware of the potential impact of race in online reviews and integrate corresponding factors, such as the race of the reviewers, in any measurement procedures.

For instance, while the perceived credibility of Black reviewers is still high when they post positively, it does not carry the same weight as White and Asian reviewers. It is recommended, therefore, that managers respond to both these negative and positive reviews with care and attention to give them [credibility](#) and importance among readers.

Professor Taheri added: "Perhaps the most effective measure in fighting online racial bias, as has happened with other review sites, would be to stop using profile pictures on such platforms and instead offer the option of adding generic, landscape, system-provided [profile](#) pictures for users to choose from and add to their profiles.

"However, we acknowledge that while avatars may help attenuate face-based discrimination, many people of color would still prefer race-specific avatars as a meaningful identity marker. Accordingly, it is recommended that, when using platforms that currently use avatars with racial markers, businesses should consider additional metadata about interactions with these reviews, such as dwell time and engagement to determine the additional impact that bias may have on their platforms. This would avoid reinforcing existing racial biases and bubbles."

The paper "Consumer-Driven racial stigmatization: The moderating role

of [race](#) in online consumer-to-consumer reviews" has been published in the *Journal of Business Research*.

More information: Jaylan Azer et al, Consumer-Driven racial stigmatization: The moderating role of race in online consumer-to-consumer reviews, *Journal of Business Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113567](#)

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