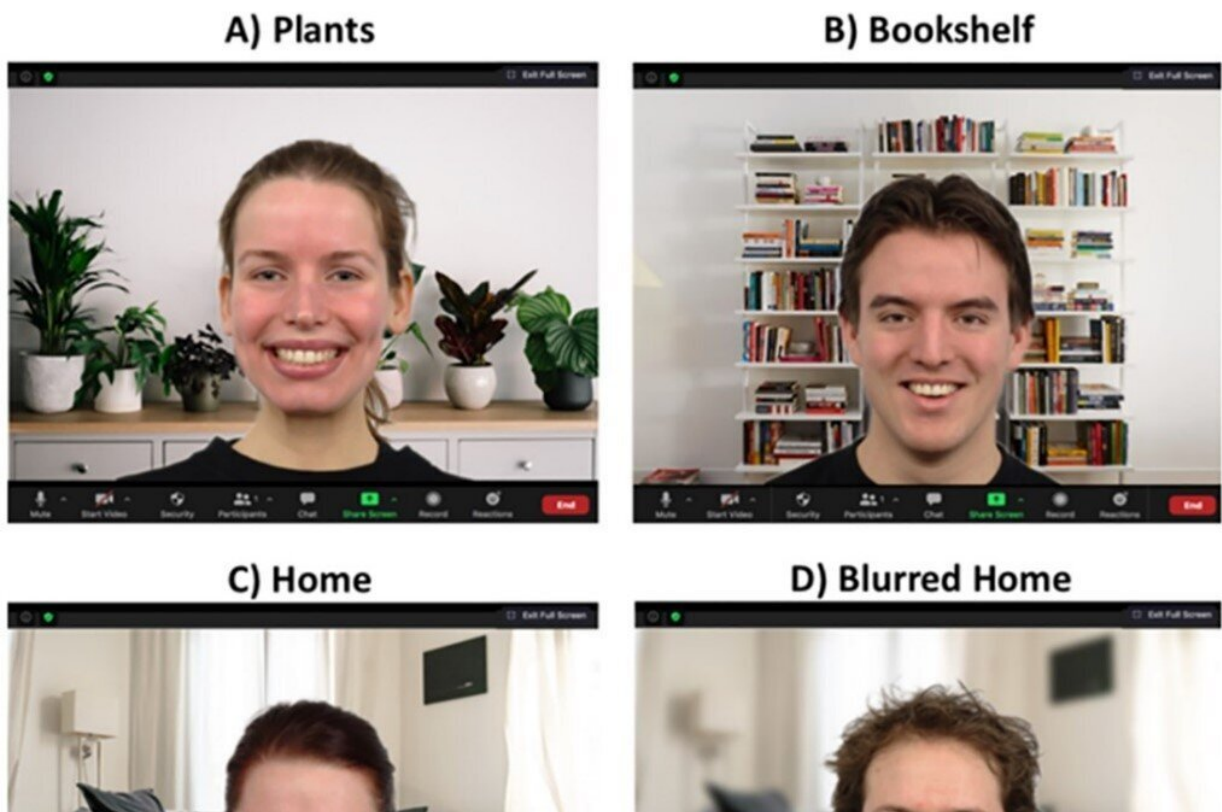


# Your Zoom background might influence the first impression you make

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Sample Stimuli: A) Happy female on plants background B) Happy male on bookcase background C) Happy female on home background D) Neutral male on blurred home background E) Neutral female on blank background F) Neutral male on novelty background. Credit: Cook et al., 2023, PLOS ONE, CC-BY 4.0 ([creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/))

In a new study, participants tended to judge faces appearing against backgrounds featuring houseplants or bookcases as more trustworthy and competent than faces with a living space or a novelty image behind them. Gender and facial expression also appeared to influence judgments. The research led by Paddy Ross, Abi Cook and Meg Thompson at Durham University, UK has been published in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE*.

Prior research has demonstrated that [first impressions](#) can make a real difference in people's lives; for example, they can influence criminal sentencing decisions or choices of romantic partners.

In recent years, a major increase in videoconferencing has resulted in many first impressions of others now occurring virtually. Popular videoconferencing platforms let users customize their background image. However, few studies have explored how background choice might influence first impressions.

Ross and colleagues asked 167 adults to view still images that appeared to have been captured during a videoconference. Each image showed the face of a man or woman, either smiling or with a neutral expression, against a background featuring a [living space](#), a blurred living space, houseplants, a bookcase, a blank wall, or a novelty image of a walrus on an iceberg. Participants reported how competent and trustworthy they perceived each face to be.

Statistical analysis showed that participants rated faces against the houseplant and bookcase backgrounds as being more trustworthy and competent than faces with other backgrounds. Faces against a living space or novelty image were rated as the least competent or trustworthy.

Participants tended to perceive happy faces as more trustworthy and competent than neutral faces. They also perceived female faces as more

trustworthy and competent overall. However, among female faces, those with the living-space background were perceived as no less trustworthy than those with houseplants or a bookcase, suggesting that the lower trustworthiness associated with the living-space background were primarily driven by male faces.

More research is needed to confirm these findings and examine whether they apply across cultural contexts—for instance, the image database used in the study primarily featured white individuals. Nonetheless, they suggest that videoconference users concerned with making a good impression, especially men, might smile and choose a background with houseplants or a bookcase.

The authors add, "This research shows how our Zoom backgrounds can affect the first impressions we make. If you want to come across as trustworthy and competent there are some backgrounds you should use and some you should definitely avoid."

**More information:** Virtual first impressions: Zoom backgrounds affect judgements of trust and competence, *PLoS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0291444](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0291444). [journals.plos.org/plosone/arti ... journal.pone.0291444](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0291444)

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