

# How your Zoom background can make you seem more competent

January 8 2024, by Paddy Ross

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Working from home has made job interviews and starting a new role

easier in many ways. You don't have to worry about a missed train or spilled coffee derailing a job interview if it's on Zoom—but you still need to impress your interviewer.

Your home surroundings help show off your personality to the person on the other end of the Zoom call. Anyone who judged the bookcases of [politicians and celebrities](#) during the early days of lockdown will be familiar with this.

My colleagues and I recently [conducted a study](#) that found the objects in your digital background can affect how people view you. We already know that people make snap [first impressions](#) based on [faces](#) and [voices](#). On a [video call](#), you have to represent yourself, but also your environment.

The messy table behind you may be seen as an indication of your personality and capabilities. An unmade bed shows a lack of attention to detail. On the positive side, plants that you've kept alive showcase your responsibility and maturity.

We created still images of men and women with smiling and neutral expressions in front of various backgrounds on a Zoom call. We then asked 167 people to rate the faces using a seven-point scale on how trustworthy and competent they thought they were.

We didn't mention the backgrounds, which allowed us to find out whether the same face would be rated differently depending on what was behind them.

We found that plants or a bookcase in the background significantly increased ratings of trust and competence. Conversely, a living room or novelty background showed lower ratings. A blank or blurred background fell somewhere in the middle. We also found that smiling

faces and females were generally regarded as more [trustworthy and competent](#).

When we looked specifically at faces with neutral expressions, we found no gender difference in ratings of trust or competence when they were seated in front of the plants and bookcase. However, the male faces were rated as significantly less competent if in front of a [living room](#), novelty background or blank wall.

All the faces in the database we used are white, thus avoiding race becoming a confounding factor and allowing us to just focus on the effect of the Zoom backgrounds. However, we know from other research that subconscious bias about race, class and disability [can affect](#) how job applicants are viewed. Zoom backgrounds may give an impression of someone's heritage, disability or [socioeconomic status](#), so interviewers must still make an effort to remain unbiased.

## **Tidy up your background**

Most of us put a lot of time and effort into our appearance for a Zoom meeting or interview. But much of what our webcam actually picks up is what's behind us.

Our research shows that there are small tweaks you can make to help make a good virtual first impression: put some plants behind you, or turn your desk so you're framed by a bookcase.

Of course, a downside of working from home is that many factors are out of our control. You may have to share a home office (or desk) with a flatmate or partner, or have construction going on nearby. As our findings show, if you don't have much control over your background, smiling can help. There are also AI tools which allow you to [virtually "tidy up" or add a little sparkle](#) to your background space.

So, after you've gone over your notes and popped on some [smart clothes \(at least on the top half of your body\)](#) take a look at your video preview or over your shoulder. Does that background give the best first impression? If not, how close is your nearest garden center?

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