

Teaching algorithms about skin tones | Harvard Gazette

By Nikki Rojas

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When Ellis Monk's wife became pregnant in 2019, the couple became curious about what skin tone their child might have. The subject was of more than passing interest to the sociology professor, some of whose work involves the role lighter and darker skin tones play in society. Monk's wife noted that a comprehensive scale would be useful and urged him to develop one.

So he did, and last month Google adopted Monk's namesake 10-shade scale as a standard in its digital products to make them more inclusive and diverse and to promote wider awareness of the problems and unintended bias associated with technologies that fail to recognize a wider range of skin tones.

Monk's scale is already making an impact. It has been incorporated in Google's online image searches and photo filters. The innovation will be particularly important for training artificial intelligence and machine learning applications, such as facial recognition and self-driving vehicle systems, which often have not performed as well with people with darker skin tones. And it could help reduce or eliminate some unintended algorithm bias in search engines and other products.

[...]

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