BUYING a new car is an experience that can put to the test most anyone's negotiating mettle.

A recent study by researchers at Yale University and the University of California at Berkeley has found that the Internet levels the playing field for African-American, Hispanic and female customers, who usually pay more for cars at dealerships than white males do.

The authors of the study found that on average, African-American and Hispanic consumers pay 2 percent more, or about $500 on the average car, than white male consumers. Women pay 0.2 percent, or $45 more. (The study can be downloaded at papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract-id=288527).

The authors looked at some 700,000 transactions made through Autobytel.com and found that when such consumers used the online service, the price differences disappeared.

The authors contend that it may not be racism or other forms of discrimination that drive car prices up for the groups they studied, but that these groups tend to have less information going into a car purchase, which makes it more difficult to comparison shop.

The amount of research a customer has done is usually evident at a glance, said Florian Zettelmeyer, a marketing professor at the University of California at Berkeley's Haas School of Business. "A good salesperson at a dealership can look at a person, and within a few seconds figure out how much they know about cars, et cetera," he said.

But when the transaction is conducted from behind a computer, which removes the ability for a car dealer to see the customer, the negotiation changes. Also, Dr. Zettelmeyer pointed out, the dealer calls the customer with a quote rather than negotiating on the spot.

"The dealers probably know a certain amount, because they see your name and address and call you on the phone," said Fiona Scott Morton, an associate professor at Yale's School of Management and one of the study's authors. "Yet they can't see you, or what jewelry you're wearing, or your outfit. So even though they know something about you, they know less than if you went to the dealership, and I think that's crucial."

Professor Scott Morton said that the Internet allowed consumers to arm themselves with information. "This greatly improves the consumer's bargaining position vis-a-vis a dealer," she said.

Ian Ayers, a professor at Yale Law School, called the study "excellent and important" and said it showed "that there
are substantial racial disparities in traditional negotiations that are substantially reduced by Internet sales." But he disagreed with the interpretation of the source of the disparity, saying it was unclear what kind of discrimination was at work in car sales.

The researchers chose cars for the study because consumers bargain over them. But Professor Scott Morton said there were other areas to which their research could be applied. "This isn't really about cars," she said. "The point of it is a lot broader than cars. In almost all of our daily activities, having more information makes us better off. Maybe we get a better price on a car or maybe we don't wait in a long line at the wrong office because we didn't know where to go."

Minority consumers have the most to gain from using the Internet to gain information, she added, but, she said, "this is the very group that is least likely to have access to the Internet."