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1 **Put on your sunglasses and smile: The secret of Airbnb hosts' profile photos?**

2

3 **Abstract:** On Airbnb, profile photos play a crucial role in decision-making. This paper
4 examines how hosts' profile photos—specifically, gender, facial expression and the presence
5 of sunglasses—affect guests' intentions to trust and book. An experiment was conducted to
6 seek both close- and open-ended responses (N=524), the former analyzed statistically and the
7 latter thematically. According to the quantitative results, female hosts were preferred to males.
8 Positive facial expressions outperformed neutral ones. A significant interaction effect
9 emerged such that the positive effect of a positive facial expression was stronger when
10 sunglasses were present (vs. absent). Moreover, a mediated moderation was identified: The
11 interaction between facial expression and the use of sunglasses on intention to book was
12 mediated by intention to trust. Themes from the qualitative analysis complement and extend
13 the quantitative results. Overall, the paper adds to the literature on online profile photos in the
14 context of peer-to-peer tourism and hospitality platforms.

15 **Keywords:** Airbnb; facial expression; gender; peer-to-peer; profile photo; sharing economy.

16

17 **Introduction**

18 The popularity of peer-to-peer tourism and hospitality platforms has grown
19 exponentially over the past decade. Typical examples include taxi services such as Uber,
20 restaurant services such as Eatwith, food delivery services such as Deliveroo, and
21 accommodation services such as Airbnb. This paper specifically focuses on Airbnb, a peer-
22 to-peer online marketplace that connects people who have space to spare (henceforth, hosts)
23 with those who are looking for a place to stay (henceforth, guests).

24 By bringing hosts in contact with guests, Airbnb has now established itself as one of
25 the most successful peer-to-peer accommodation services with over six million rooms, flats

26 and houses spread across 81,000 cities worldwide (Sherwood 2019). A disruptive innovation
27 (Guttentag 2015; Karlsson et al. 2017), Airbnb's uniqueness lies in offering an alternative to
28 traditional hotel stay, especially when it comes to the leisure segment (Sainaghi and Baggio
29 2020).

30 Although badly hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, Airbnb is likely to emerge as a
31 preferred option to hotels in the post-Covid world. The former is expected to offer safer
32 accommodation with exposure to relatively fewer people and fewer shared spaces compared
33 with the latter (Bosa 2020). Thus, once social distancing restrictions are eased, the demand
34 for Airbnb-listed properties is predicted to rise again (Dolnicar and Zare 2020), reigniting the
35 original Airbnb ethos: the sharing of spaces among ordinary people (Oskram and Boswijk
36 2016).

37 However, a downside of Airbnb is that it breeds uncertainty among tourists (Ert and
38 Fleischer 2019). For one, any accommodation is an intangible service that is difficult to
39 evaluate prior to actual experience (Chen and Peng 2014). Moreover, given the peer-to-peer
40 nature of Airbnb, guests have to depend on the goodwill of hosts—who usually are complete
41 strangers—for safety and protection (Jaeger et al. 2019). The act of sharing a home with
42 strangers in a new destination can be fraught with danger (Ert et al. 2016). In addition, the
43 quality of service—including the rigor with which cleaning and sanitization protocols are
44 followed in the post-pandemic world—that guests would eventually receive from the
45 strangers is difficult to predict beforehand (Jaeger et al. 2019).

46 To address the uncertainty engendered by Airbnb, guests commonly rely on hosts'
47 profile photos for decision-making. Expectedly, guests' perception of Airbnb hosts' profile
48 photos has been a major topic of practical interest (e.g., Airbnb Business Academy 2021;
49 Ticha 2021) and academic attention in recent years (e.g., Ert et al. 2016; Fagerstrøm et al.
50 2017; Jaeger et al. 2019). Facial expression is a crucial aspect of such profile photos. While

51 prior research has shown that neutral and positive facial expressions work better than
52 negative facial expressions (Fagerstrøm et al. 2017), differences between sporting a smile and
53 not smiling are not yet clearly understood. Plugging this research gap is important for
54 practice as it would help understand the desirable traits of Airbnb hosts' profile photos.

55 In addition, the roles played by Airbnb hosts' gender and the presence of sunglasses
56 on profile photos have gone unnoticed. Both these factors are important to study. For one,
57 previous works have highlighted the possibility of a gender bias to exist on Airbnb (Ert et al.
58 2016; Fagerstrøm et al. 2017). Hence, more empirical research around gender issues on
59 Airbnb is warranted. Besides, the presence of sunglasses on profile photos offers a theoretical
60 conundrum. On the one hand, the notion of self-presentation holds that sunglasses add a
61 coolness factor that is desirable when portraying oneself online (Gretzel 2017). On the other,
62 the theory of affect perception suggests that sunglasses—by hiding the eyes—hinder
63 personality assessment and impede trust formation (Karlsson et al. 2017; Tifferet and Vilnai-
64 Yavetz 2018; Zamuner 2011). From a practical perspective, Airbnb currently recommends—
65 but does not enforce—hosts to show their full faces unobstructed on their profile photos
66 (Airbnb 2021). Hence, it is timely to shed greater light on this theoretical conundrum and
67 tease out the impact of sunglasses.

68 For these reasons, this paper investigates how prospective guests respond to Airbnb
69 hosts' profile photos as a function of the latter's gender, facial expression, and the presence
70 of sunglasses. In so doing, it contributes in several ways. First, the paper conceptualizes
71 guests' response in terms of intention to trust as well as intention to book. Intention to trust
72 here refers to guests' willingness to depend on an Airbnb host with a sense of relative
73 security (Banerjee and Chua 2019). Intention to book refers to their willingness to reserve
74 accommodation from the Airbnb host (Amaro et al. 2019). In this vein, several works have
75 studied either trust (e.g., Zhang et al. 2018) or booking intention (e.g., Amaro et al. 2019)—in

76 isolation but not in conjunction. However, informed by recent research (Park and Tussyadiah
77 2020; Su and Mattila, 2020), this paper recognizes the two as related but disparate constructs.
78 It considers both in tandem to offer a more holistic understanding of the impact of Airbnb
79 hosts' profile photos on guests' response. Second, the paper responds to a previous call for
80 research on investigating the possibility of a gender bias on Airbnb (Ert et al. 2016;
81 Fagerstrøm et al. 2017). Third, while prior works have suggested that a neutral or a positive
82 facial expression on profile photos work better than one that is negative (Fagerstrøm et al.
83 2017), this paper sought to granularly tease out differences—if any—in guests' response
84 caused by neutral and positive faces. Fourth, this is the earliest effort to examine the role
85 played by the presence of sunglasses in Airbnb hosts' profile photos. According to the
86 literature, sunglasses make one look cool (Gretzel 2017) but impede trust formation by
87 obscuring the individual's eyes (Zamuner 2011). To this end, the paper adds to the literature
88 on the impact of sunglasses in online profile photos.

89

90 **Related works on Airbnb hosts' profile photos**

91 Tourists are increasingly seeking not only low-cost accommodation but also
92 interactions with the local community—precisely what Airbnb offers (Guttentag 2015).
93 Hence, Airbnb has been growing in popularity as an alternative to traditional hotel stay
94 (Guttentag and Smith, 2017), especially for leisure travel (Sainaghi and Baggio 2020). It has
95 also been attracting much scholarly attention in recent years (e.g., Amaro et al. 2019;
96 Dolnicar and Zare 2020; Zhang et al. 2018).

97 The literature unequivocally agrees on the potential of Airbnb to revolutionize the
98 lodging industry while also acknowledging a lack of holistic understanding of how tourists
99 decide to prefer some hosts to others. In this vein, several works have investigated guests'
100 response to hosts' profile photos by analyzing Airbnb datasets. For example, Ert et al. (2016)

101 found that the level of Airbnb hosts' trustworthiness as inferred from their profile photos
102 predicted their probability of being selected by guests. Zhang et al. (2018) found positive
103 facial expressions in hosts' profile photos to be positively related to perceived trust among
104 guests. Jaeger et al. (2019) found Airbnb hosts' appearance as reflected through profile
105 photos to guide guests' decision-making. More recently, Barnes (2021, p.7) confirmed that
106 facial images of hosts serve as trustworthiness cues, and hence, "are extremely important as
107 an initial reference point that will influence subsequent information processing" by guests.

108 Meanwhile, this body of literature based on Airbnb datasets has now started to give
109 rise to experimental research aimed at finding causality between hosts' profile photos and
110 guests' response. For example, through an experimental design, Fagerstrøm et al. (2017)
111 found a causal relationship between hosts' facial expression on profile photos and guests'
112 intention to book. Guests did not appreciate either an absence of a profile photo or a picture
113 with a negative facial expression. In contrast, both neutral and positive facial expressions
114 worked well. In a more recent experiment, Su and Mattila (2020) found that guests,
115 especially females, looked for gender congruity with Airbnb hosts.

116 It is this line of academic discourse to which the current paper contributes. The focus
117 is specifically on profile photos rather than profile descriptions. This is because visual cues of
118 profile photos are more impactful than textual descriptions in fostering a personal connection
119 in peer-to-peer marketplaces (Barnes 2021; Ert et al. 2016). In particular, facial expressions
120 on profile photos are likely to result in the first impression of what to expect from the
121 concerned individuals (Banerjee and Chua 2020; Todorov et al. 2015). Cognitive psychology
122 literature has long suggested that the non-verbal cue of facial expression, even when viewed
123 for milliseconds, aids assessing the personality of the target (Asch 1946). Particularly in the
124 context of Airbnb, hosts' profile photos not only serve as a means of identity verification but
125 also help foster sociability (Ert and Fleischer 2019). Building on such works, this paper

126 recognizes the need to better understand how Airbnb hosts' profile photos affect guests'
127 response.

128

129 **Research framework**

130 *The role of gender*

131 When it comes to decision-making regarding whether to rely on somebody, the
132 literature has long documented a gender gap (Awad and Ragowsky 2008; Riedl et al. 2010;
133 Sun et al. 2018). Females and males rely on different underlying cognitive mechanisms that
134 in turn result in behavioral differences (Chai et al. 2011; Thelwall and Vis 2017; Robert and
135 You 2018). In particular, the literature indicates that males are more willing to rely on others
136 whereas females tend to be skeptical (Buchan et al. 2008). Several surveys have shown that
137 women are less likely to agree with the statement, "most people can be trusted" (Alesina and
138 La Ferrara 2002; Glaeser et al. 2000; Terrell and Barrett 1979).

139 When it comes to being trusted by others, competing evidence exists in the literature.
140 On the one hand, prior research suggests that people tend to rely on strangers of the opposite
141 gender more than those of the same gender in mixed-gender situations (Ciarrochi and Heaven
142 2009; Zhao and Zhang 2016). However, recent evidence in travel and tourism found
143 opposite-sex attraction to be fairly inconspicuous (Banerjee and Chua 2020; Su and Mattila
144 2020). In fact, several works in a variety of contexts have found that females are relied upon
145 more readily compared with men (Buchan et al. 2008; Jensen 2012; Shaub 1996).

146 Moreover, due to gender stereotype, females are expected to outperform males in
147 providing indoor services (Banerjee and Chua 2020; Lin et al. 2008). Offering services as an
148 Airbnb host can be conceived as an indoor activity. Therefore, in the context of Airbnb,
149 guests may assume that females make for better hosts vis-à-vis men. Hence, the paper posits
150 the following hypothesis:

151 H1: The gender of an Airbnb host, as reflected through the profile photo, affects
152 guests' response in terms of intentions to (a) trust and (b) book. Specifically, regardless of
153 guests' gender, a female host is preferred to a male host.

154

155 *The role of facial expressions*

156 Facial expressions are information-rich visual cues that allow for a heuristic appraisal
157 of one's trustworthiness by another (Barnes 2021; Porter and ten Brinke 2009). They
158 influence observers' emotional state and subsequently their behaviors in relation with the
159 subjects (Banerjee and Chua 2020; Zamuner 2011). Positive facial expressions such as
160 smiling and laughter tend to promote affiliative tendencies in observers (Carragher et al. 2018;
161 Keltner and Bonanno 1997; Oosterhof and Todorov 2008). It is conceivable that positive
162 facial expressions would be more inviting than negative ones.

163 Particularly, in the context of hospitality and tourism, the mantra of "service with a
164 smile" has long been widely acknowledged. Smile has been shown to positively shape tourist
165 satisfaction (Baker and Kim 2018). According to Banerjee and Chua (2020), tour guides'
166 profile pictures with a smile promotes purchase intention among prospective travelers.
167 Likewise, Woo and Chan (2020) suggest that smiling in tourism service encounters improves
168 the quality of tourist experiences.

169 However, are positive and neutral facial expressions equally effective in fostering a
170 favorable impression? To this end, evidence in the academic literature is hitherto limited.
171 Among the handful of related works, a game of trust experiment conducted by Scharlemann
172 et al. (2001) showed that smiling partners were trusted more than non-smiling ones.
173 Nevertheless, specifically in the context of Airbnb, Fagerstrøm et al. (2017) showed that both
174 neutral and positive facial expressions in hosts' profile photos worked better than negative

175 ones. Differences between positive and neutral facial expressions has thus far remained
176 largely blurred.

177 Intuitively, a positive facial expression should work better than a neutral one. After all,
178 when people meet strangers, a positive facial expression can create a sense of familiarity and
179 amiability, thereby facilitating trust formation, whereas a neutral facial expression may
180 convey a lack of interest (Banerjee and Chua 2020; Baudouin et al. 2000; Krumhuber et al.
181 2007). Guests would not enjoy being hosted by individuals who seem unapproachable and
182 disengaged. Hence, the following hypothesis is posited:

183 H2: The facial expression of an Airbnb host, as reflected through the profile photo,
184 affects guests' response in terms of intentions to (a) trust and (b) book. Specifically, a
185 positive facial expression is preferred to a neutral facial expression.

186

187 *The role of sunglasses*

188 Although facial expression constitutes an important information affecting an
189 observer's decision-making, other characteristics of appearance are also influential. In
190 particular, this paper's inspiration to investigate the effect of sunglasses is two-fold: One,
191 sunglasses have long been used in experiments as a mechanism to make individuals look less
192 generous by hiding emotions, most notably in the infamous Stanford prison experiment
193 (Zimbardo 1972). While the presence of sunglasses has been studied in Airbnb guests' profile
194 photos (Karlsson et al. 2017), its effect has yet to be explored for hosts. Two, in a recent work,
195 Gretzel (2017) indicated that sunglasses—rather than making one look less generous—can in
196 fact add a coolness factor, which is desirable when portraying oneself online. But the
197 conditions under which sunglasses may work on Airbnb profile photos are not yet known.

198 With the exception of Gretzel (2017) however, there is a larger body of evidence
199 indicating that sunglasses prevent trust formation among strangers. This is rooted in the

200 theory of affect perception (Zamuner 2011). According to the theory, since sunglasses
201 obscure the whole eye region, most of the information about the person's affective state is not
202 available to observers. This in turn makes it difficult for them to assess the emotion that the
203 person is expressing. In consequence, assessing the personality of the person also becomes
204 challenging (Zhong et al. 2010).

205 Particularly, considering the online setting, Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz (2018)
206 discouraged the use of dark glasses for portraits to be published on the web. More pertinently,
207 research shows that when guests use sunglasses on their Airbnb profile photos, their
208 likelihood to get booking permission from hosts falls (Karlsson et al. 2017). Therefore,
209 bearing the foregoing, this paper expects that Airbnb hosts with sunglasses on their profile
210 photos will be viewed unfavorably. By preventing direct attention to the eye region,
211 sunglasses will conceal emotions, prevent personality assessment, and hence, result in a lack
212 of trust (Zamuner 2011). Guests are unlikely to rely on hosts whose personality resembles a
213 mystery. Hence, the following hypothesis is posited:

214 H3: The presence of sunglasses on the profile photo of an Airbnb host affects guests'
215 response in terms of intentions to (a) trust and (b) book. Specifically, a profile photo without
216 sunglasses is preferred to one with sunglasses.

217

218 *The interplay between facial expression and the presence of sunglasses*

219 As predicted from the literature, the presence of sunglasses in the profile photo may
220 lead to a lack of trust (Zamuner 2011), and therefore lower guests' intentions to trust and
221 book. While a positive facial expression may be preferred to a neutral one (Krumhuber et al.
222 2007; Scharlemann et al. 2001), the interplay between facial expression and the presence of
223 sunglasses has yet to be investigated.

224 Nevertheless, it is important to tease out the interplay between these two variables
225 because the effect of one could differ depending on the status of the other (Dobel et al. 2008;
226 Winkielman et al. 2015). In this vein, the paper argues that if a host with sunglasses smiles,
227 the positive facial expression may stand a good chance to counter the negative effect of
228 sunglasses. After all, research shows that even when eyes are veiled by sunglasses, a smiling
229 facial expression is hard to miss (Zhang et al. 2012). However, if a host with sunglasses does
230 not smile, the negative effect will make its presence felt. Stated otherwise, there could be an
231 interaction effect between facial expression and the presence of sunglasses on guests'
232 response. Hence, the following hypothesis is posited:

233 H4: The interplay between facial expression and the presence of sunglasses on the
234 profile photo of an Airbnb host affects guests' response in terms of intentions to (a) trust and
235 (b) book. The negative effect of sunglasses will be stronger when the facial expression is
236 neutral rather than positive.

237

238 *The mediating role of intention to trust*

239 We further expect that (a) an Airbnb host's gender, (b) facial expression on the profile
240 photo, (c) the presence of sunglasses on the profile photo, and (d) the interaction between
241 facial expression and the presence of sunglasses will have an indirect relation with intention
242 to book through intention to trust. This is because the literature has long shown trust-related
243 constructs to mediate the effects of a variety of focal variables on intention-related outcomes.

244 For example, in Ganguly et al. (2010), trust in online stores mediated the effect of
245 website design on purchase intention. According to Kim et al. (2017), online reviews
246 positively influence trust toward hotels, which in turn affects intention to book. More
247 pertinently, in the context of Airbnb, a recent study by Su and Mattila (2020) suggested that
248 trust perceptions can mediate the effects of host-guest gender congruity on booking intention.

249 Therefore, guests' booking intention could be dictated by Airbnb hosts' profile
250 photos—particularly, gender, facial expression, and the presence of sunglasses—not directly
251 but mediated through intention to trust the host. Traits of a profile photo will first have a
252 bearing on intention to trust the host. This in turn will then determine intention to book
253 accommodation from the host. Hence, the following mediation hypothesis is posited:

254 H5: Intention to trust mediates the effects of (a) an Airbnb host's gender, (b) facial
255 expression on the profile photo, (c) the presence of sunglasses on the profile photo, and (d)
256 the interaction between facial expression and the presence of sunglasses on intention to book.
257

258 The research model, which will guide the methods and the results presented next, is
259 diagrammatically depicted in Figure 1.

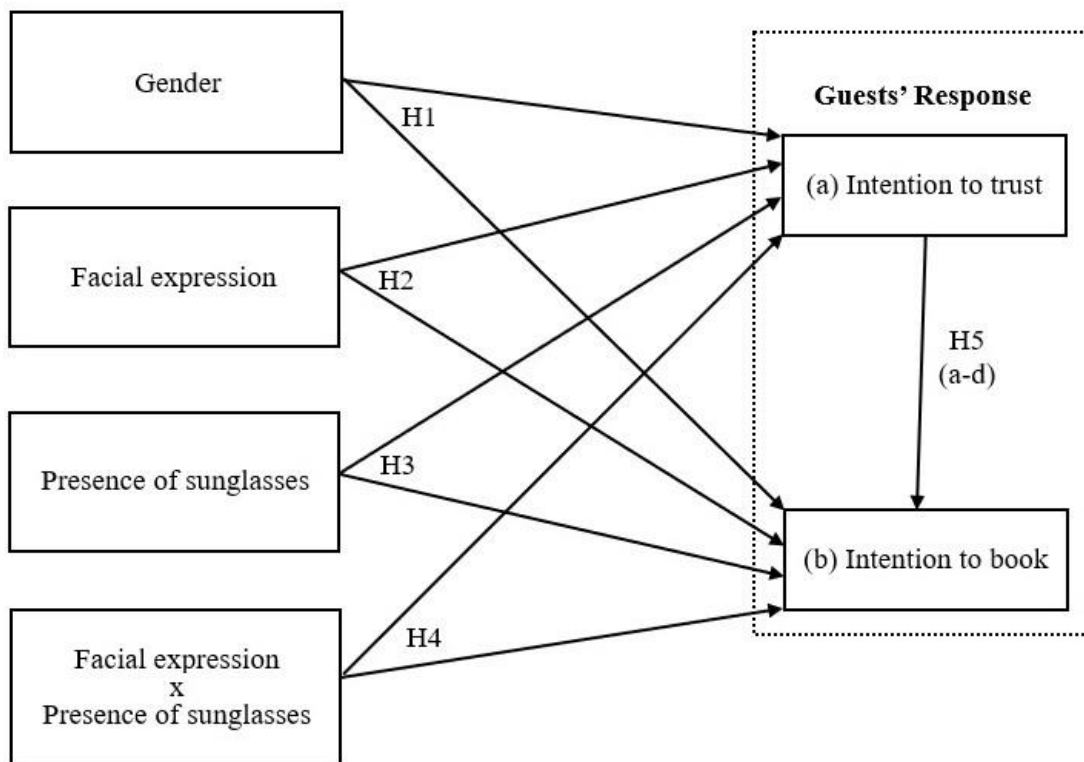


Figure 1: Research Model.

260
261
262
263

264 **Methods**

265 *Research design, pre-tests and experimental stimuli*

266 A 2 (hosts' gender: male, female) × 2 (hosts' facial expression: positive, neutral) × 2
267 (hosts' use of sunglasses: present, absent) between-participants online experiment was
268 conducted. Constructing the experimental stimuli of profile photos required identifying a
269 male and a female whose facial expressions could be manipulated. For this purpose, the Cohn
270 Kanade image database (©Jeffrey Cohn) was leveraged. It contains photos of human faces—
271 verified to display different emotions including positive and neutral—to be used for research
272 purposes (Kanade et al. 2000; Lucey et al. 2010).

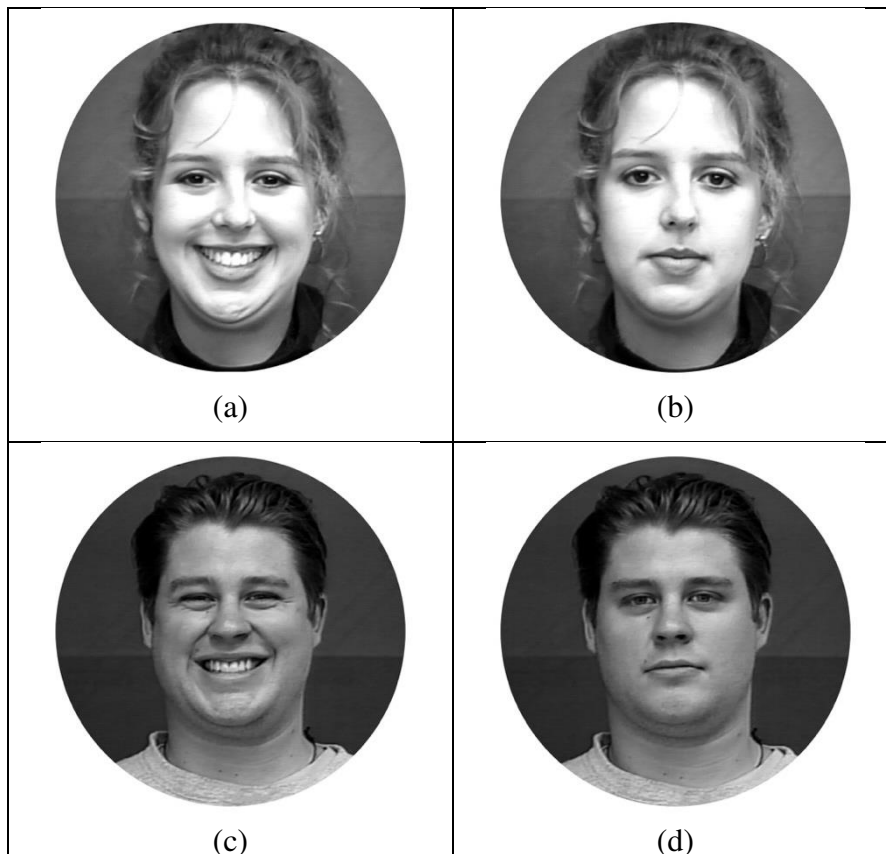
273 A male and a female were randomly selected from the database. Thereafter, their
274 photos reflecting both positive and neutral facial expressions were used as the experimental
275 stimuli. The four identified photos are shown in Figure 2. They were cropped to mimic how
276 Airbnb displays hosts' profile photos in a circular frame.

277 These photos were subjected to a pre-test by 15 participants recruited using
278 convenience sampling. They were exposed to the four photos in a random order. Thereafter,
279 they were required to indicate if the facial expression was positive, neutral or negative. There
280 was unanimous agreement regarding the success of manipulating facial expressions across
281 the four photos. All the pre-test participants agreed that the faces sporting a smile—Figure
282 2(a) and Figure 2(c)—revealed a positive expression while those without a smile—Figure 2(b)
283 and Figure 2(d)—were neutral.

284 To manipulate the presence of sunglasses, an online retail store that allows customers
285 to try on sunglasses virtually by uploading facial photos was used (Vint & York 2019). At the
286 time of the stimuli construction, the store website had 47 pairs of sunglasses available for
287 virtual try on. Of these, 10 pairs were randomly selected, and applied to the four photos.
288 These photos were then shown to an independent group of 10 participants for another pre-test.

289 On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), they indicated the degree to which
290 the sunglasses appeared realistic across the four photos. The pair of sunglasses that was
291 deemed to be most realistic on average ($M=5.09$, $SD=1.28$) was used as the experimental
292 stimuli. The four profile photos with sunglasses are shown in Figure 3.

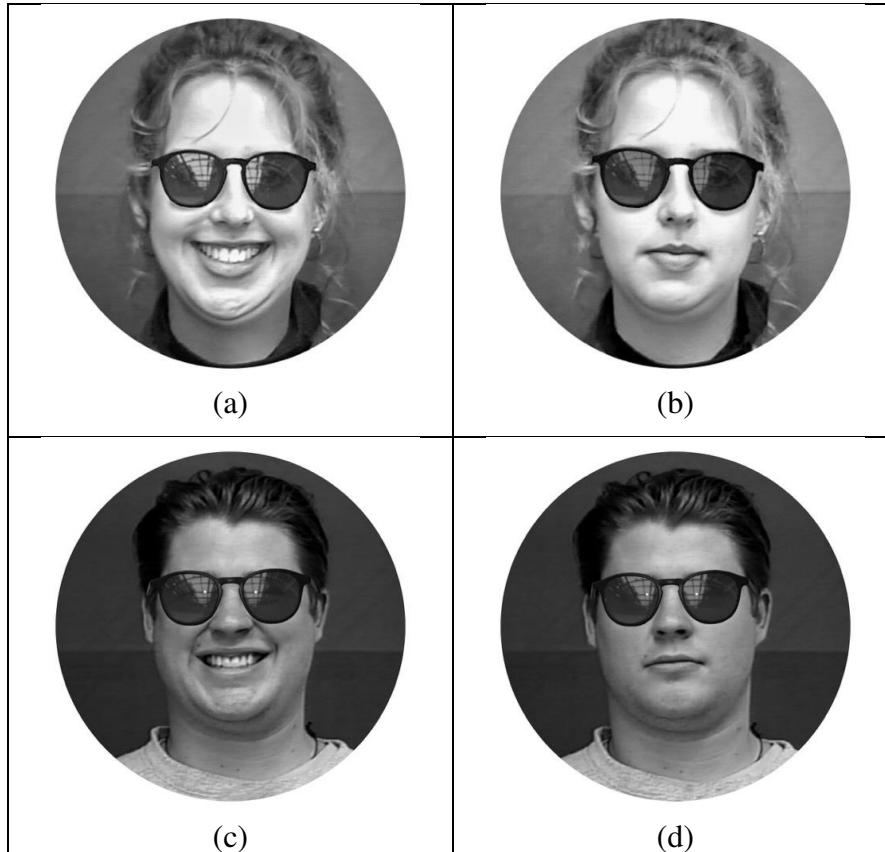
293



294 Figure 2: Experimental stimuli without sunglasses: (a) female with positive facial expression,
295 (b) female with neutral facial expression, (c) male with positive facial expression, (d) male
296 with neutral facial expression.

297

298



300 Figure 3: Experimental stimuli with sunglasses: (a) female with positive facial expression, (b)
 301 female with neutral facial expression, (c) male with positive facial expression, (d) male with
 302 neutral facial expression.

303
 304

305 *Experimental procedure and measures*

306 Participants for the main experiment were recruited using a combination of purposive
 307 and snowball sampling. The study invitation was disseminated through the researchers' and
 308 the pre-test participants' online (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp) and offline networks (e.g., word
 309 of mouth). The eligibility criterion was that they must have relied on Airbnb to book
 310 accommodation in the last year. This ensured that they were familiar with the research
 311 context. Based on the criterion, a screening question was used to filter prospective
 312 participants.

313 Those who had booked using Airbnb were allowed to proceed. They were then
 314 randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. In each condition, they imagined

315 that they were looking for accommodation on Airbnb for their forthcoming trip, and had
316 found a property that matched well with their requirements. Next, it was time for them to
317 assess the property's host (the experimental stimuli).

318 After exposure to the stimuli, participants responded to a questionnaire that contained
319 both close-ended and open-ended segments (Singer and Couper 2017). The former facilitated
320 a statistical analysis whereas the latter allowed gleaning richer insights compared with
321 previous related works such as Fagerstrøm et al. (2017). Demographic information of age and
322 gender was also sought.

323 The close-ended segment of the questionnaire contained three parts. The first
324 contained three items to measure intention to trust (Grewal et al. 1998; Sparks and Browning
325 2011). On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), participants indicated the
326 degree to which they agreed with the following statements: "I feel comfortable to trust this
327 host," "I do not hesitate to rely on this host," and "I feel secure to trust this host." Responses
328 to these items were averaged to create a composite index with higher scores indicating a
329 greater intention to trust ($M=4.42$, $SD=1.41$, Cronbach's $\alpha=0.91$).

330 The second part contained three items to measure intention to book (Grewal et al.
331 1998; Noone and Mattila 2009). On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree),
332 participants indicated the degree to which they agreed with the following statements: "I
333 would consider reserving this host's room," "I am likely to book this host's room," and "The
334 probability of me booking this host's room is high." Responses to these items were averaged
335 to create a composite index with higher scores indicating a greater intention to book ($M=4.47$,
336 $SD=1.52$, Cronbach's $\alpha=0.95$).

337 The third close-ended part of the questionnaire checked the extent to which
338 participants found the experimental setting realistic (Daunt and Greer 2015). On a scale of 1
339 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), they indicated the degree to which the setting was

340 “realistic” and “believable.” Responses to these items were averaged to create a composite
341 index with high scores indicating a greater perceived realism of the experimental setting
342 (M=5.09, SD=1.28, r=0.77).

343 The open-ended segment of the questionnaire contained a question that asked
344 participants about elements of the Airbnb host’s profile photo that determined their responses.
345 It was meant to obtain qualitative insights that would complement the quantitative data
346 collected from the close-ended questions.

347

348 *Analytical procedure*

349 With the responses to the close-ended questions from the participants (N=524, Age in
350 years: M=23.84, SD=6.15; Gender: 73.67% female, 25.57% male, 0.76% others, see Table 1
351 for the sample distribution across the experimental conditions), two sets of hierarchical
352 multiple regression analyses were conducted. The dependent variables include intention to
353 trust and intention to book.

354 Age and gender of the participants along with their perception towards the realism of
355 the experimental setting were added as control variables, which constituted Model 1. Model 2
356 included the following dummy-coded independent variables: gender (H1: 1=male, 0=female),
357 facial expression (H2: 1=positive, 0=neutral), and the presence of sunglasses (H3: 1=present,
358 0=absent). Finally, Model 3 included a product term to capture the interaction effect of facial
359 expression and the presence of sunglasses (H4). For brevity, the hierarchical regression
360 results are reported only for Model 3. Furthermore, to test H5, mediation models with bias-
361 correction were employed (Hayes 2013; model 4; 5,000 bootstrap). The variance inflation
362 factors were well below 10, confirming no multicollinearity (Hair et al. 1995).

363 Responses to the open-ended question (N=155) was subjected to thematic content
364 analysis. The number of responses to the open-ended question is fewer than those to the

365 close-ended questions because several participants refrained from answering the former
 366 meaningfully (e.g., “N/A”, “-”).

367

368 **Table 1: Distribution of participants across the different experimental conditions.**

Gender	Facial expression	Use of sunglasses	#Participants
Male	Positive	Yes	65
Male	Positive	No	67
Male	Neutral	Yes	64
Male	Neutral	No	66
Female	Positive	Yes	65
Female	Positive	No	67
Female	Neutral	Yes	64
Female	Neutral	No	66
Total			524

369

370

371 **Results**

372 *Quantitative results*

373 Table 2 presents the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analyses. The
 374 control variables (age, gender and perceived realism of the experimental setting) in Model 1
 375 explained 17.3% of the variance in intention to trust ($p < 0.001$) and 13.4% of the variance in
 376 intention to book ($p < 0.001$). By adding the independent variables, Model 2 explained 27.2%
 377 of the variance in intention to trust ($\Delta R^2 = 9.9\%$, $p < 0.001$) and 24% of the variance in
 378 intention to book ($\Delta R^2 = 10.6\%$, $p < 0.001$). Model 3 was also significant, explaining 28.1% of
 379 the variance in intention to trust ($\Delta R^2 = 0.9\%$, $p < 0.05$) and 24.6% of the variance in intention
 380 to book ($\Delta R^2 = 0.6\%$, $p < 0.05$).

381 The specific results corresponding to the four research hypotheses are as follows: First,
 382 compared with females, male hosts elicited lower intentions to trust ($\beta = -0.132$, $p < 0.001$) and
 383 book ($\beta = -0.119$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, female hosts seemed to inspire greater confidence
 384 compared with male hosts, thereby supporting the hypotheses H1(a) and H1(b).

385 Second, compared with hosts displaying a neutral facial expression, those with a
 386 positive facial expression resulted in greater intentions to trust ($\beta=0.139, p<0.05$) and book
 387 ($\beta=0.177, p<0.05$). This result lends support to the hypotheses H2(a) and H2(b).

388 Third, the presence of sunglasses on profile photos had a damning effect on intentions
 389 to trust ($\beta=-0.277, p<0.001$) and book ($\beta=-0.264, p<0.001$). Thus, the hypotheses H3(a) and
 390 H3(b) were supported.

391 Fourth, the interaction effect of facial expression and the presence of sunglasses was
 392 significant for both intentions to trust ($\beta=0.173, p<0.05$) and book ($\beta=0.137, p<0.05$). This
 393 result lends support to the hypotheses H4(a) and H4(b).

394 To delve deeper, it was found that the positive effect of a positive facial expression on
 395 the dependent variables was stronger when sunglasses were present (Intention to trust:
 396 $\beta=0.347, p<0.001$; Intention to book: $\beta=0.332, p<0.001$) versus absent (Intention to trust:
 397 $\beta=0.171, p<0.05$; Intention to book: $\beta=0.217, p<0.05$). Stated otherwise, profile photos with
 398 hosts wearing sunglasses and smiling turned out to be effective.

399

400 Table 2: Standardized coefficients (β) from the hierarchical multiple regression analyses.

	(a) Intention to trust	(b) Intention to book
Age	-0.025	-0.057
Gender (Male)	0.060	0.032
Gender (Other)	0.093*	0.083*
Perceived realism of the experiment	0.306***	0.257***
H1: Host's gender (Male)	-0.132***	-0.119*
H2: Host's facial expression (Positive)	0.139*	0.177*
H3: Host's use of sunglasses (Present)	-0.277***	-0.264***
H4: Host's facial expression x Host's use of sunglasses	0.173*	0.137*

401 Note. * $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.001$, N=524, Age in years: M=23.84, SD=6.15; Gender: 73.67%
 402 female, 25.57% male, 0.76% others.
 403

404 The mediation results corresponding to H5 are presented as follows (Table 3): First,
 405 the effect of host's gender on intention to book was significantly mediated by intention to
 406 trust (a path: B=-0.37, SE=0.12, 95% CI=[-0.61, -0.13]; b path: B=0.93, SE=0.02, 95%

407 CI=[0.89, 0.98]; Indirect effect ab: $B=-0.35$, $SE=0.11$, 95% CI=[-0.57, -0.13]; direct effect c:
408 $B=-0.01$, $SE=0.07$, 95% CI=[-0.14, 0.12]). Thus, H5(a) was supported. Since the direct effect
409 (c path) is non-significant, intention to trust seems to fully explain the relationship between
410 host's gender and intention to book.

411 Second, the effect of host's facial expression on intention to book was significantly
412 mediated by intention to trust (a path: $B=0.75$, $SE=0.12$, 95% CI=[0.51, 0.98]; b path: $B=0.92$,
413 $SE=0.02$, 95% CI=[0.87, 0.97]; Indirect effect ab: $B=0.69$, $SE=0.11$, 95% CI=[0.47, 0.90];
414 direct effect c: $B=0.15$, $SE=0.07$, 95% CI=[0.01, 0.28]). Thus, H5(b) was supported. The
415 statistically significant direct effect suggests that intention to trust does not completely
416 explain the relationship between facial expression and intention to book. Future research
417 needs to look for other mediators.

418 Third, the effect of sunglasses on intention to book was significantly mediated by
419 intention to trust (a path: $B=-0.73$, $SE=0.12$, 95% CI=[-0.96, -0.49]; b path: $B=0.92$, $SE=0.02$,
420 95% CI=[0.88, 0.97]; Indirect effect ab: $B=-0.67$, $SE=0.11$, 95% CI=[-0.89, -0.45]; direct
421 effect c: $B=-0.10$, $SE=0.07$, 95% CI=[-0.23, 0.03]). Thus, H5(c) was supported. Since the
422 direct effect is non-significant, intention to trust can be said to fully explain the relationship
423 between the presence of sunglasses and intention to book.

424 Finally, the effect of the product term on intention to book was also significantly
425 mediated by intention to trust (a path: $B=0.30$, $SE=0.14$, 95% CI=[0.02, 0.58]; b path: $B=0.93$,
426 $SE=0.02$, 95% CI=[0.89, 0.98]; Indirect effect ab: $B=0.28$, $SE=0.13$, 95% CI=[0.02, 0.54];
427 direct effect c: $B=0.004$, $SE=0.08$, 95% CI=[-0.15, 0.16]). Thus, H5(d) was supported. Since
428 the direct effect is non-significant, intention to trust seems to fully explain the relationship
429 between the product term and intention to book. In other words, we hereby find evidence of a
430 mediated moderation. The interaction between facial expression and the use of sunglasses on

431 intention to book can be fully explained through intention to trust. The results of testing the
 432 five hypotheses are presented in Table 4.

433

434 Table 3: Indirect effects on intention to book through intention to trust.

	B	SE	95% CI
H5(a): Host's gender (Male)	-0.35	0.11	[-0.57, -0.13]
H5(b): Host's facial expression (Positive)	0.69	0.11	[0.47, 0.90]
H5(c): Host's use of sunglasses (Present)	-0.67	0.11	[-0.89, -0.45]
H5(d): Host's facial expression x Host's use of sunglasses	0.28	0.13	[0.02, 0.54]

435 *Note.* N=524, Bootstrap resamples=5000, CI=Confidence Interval (All mediations are
 436 statistically significant as the confidence intervals do not include zero).

437

438 Table 4: Hypotheses test results.

Hypotheses	Results
H1: The gender of an Airbnb host, as reflected through the profile photo, affects guests' response in terms of intentions to (a) trust and (b) book. Specifically, regardless of guests' gender, a female host is preferred to a male host.	Supported
H2: The facial expression of an Airbnb host, as reflected through the profile photo, affects guests' response in terms of intentions to (a) trust and (b) book. Specifically, a positive facial expression is preferred to a neutral facial expression.	Supported
H3: The presence of sunglasses on the profile photo of an Airbnb host affects guests' response in terms of intentions to (a) trust and (b) book. Specifically, a profile photo without sunglasses is preferred to one with sunglasses.	Supported
H4: The interplay between facial expression and the presence of sunglasses on the profile photo of an Airbnb host affects guests' response in terms of intentions to (a) trust and (b) book. The negative effect of sunglasses will be stronger when the facial expression is neutral rather than positive.	Supported
H5: Intention to trust mediates the effects of (a) an Airbnb host's gender, (b) facial expression on the profile photo, (c) the presence of sunglasses on the profile photo, and (d) the interaction between facial expression and the presence of sunglasses on intention to book.	Supported

439

440

441 *Qualitative results*

442 From the 155 responses to the open question, three themes were identified. Each of
 443 the three themes included two to four sub-themes as shown in Table 5. The first theme is
 444 hosts' gender. Ten responses broadly indicated that gender of the host was important to them
 445 when using Airbnb. This is reflected in remarks such as "Gender affects my choices", and

446 “The same gender is more reliable”. Fifty-five responses specifically indicated a preference
447 for female hosts. For example, participant 505 asserted, “I feel more comfortable with a
448 female host.” Such widespread preference was however not evident for male hosts. This
449 qualitative result supports the quantitative result corresponding to the hypothesis H1.

450 The second theme has to do with hosts’ facial expression on profile photos. Sixty-
451 three responses broadly highlighted that the host’s facial expression mattered on Airbnb. This
452 is reflected in remarks such as “The host’s facial expression will affect my decision strongly”
453 and “Facial expressions play a big factor.” The need for a smiling facial expression was
454 particularly echoed in 45 responses. For example, participant 29 stated, “a smiling face makes
455 me trust them more than others.” “Smiling makes me feel that they are approachable,” agreed
456 participant 347. This qualitative result further lends support to the quantitative result
457 corresponding to the hypothesis H2.

458 The third theme focuses on attributes of hosts, apart from facial expression. Fourteen
459 responses indicated that not seeing the full face of the host would fail to inspire confidence.
460 This is reflected in remarks such as “Seeing the eyes is important” and “How visible they
461 have presented themselves in the photo [matters].” Occasionally, hosts’ age, family and
462 hairstyle also emerged in the responses.

463 Of the 155 responses, 42 reflected more than one theme. The most commonly co-
464 occurring pair of themes include facial expression and gender. In particular, female host and
465 smile were mentioned together 14 times. For example, participant 29 stated “I do prefer
466 female host and a smiling face makes me trust them more than others.” Similarly, participant
467 312 commented, “I prefer female host and the smile in the picture makes [...them appear]
468 approachable.”

469

470

471 Table 5: Qualitative data organized into themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Sample excerpts
Hosts' gender	General gender concerns	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Gender [of hosts] matters" • "The gender is important to me" • "The same gender as myself is preferable"
	Preference for female hosts	55	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...easily trust women than men" • "More trusting of a woman's photo" • "I feel more secure to stay with female host"
	Preference for male hosts	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I prefer male host..." • "I particularly prefer male host" • "A man with a smile...always trustworthy"
Hosts' facial expression	Importance of facial expression in general	63	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The facial expression is important to me" • "Facial expressions would affect my perception" • "The facial expression can be interpreted as a sign of hospitality"
	Importance of smiling	45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "A smiling face would give a better impression" • "Smiling of the host would make me be more likely to choose the accommodation." • "Profile photo with smile would more likely to be a prior choice"
Other attributes of hosts	Full face visibility	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "People with sunglasses put me off" • "I prefer to be able to see their face clearly" • "Seeing the whole face including eyes is necessary"
	Age	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I prefer an elderly host" • "How old they are...The age of the host matters" • "With the same price, position etc, I would choose an elder host"
	Family	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Couple is more preferred" • "More believable when there is a couple's photo" • "I prefer the host to be photographed with his/her pets or family"
	Hairstyle	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I prefer host with good hairstyle" • "The hairstyle as well matters"

472

473

474 **Discussion**

475 As summarized in Table 6, four key findings are gleaned from the results. First, the
 476 characteristics of Airbnb hosts' profile photos are shown to be significant in facilitating trust
 477 and affecting booking decisions. According to Ert et al (2016), the absence of a facial image
 478 might reduce guests' perception of trust. The current finding extends Ert et al. (2016) by

479 showing that it is not enough to just have a profile photo. The profile photo should
480 additionally reflect a positive facial expression to not only promote trust but also nudge
481 booking intention. Moreover, in this vein, Fagerstrøm et al. (2017) showed that positive and
482 neutral facial expressions in hosts' profile photos worked better than negative facial
483 expressions. The current finding extends Fagerstrøm et al. (2017) by showing that positive
484 and neutral facial expressions are not made equal: The former works better than the latter in
485 influencing trust and booking intentions. This finding corroborates the wider cognitive
486 psychology literature that has shown positive facial expressions to promote affiliative
487 tendencies (Banerjee and Chua 2020; Carragher et al. 2018; Keltner and Bonanno 1997;
488 Oosterhof and Todorov 2008; Zamuner 2011). It also echoes the hospitality and tourism
489 mantra of "service with a smile" (Baker and Kim 2018; Banerjee and Chua 2020; Woo and
490 Chan 2020). On the practical front, this finding suggests that Airbnb hosts should set up their
491 online profile photos with a smiling expression. This will promote intention to trust the hosts,
492 which in turn triggers intention to book.

493 The second finding is with regard to the presence of sunglasses in a host's profile
494 photo on Airbnb. The literature suggests that although sunglasses add a desirable coolness
495 factor when portraying oneself online (Gretzel 2017), they may also lead to a lack of trust by
496 preventing direct observation of the eye region (Zamuner 2011). All else being equal, this
497 paper found the presence of sunglasses to lower intentions to trust and book. This supports
498 the notion of Zamuner (2011) rather than that of Gretzel (2017).

499 However, extending both viewpoints, the profile photos with hosts wearing sunglasses
500 and smiling turned out to be an effective option. The positive effect of a positive facial
501 expression on intentions to trust and book was stronger when sunglasses were present (vs.
502 absent). In other words, the lack of trust engendered by the presence of sunglasses was
503 possible to be countered through a smile. This provokes theoretical progress by encouraging

504 interested scholars to study possible mediators such as perceived coolness. Putting on one's
505 sunglasses and smiling might be the new formula for an effective Airbnb profile photo. That
506 said, this is not in accordance with Airbnb's (2021) suggestion that profile photos should
507 show faces clearly. If the idea is to promote a fair assessment of faces, it might be worth
508 converting the recommendation into a mandatory requirement on the platform.

509 The third finding is that females are preferred to males as Airbnb hosts. The results
510 indicated that intentions to trust and to book were both lower for male hosts compared with
511 female hosts. This is consistent with the literature that holds women to be more trustworthy
512 compared with men (Buchan et al. 2008; Jensen 2012; Shaub 1996). Moreover, it contradicts
513 the early suggestion in the literature that people trust strangers of the opposite gender in
514 mixed-gender situations (Zhao and Zhang 2016) but is more in line with recent evidence in
515 hospitality and tourism (Banerjee and Chua 2020). Therefore, if a property listed on Airbnb is
516 owned/managed by a family, a female member is suggested to put up the profile photo, where
517 possible, to maximise the likelihood of booking.

518 To this end, it should be acknowledged that majority of the participants in the
519 experiment were females (73.67%). Hence, it seems that female guests have an inclination for
520 female Airbnb hosts, consistent with Su and Mattila (2020). However, the paper could not
521 tease out whether this was due to the assumption that women are more trustworthy than men
522 (Buchan et al. 2008; Jensen 2012; Shaub 1996) or was vestige of the expectation that females
523 outperform males in providing indoor services (Banerjee and Chua 2020; Lin et al. 2008).
524 This could be an interesting avenue for further exploration to deepen the scholarly
525 understanding of gender in tourism.

526 The fourth finding is concerned with the themes emerging from the qualitative data
527 analysis, which complements the quantitative analysis by going beyond hosts' gender, facial
528 expression, and the presence of sunglasses. Through the open-ended responses, a few

529 participants alluded to factors that have received little attention in the literature. For example,
530 participants expressed concerns about the age and the hairstyle of hosts. All else being equal,
531 older hosts were perceived more favorably than their younger counterpart. Unkempt hair was
532 viewed with skepticism. Some of the participants were found to voice their preference for
533 profile photos to be taken with family/pet. These suggest that future research on Airbnb needs
534 to study guests' response as a function of such hitherto-unexplored factors. Whether a host
535 lives alone, with family, or with pet(s) may also determine guests' willingness to trust and
536 book. On the practical front, Airbnb hosts are recommended to provide information about
537 pet(s), where applicable, at least in their profile descriptions if not on their profile photos.
538 Overall, the paper offers insights to Airbnb hosts for better managing their self-presentation
539 in order to promote intentions to trust and book.

540

541

542 Table 6: Brief highlights of the discussion and implications.

Finding	Prior Research	Literature Extension	Practical Implication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Characteristics of Airbnb hosts' profile photos affect intentions to trust and book. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive and neutral facial expressions work better than negative facial expressions (Fagerstrøm et al. 2017). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive facial expressions outperform neutral facial expressions. The two are not the same. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Airbnb hosts should include a positive facial expression on their profile photos.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The positive effect of a positive facial expression was stronger when sunglasses were present on profile photos. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sunglasses add a desirable coolness factor (Gretzel 2017). Sunglasses lead to a lack of trust by preventing direct observation of the eye region (Zamuner 2011). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sunglasses in profile photos worked well but only if accompanied with a smile. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Airbnb hosts could put on their sunglasses and smile. To promote a fair assessment of faces, Airbnb could make no-sunglasses a strict requirement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female hosts are preferred to male hosts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competing evidence: People trust strangers of the opposite gender (Zhao and Zhang 2016). Opposite-sex attraction does not manifest in hospitality and tourism (Banerjee and Chua 2020). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opposite-sex attraction was not too conspicuous, supporting recent evidence. New line of inquiry: Why are female hosts preferred to male hosts? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where possible, a female family member is suggested to put up the profile photo on Airbnb.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Factors such as hosts' age and hairstyle may also have a bearing on guests' response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Such factors have hitherto received little attention in the literature. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New line of inquiry: How do these hitherto-unexplored factors affect guests' response? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Airbnb hosts are recommended to provide information about pet(s), where applicable, in their profile descriptions.

543

544

545 **Conclusions**

546 Using an experiment, this paper represents one of the earliest efforts to systematically
 547 examine the cause-and-effect relationship between Airbnb hosts' profile photos—specifically,
 548 gender, facial expression as well as the presence of sunglasses—and guests' response in

549 terms of not only intention to trust but also intention to book. Female hosts were preferred to
550 males. Positive facial expressions outperformed neutral ones. The presence of sunglasses
551 lowered intentions to trust and book. Nevertheless, putting on one's sunglasses and sporting a
552 smile turned out to be an effective option. Furthermore, intention to trust was found to
553 mediate the effects of profile photos on intention to book.

554

555 *Theoretical implications*

556 The paper has several implications for the Airbnb literature. For one, while prior
557 research has shown positive and neutral facial expressions in hosts' profile photos to work
558 better than negative facial expressions (Fagerstrøm et al. 2017), this paper demonstrates that
559 the former works better in influencing trust and booking intentions. Moreover, responding to
560 the call for research on investigating the possibility of a gender bias on Airbnb (Ert et al.
561 2016; Fagerstrøm et al. 2017), the paper finds that females are preferred to males as hosts on
562 the platform.

563 In addition, the paper finds a significant interaction effect between facial expression
564 and the presence of sunglasses. The positive effect of a positive facial expression was
565 stronger when sunglasses were present (vs. absent). This finding adds to the online self-
566 presentation literature (Gretzel 2017; Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz 2018), specifically in the
567 context of peer-to-peer tourism and hospitality platforms. Prior research had already shed
568 light on the role played by facial expressions (Fagerstrøm et al. 2017; Scharlemann et al.
569 2001) and sunglasses (Gretzel 2017; Zamuner 2011) in isolation. However, the two variables
570 were never studied in tandem. In this regard, the paper breaks new ground by challenging the
571 conventional wisdom of avoiding dark glasses on profile photos, when the purpose is to
572 foster trust among strangers (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz 2018). It also adds to the theory of
573 affect perception. While the theory suggests that sunglasses—by hiding the eyes—impede

574 trust formation (Zamuner 2011), this paper highlights the possibility to mitigate the negative
575 effect of sunglasses by sporting a smile.

576 Furthermore, the experiment made use of an online store’s virtual try-on functionality
577 to manipulate the presence of sunglasses on profile photos. This represents a methodological
578 novelty that could be leveraged in future experimental research where the goal is to
579 manipulate the presence of sunglasses or eyeglasses.

580

581 *Practical implications*

582 The paper offers a number of suggestions to Airbnb hosts around their self-
583 presentation and online persona. They are specifically urged to sport a smile when being
584 clicked for their profile photos, which shape how they are seen by hosts. A happy face online
585 appears to be a crucial predictor of business outcomes in the context of Airbnb. Putting on
586 one’s sunglasses and smiling turned out to be a particularly effective option, which might
587 also be explored.

588 That said, Airbnb (2021) recommends that profile photos should show faces clearly. If
589 the idea is to promote a fair assessment of faces on the platform, Airbnb could consider
590 converting the recommendation into a requirement. Moreover, given that male hosts were
591 viewed less favourably compared with their female counterpart—all else being equal, Airbnb
592 needs to find ways to make the platform a more level playing field for all hosts regardless of
593 their demographics. This would be a step in the right direction for greater digital inclusivity.

594

595 *Limitations and scope for future research*

596 A few limitations inherent in the paper need to be acknowledged. One, the sample
597 happened to be female-dominated. It is important to replicate the current study with a male-
598 dominated sample. Nevertheless, a female-dominated sample in this case is still useful

599 because the literature suggests that males are more willing to rely on strangers whereas
600 females tend to be more suspicious (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Buchan et al. 2008;
601 Glaeser et al. 2000; Terrell and Barrett 1979).

602 Two, the experimental stimuli shown to participants included Caucasian hosts. Future
603 research could investigate how Caucasian and Asian guests respond to both Caucasian and
604 Asian hosts on Airbnb. In fact, given the recent Black Lives Matter movement, investigating
605 how Black and non-Black guests respond to both Black and non-Black hosts is also
606 particularly worthwhile in order to understand if Airbnb breeds racism.

607 Three, the qualitative component of the questionnaire used in the study included just
608 one open-ended question. Future research could conduct in-depth interviews to better
609 understand how guests evaluate Airbnb hosts.

610 Finally, the paper investigated the role of sunglasses, but not general eyeglasses.
611 Eyeglasses are often associated with intelligence (Leder et al. 2011), competence (Terry and
612 Krantz 1993), and higher professional status (Guéguen 2015). Moreover, our study of smiling
613 facial expressions did not separate the effect of spontaneous smiles from forced smiles. Thus,
614 investigating how general eyeglasses in hosts' profile photos, exhibiting different smiling
615 behaviors (Ekman and Friesen 1982), affect guests' response could also be an important
616 research endeavor. Such future studies should additionally consider variables such as
617 perceived attractiveness, familiarity, amiability and coolness as possible mediators to better
618 explain the underlying mechanism of how profile photos shape booking decisions.

619

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