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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Related works on Airbnb hosts' profile photos

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

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

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

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

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

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

Research framework

The role of gender

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

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

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

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.

The role of facial expressions

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

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

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

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

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

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.

The role of sunglasses

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

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

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

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

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.

The interplay between facial expression and the presence of sunglasses

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

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

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.

The mediating role of intention to trust

We further expect that (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 will have an indirect relation with intention to book through intention to trust. This is because the literature has long shown trust-related constructs to mediate the effects of a variety of focal variables on intention-related outcomes.

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

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

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.

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

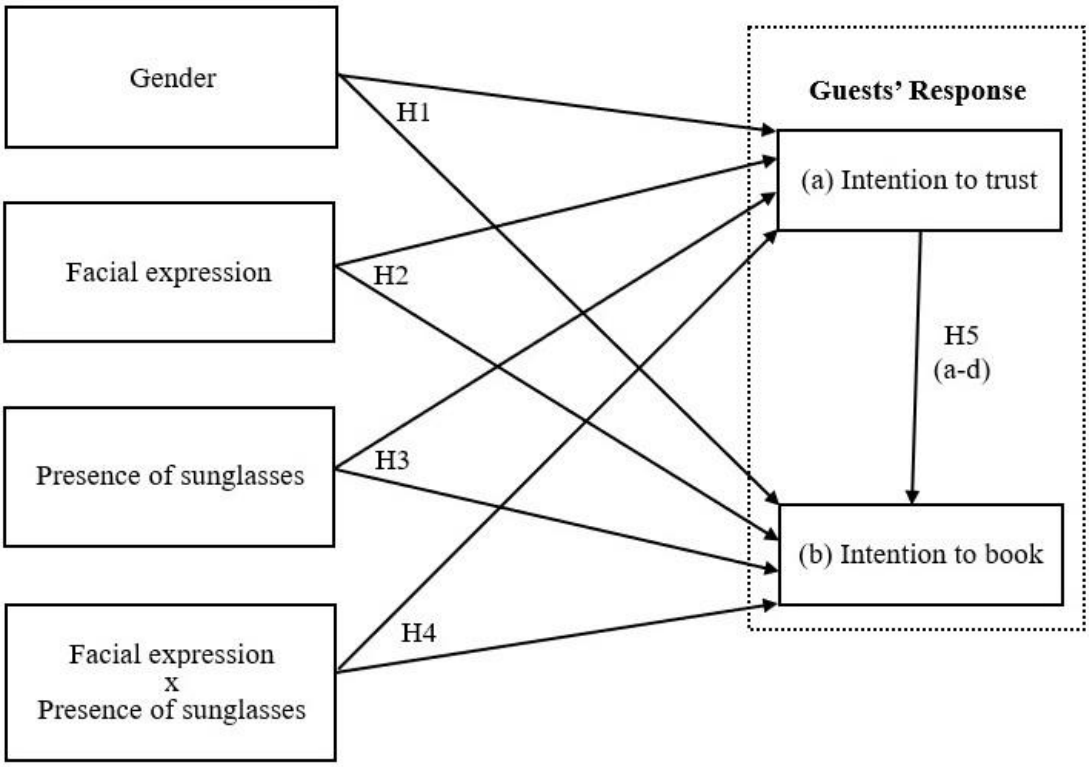

Figure 1: Research Model.

Methods

Research design, pre-tests and experimental stimuli

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

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

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

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

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

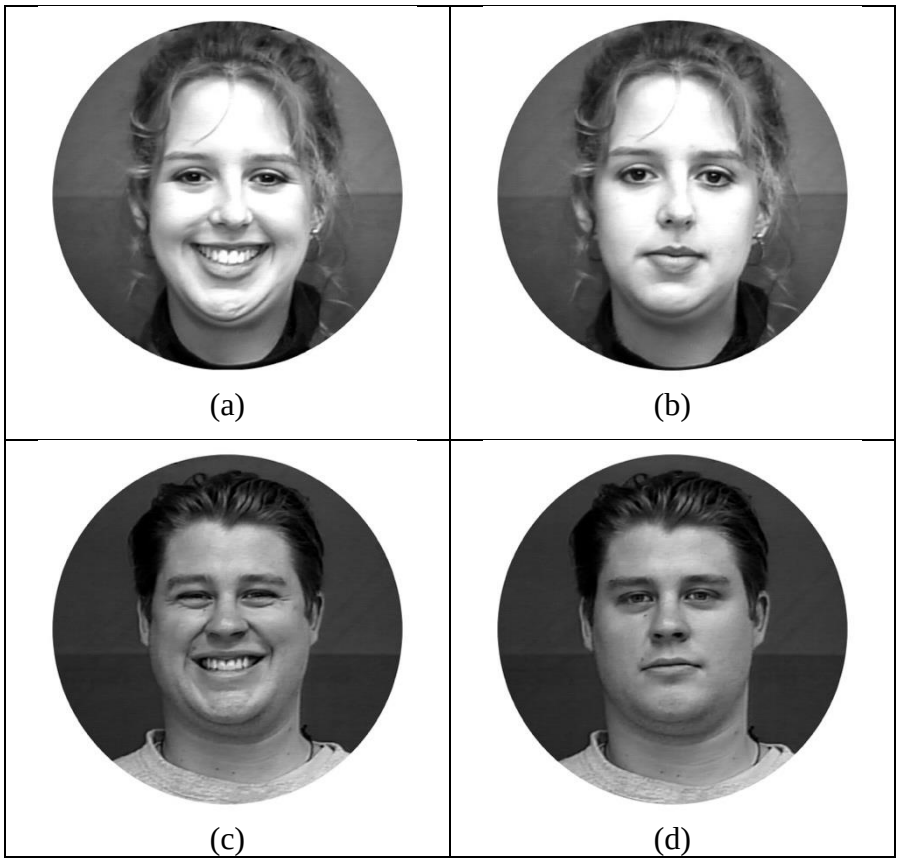

Figure 2: Experimental stimuli without sunglasses: (a) female with positive facial expression, (b) female with neutral facial expression, (c) male with positive facial expression, (d) male with neutral facial expression.

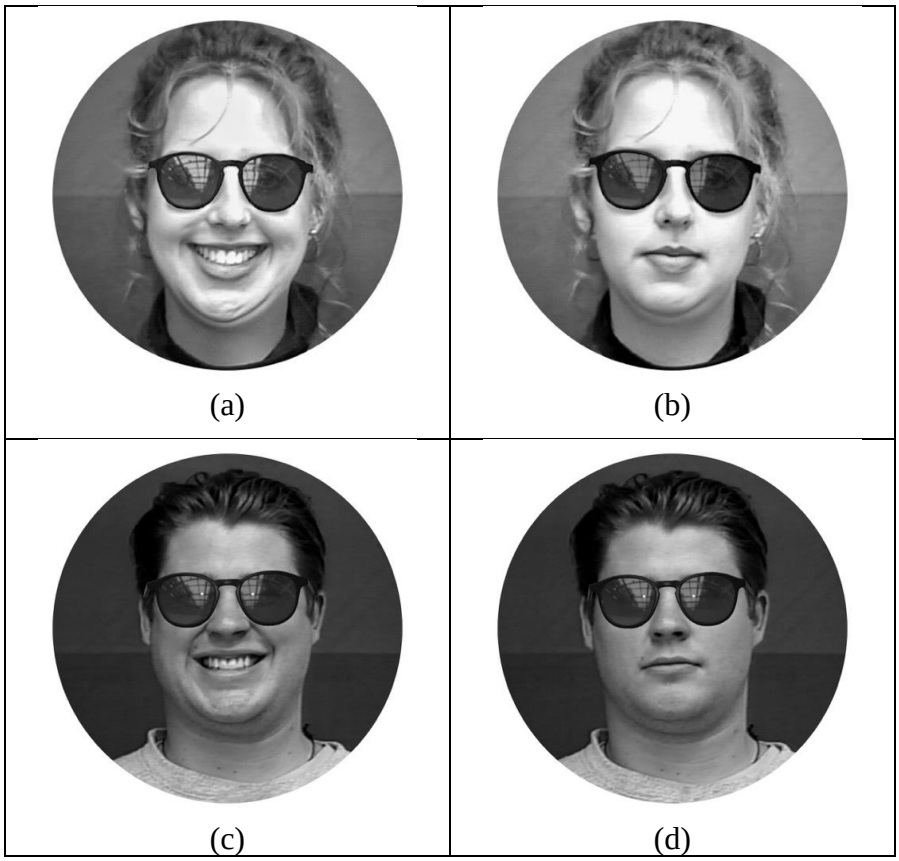

Figure 3: Experimental stimuli with sunglasses: (a) female with positive facial expression, (b) female with neutral facial expression, (c) male with positive facial expression, (d) male with neutral facial expression.

Experimental procedure and measures

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

Those who had booked using Airbnb were allowed to proceed. They were then 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

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

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

Results

Quantitative results

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

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

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

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

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

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

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*

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

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

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

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

Third, the effect of sunglasses on intention to book was significantly mediated by 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, 95% CI=[0.88, 0.97]; Indirect effect ab: B=-0.67, SE=0.11, 95% CI=[-0.89, -0.45]; direct effect c: B=-0.10, SE=0.07, 95% CI=[-0.23, 0.03]). Thus, H5(c) was supported. Since the direct effect is non-significant, intention to trust can be said to fully explain the relationship between the presence of sunglasses and intention to book.

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

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

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]

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

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

Qualitative results

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency	Sample excerpts
Hosts' gender	General gender concerns	10	• "Gender [of hosts] matters" • "The gender is important to me" • "The same gender as myself is preferable"
	Preference for female hosts	55	• "…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	• "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	• "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	• "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	• "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	• "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	• "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	• "I prefer host with good hairstyle" • "The hairstyle as well matters"

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 6: Brief highlights of the discussion and implications.

Finding	Prior Research	Literature Extension	Practical Implication
• Characteristics of Airbnb hosts' profile photos affect intentions to trust and book.	• Positive and neutral facial expressions work better than negative facial expressions (Fagerstrøm et al. 2017).	• Positive facial expressions outperform neutral facial expressions. The two are not the same.	• Airbnb hosts should include a positive facial expression on their profile photos.
• The positive effect of a positive facial expression was stronger when sunglasses were present on profile photos.	• 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).	• Sunglasses in profile photos worked well but only if accompanied with a smile.	• Airbnb hosts could put on their sunglasses and smile. • To promote a fair assessment of faces, Airbnb could make no-sunglasses a strict requirement.
• Female hosts are preferred to male hosts.	• 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).	• Opposite-sex attraction was not too conspicuous, supporting recent evidence. • New line of inquiry: Why are female hosts preferred to male hosts?	• Where possible, a female family member is suggested to put up the profile photo on Airbnb.
• Factors such as hosts' age and hairstyle may also have a bearing on guests' response.	• Such factors have hitherto received little attention in the literature.	• New line of inquiry: How do these hitherto-unexplored factors affect guests' response?	• Airbnb hosts are recommended to provide information about pet(s), where applicable, in their profile descriptions.

Conclusions

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

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

Theoretical implications

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

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

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

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

Practical implications

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

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

Limitations and scope for future research

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

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

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

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

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

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