

Study finds Airbnb hosts who smile get more bookings

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A new study shows that Airbnb hosts who smile in their profile photos can get more bookings. Hosts with a smile see an average increase of 3.5% in bookings.

The study, done by researchers from Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business, Harvard Business School, Columbia Business School, University of Rochester, and Yale School of Management, is forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Smiling hosts, especially those with higher uncertainty in their listings, e.g., hosts with less experience or those with properties in high-crime areas, see a significant boost in demand. A smile may reduce perceived uncertainty and improve perceptions of warmth and competence. The benefit of smiling in profile photos is greater for male hosts than for female hosts.

Furthermore, the study found that a smile in a male host's profile photo can increase property demand by more than 8%, while the increase for female hosts was not significant. This may suggest that smiling conveys warmth and competence more effectively for male hosts, who might generally be seen as less warm than female hosts.

"Our research highlights the significant impact of a simple smile in online interactions, showing how it can enhance trust and reduce uncertainty for [potential customers](#)," said study co-author Kannan Srinivasan, H.J. Heinz II Professor of Management, Marketing and Business Technology at the Tepper School. "This finding is crucial for any [online platform](#) where personal interaction and trust play a key role in consumer decisions."

The study sought to understand how smiling affects bookings on Airbnb. Researchers used advanced machine-learning techniques to train a computer program to recognize and classify smiles in thousands of photos. This large-scale analysis, which would be difficult and time-consuming for humans to perform manually, allowed the researchers to uncover patterns and draw conclusions about how smiles affect consumer behavior.

"Our approach combined machine learning with [behavioral science](#), providing precise and scalable insights into how non-verbal cues influence decisions in online marketplaces," said Shunyuan Zhang, assistant professor of [business](#) administration from Harvard Business School.

"Machine learning really helps to develop scalable methods to capture behavioral constructs," Srinivasan added. "Researchers believe that this will accelerate the field-based behavioral studies."

The study offered a chance to examine how smiling impacts customer decisions in a real-world e-commerce environment, where face-to-face interactions are absent. This research can help inform others who rely on profile photos or images in their marketing (e.g., doctors, lawyers, or people using [online dating](#)) by demonstrating that smiling profile photos can increase customer engagement and bookings.

The smile effect might differ across various fields because the importance of personal interaction can vary. For example, in legal settings, people's preferences for interaction might be more diverse compared to the sharing economy, like Airbnb, so the impact of smiling might depend more on the customer's preferences rather than just the [smile](#) itself.

Future research includes exploring how smiling affects customer choices in other online service areas and how other [non-verbal cues](#) might influence consumer behavior on other online platforms.

Other authors on the study include Elizabeth Friedman (Columbia Business School), Ravi Dhar (Yale School of Management) and Xupin Zhang (East China Normal University).

More information: The study is forthcoming in the *Journal of*

Consumer Research.

Provided by Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University

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