The Power of a Profile Picture

Booking the perfect getaway has never been so easy. As China's online peer-to-peer accommodation market continues to grow, so too does curiosity about how hosts can drive up their listings, popularity, and earnings. In exciting recent work, the SHTM's Hengyun Li, Qian Wang, and Danting Cai, along with their co-author Gang Li, investigated how hosts' profile picture attractiveness, reputation, and self-disclosure sway consumer decision making in the peer-to-peer accommodation market. More open, accurate, and high-quality information could help hosts – and platforms – to win the loyalty of new, satisfied guests.

A Reliance on Facial Beauty

The world of temporary accommodation is dominated by peer-to-peer platforms such as Airbnb and the China-based platform Tujia. However, renting that all-important holiday getaway from total strangers and paying online comes with risks. There is no guarantee that your accommodation will be as advertised, no real assurance that hosts will fulfil promises, and sometimes blind faith that the desired services will even be available at all. "Transactions on these platforms often occur among people who do not know each other; therefore, uncertainty pervades consumers' decision-making", note the researchers.

Red flags for potential guests can come in many forms – maybe there is a worrying lack of reviews, the occasional 2-star rating, or a cartoon profile picture that says nothing about the host's personality, reliability, or moral values. Faced with these worrisome signs, guests scramble to find more information that will allow them to gauge hosts' reliability and, as a result, to reduce uncertainty. Sometimes, however, all they have to go on is hosts' profile photos. "Hosts are already encouraged to share authentic personal photos to mitigate consumers' concerns", say the authors. "Therefore, it is worth exploring how photo disclosure influences consumers' attitudes and behaviour".

The "beauty premium" is a phenomenon in which people respond positively to beautiful things – including faces. This means that we tend to perceive attractive people as having desirable qualities such as kindness and trustworthiness. Research has already shown that hosts' facial attractiveness positively influences Airbnb listing prices, but it remains to be seen how judgements of hosts' beauty influence consumer decision making when booking accommodation. "Most work has overlooked the role of consumption vision, evoked by the visual stimulus of hosts' facial attractiveness in profile photos, during the pre-booking stage", report the researchers.

According to stimulus–organism–response theory, a "stimulus", such as a profile photo, elicits a "response", i.e. customers' booking intention and willingness to pay. This theory could explain the beauty premium effect. Delving deeper, the researchers explored the role of guests' perceived enjoyment and threat. They reasoned that the "mental imagery" of a positive or negative future stay underlay the influence of hosts' facial attractiveness on booking intention. "When consumers see an attractive host on Airbnb, they are likely to imagine a more positive future stay", they hypothesised. Envisioning an enjoyable stay could increase booking intention and willingness to pay for accommodation, whereas an anticipated negative experience, often triggered by less attractive host photos, could reduce booking intention and willingness to pay.

Overriding Superficial Judgements

It is natural for us to avoid uncertainty and threat, and to be less willing to invest in a situation that could jeopardise our enjoyment, finances, and time. We already know that access to more information decreases uncertainty surrounding purchases. In the accommodation context, we also know that host reputation and self-disclosure are integral to guests' booking decisions. To probe this topic further, the researchers examined whether perceived threat and perceived enjoyment mediated the effect of profile photo attractiveness on booking intention and willingness to pay. "When confronted with a less attractive host, people might imagine greater threats during their experiences", predicted the authors. Nonetheless, there may be ways to overcome these snap judgements.

Information on hosts' reputations could reduce uncertainty and lessen the indirect effect of host facial attractiveness on booking intention and willingness to pay through perceived enjoyment and threat. With more salient information, "the tendency to form subjective judgments based on the consumption vision evoked by hosts' facial attractiveness declines", explain the researchers. Similarly, the degree of hosts' self-disclosure was predicted to moderate the mediating effect of perceived enjoyment on the influence of facial attractiveness. "According to social penetration theory", say the authors, "interpersonal

relationships become closer when people voluntarily open up". Thus, greater breadth and depth of self-disclosed information could reduce uncertainty and stranger-danger bias, foster trust, and aid decision making.

Three Experimental Studies

In three in-depth studies conducted in China, the participants were asked to imagine that they were about to book accommodation for an upcoming trip before viewing an online accommodation option. To determine the effect of facial attractiveness on consumer decision making, the participants were presented with host profile photos that were either "unattractive" or "attractive". Initial results confirmed that the varying degrees of facial attractiveness within the host profile pictures, designated as attractive and unattractive, were indeed perceived as such by the participants, and this perception influenced their booking intention.

Study 1 additionally investigated the mediating roles of perceived enjoyment and perceived threat – the "organism" factors within the stimulus–organism–response paradigm – with 125 participants using a questionnaire. Study 2, which included 212 participants, measured how hosts' "reputation", including the presence or absence of a Superhost badge, the number of online reviews, and the average rating, impacted the attractiveness-based willingness to pay and booking intention. Study 3 assessed the effect of hosts' text-based self-disclosure on 210 participants. Hosts' self-disclosure was manipulated in terms of (a) the length of the self-description and (b) the number of topics covered in the self-description.

Reputation Outweighs Beauty

As expected, consumers tended to book more and pay more for accommodation when it was offered by an attractive host. Additionally, hosts' facial attractiveness had less influence on purchase decisions when reputation information was available. This indicates that the initial impressions based on hosts' profile images can be quashed by the host's reputation. "Thus", say the authors, "hosts whose faces are not dominant in profile photos should seek to improve their personal reputations on the platform to compensate". They can do so by attaining more Superhost badges, more positive reviews, and/or higher ratings by providing excellent services.

The researchers also found that self-disclosure weakened consumers' reliance on hosts' facial attractiveness when making purchase decisions. When self-descriptions contained less information, consumers were more likely to make appearance-based decisions. This shows that hosts should consider writing more in-depth self-descriptions that will help prospective consumers learn more about them. "The identity, characteristics, and emotions displayed in hosts' self-disclosure increase multi-perspective information and thus facilitate guests' rational thinking when making decisions", explain the authors. In other words, providing plenty of self-disclosure information means that booking decisions become less reliant on hosts' profile pictures alone.

Onboarding for Hosts

Taken together, these striking results show that online peer-to-peer booking platforms could play a more proactive role in helping hosts. For instance, platforms could offer more opportunities for hosts to showcase themselves with vivid information to reduce consumer uncertainty and enhance guest–host communication. "Airbnb generally allows hosts to upload only pictures; however, videos would provide a more comprehensive introduction to the host and their property", suggest the researchers. Actively giving advice on hosts' profile photos and listing content during their onboarding could encourage hosts' self-disclosure and thus facilitate the provision of clearer information, less uncertainty, and more positive imagery.

POINTS TO NOTE

- The facial attractiveness of hosts on online accommodation booking platforms positively affects guests' intention to stay.

- The effect of attractiveness is weaker for hosts with better reputations, i.e., positive reviews and badges.

- Hosts can also overcome the effect of attractiveness by disclosing more about themselves.

- Facial attractiveness works by influencing guests' mental imagery of their upcoming stay.

Li, Hengyun, Wang, Qian, Li, Gang, and Cai, Danting (2023). Do Looks Matter for Hosts on the Peer-to-Peer Sharing Accommodation Market? *Annals of Tourism Research,* Vol. 98, 103510.