

Research Study:

## **Is Airbnb safe for guests?**

### **What causes an Airbnb stay to turn into a horror story?**

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# We Analyzed Over 1000 Airbnb guest horror stories and Discovered Surprising and Unfortunate Trends

We analyzed 839 online reviews by dissatisfied Airbnb guests, 46 news stories of negative Airbnb guest experiences, 27 stories from professional travel writers and 109 other bad Airbnb experiences with photo evidence. In our analysis we noticed some startling trends and areas where improvement is needed on the Airbnb platform.

In order to minimize bias, we analyzed only the 839 online reviews which were posted in the past 12 months, as those reviews are a public forum for the general public to share their experiences. News outlets, on the other hand, are very selective of what they cover (usually more dramatic stories) and travel bloggers are highly experienced travelers that don't represent the general public.

We reviewed our research procedures with Dr. S.R. Ahlqvist, a user researcher, to ensure that our research methods were as rigorous as possible, taking into account given restraints.

We noticed immediately that in the sites we searched - Better Business Bureau (BBB), Consumer Affairs, Product Reviews, SiteJabber, and TrustPilot - reviews were overwhelmingly negative. This isn't surprising since these sites are the only obvious places for people to vent after having a nightmare Airbnb experience. Lowest ratings were given on over 75% of reviews that we analyzed. Given this selection bias, it's important to remember that this study may not represent *how many* people experience these problems on Airbnb. However, it is a useful tool to show us *which problems* people are having when they do have an experience they are willing to share.

It is also important to note, however, that two individual Airbnb Customer Experience Specialists disclosed during telephone conversations with us that the "number of problem Airbnb stays is between 3% and 7%."

## Methods of Collection:

**We collected 839 consumer-posted reviews from the following websites:**

- TrustPilot - A site dedicated to making consumer reviews available to consumers for the purposes of enabling informed shopping and spending decisions.
- SiteJabber - This site's purpose is to provide overall ratings of companies as ranked by reviewing customers, and to make customer reviews available to the public.
- Product Review - Aptly named, this site allows consumers to read customers' product and company reviews, as well as rank the company, product, or service provider.

- Better Business Bureau (BBB) - A consumer ratings site that allows reviews and rankings of companies.
- Consumer Affairs - A website that provides verified reviews to make “smart buying decisions.”

Because our objective was to learn what causes the problems that happen to Airbnb guests and in which places Airbnb could improve, only reviews from the category that represented the lowest rating were collected. We only looked at reviews written by guests (not by hosts). We also filtered any reviews that promoted an Airbnb competitor and any duplicates that were posted on multiple review sites.

#### **Lowest-rated reviews of Airbnb experiences represented:**

- 73% of Airbnb reviews on TrustPilot (1694 “Bad” rated reviews out of 2319 total Airbnb reviews)
- 77% of Airbnb reviews on SiteJabber (621 “1-Star” rated reviews out of 809 total Airbnb reviews)
- 61% of Airbnb reviews on Product Review (52 “Terrible” rated reviews out of 85 total Airbnb reviews)
- 97% of Airbnb reviews on Better Business Bureau (170 “Negative” rated reviews out of 176 total Airbnb reviews)
- 92% of Airbnb reviews on Consumer Affairs (24 “1-Star” rated reviews out of 26 total Airbnb reviews)

For the purposes of gaining more insights and examples of horror stories with photo evidence of those problems, we also collected 109 examples from the Airbnb Hell website. Because the site only catered to negative reviews, we did not need to calculate percentage data for those reviews. From Airbnb Hell we only selected reviews with images, and only those which were written by guests as was our method with the other sites.

## Methods of Analysis:

### Collection and Categorization

Reviews were collected chronologically starting with the most recent. We only collected reviews posted in the last 12 months. This means that the majority of reviews that we used are from 2017.

Each review was given a line in a spreadsheet where we identified the primary or “parent” complaint they had with their Airbnb experience. We also coded up to two additional complaints, when relevant. Categories were only assigned if they were specifically mentioned - we avoided making inferences, and stuck to direct claims and phrases used in the reviews themselves. This strategy also allowed us to avoid assigning unequal weight to any particularly poignant or

memorable stories - all data was weighted equally by number and types of categories mentioned so that we could ascertain how many complaints were present for each category.

The primary coder studied sample reviews and created a coding system to represent the seven most common complaint categories. A second coder also scored a sample of responses, and their agreement met the standards of interrater reliability (Cohen's kappa = .82). Team members read the reviews and determined which category or categories each review fit into based on predetermined qualifying reasons or problems.

The seven categories we identified:

1. Customer Service
2. Host cancels stay
3. Unsafe and/or Unacceptable Conditions
4. Scams
5. Fake listings or reviews
6. Not as described
7. Discrimination

Reasons that reviews might fit into each category are listed below. These reasons are as inclusive as possible by description, and allowed us to unify our categorization.

#### Customer Service

- Takes too long with refund or refund never arrives
- Customer Service policies seem to "screw guests over"
- Denies refund unfairly or for no reason
- Hangs up on customer
- Disorganized customer service, different answers, wrong answers, lost information
- Poor treatment by Customer Service personnel
- Tech issues of any kind
- Deactivates guest account for no reason, won't reopen even if it's a mistake
- Customer Service refused to help with a problem that would typically be their responsibility
- Customer Service promised something and then renege or didn't deliver

#### Host Cancels Stay

- This category was reserved for reviews that mentioned a host cancelling the guest's stay, or host was a no-show and guests had to find alternative accommodations

#### Unsafe and Unacceptable Conditions

- Bugs in large numbers, or any biting bugs - this meant that the bugs actually posed an issue to reasonable stay in the rental

- Excessively rude or hostile host
- Broken equipment/amenities that made it unsafe or unacceptable to stay there (electrical, stairs, door lock, A/C if it's too hot for safety, etc...)
- Unhealthy mold was present
- Missing equipment/amenities that makes it unsafe or unacceptable to stay there (electrical, stairs, door lock, A/C if it's too hot for safety, etc...)
- Dangerous or intimidating host
- Host extremely late or puts guests in a bad position in some way (e.g. forcing them to wait in unsafe areas for excessive amount of time)
- Undisclosed roommates that cause issues or make guests uncomfortable
- Undisclosed animals that make guests very uncomfortable or in danger
- Very unsafe neighborhood
- Cameras filming guests
- Host threatening, other guests threatening
- Illegal drugs in rental because of host or other guests who were not part of the reviewer's party
- Drunken or otherwise belligerent host/other guests who were not part of the reviewer's party
- Host randomly barges in or invades guests' space

### Scams

- Host demands extra cash or payment off of Airbnb platform
- Host blackmails guests in any way
- Host falsifies damages to scam guests out of money
- Fake listing, guests fall for it and are out money or time
- Host cancels stay of one guest in favor of another guest who is paying more
- Host cancels or modifies booking and insists on the transaction taking place off-platform
- Fake Airbnb websites

### Fake Listings or Fake Reviews

- Airbnb modifies, censors, or deletes guest's review
- Reviews of listing/host are falsified in any way (e.g. duplicated good reviews to look better, deleted or denied bad reviews, Airbnb removes a review for no reason)
- Host leaves bad review of guests to get back at them for something
- Host blackmails or otherwise coerces guest to avoid bad review
- Pictures and/or address completely inaccurate, a different location entirely
- Guests book, show up, get told house doesn't exist or isn't owned by that host anymore
- Illegal listing that in any way causes issues for guest(s)

### Not as Described

- Anything that was different from the listing description or contract that was not dangerous or unacceptable, e.g. amenities missing and inconvenient but not dangerous,

house super dusty or grungy but not unacceptable - a basic cleaning would fix it, house not stocked with toilet paper, etc.

- Not in same area as mapped or described
- Harder to get to than described (stairs vs. elevator, etc.)

## Discrimination

- Any form of discrimination whether racial, LGBTQ, disability, or otherwise

We extrapolated statistical data from the list of reviews itself.

1. We merged all three category columns into one column in order to count and measure the number of times each complaint category was mentioned.
2. We performed a study using the same reviews that analyzed whether a problem of another category type preceded a complaint about Airbnb Customer Service (See “Conclusions: Customer Service Experiences”).
3. We measured statistical likelihood of each common cause of a negative event happening, and are now able to name most common negative events that are experienced by Airbnb guests.

In addition to our collection and analysis of guest experiences, we also read through many of Airbnb’s policies as listed on their site, such as requirements to become a host versus a guest, cancellation policies, refund policies, etc. to ensure that our understanding of current policies was thorough enough to make recommendations.

Additionally, Asher Fergusson had over 15 different phone conversations and over 30 email conversations with Airbnb Customer Experience Specialists regarding his own experiences and Airbnb horror stories, and our team was able to learn valuable information from those calls and conversations.

Finally, we read news stories regarding current Airbnb events and policy changes, lawsuits against Airbnb, and interviews with execs at Airbnb to understand current events and plans that have been publicized with regard to the company and its handling of negative reviews and press.

## Summary of Findings:

1. Airbnb doesn’t require hosts to have any form of ID except for an email address and phone number. This means new accounts and listings can be instantly created after a prior account has been “permanently banned,” and it can be done using the same listing photos. We have video evidence of the scammer who scammed Asher in Paris doing this with five different accounts within 6 weeks.

2. Airbnb claims on its website that they do background checks but only “if they have the full name and date of the birth of the host”. Since lax ID requirements allow anyone to create an account under a fake name, their background checks cannot possibly be a reliable method of verifying hosts.
3. We found that one of the most common scams is a form of arbitrage where the host creates multiple Airbnb listings at different price points. When the higher priced listing gets booked, the booking that was scheduled for that same location at a lower price gets cancelled, and typically at the last minute, which puts the lower-priced guest in a bad situation. We also have video evidence of this scam.
4. We found that Airbnb’s Customer Experience team is incredibly disorganized, unhelpful, and even rude when something goes wrong. They don’t offer enough support with finding new accommodation, and there are reports of several instances (including Asher’s) where the Customer Experience team ends up leaving guests on the street to fend for themselves.
5. Co-founder, Brian Chesky believes that Airbnb users are supposed to police one another by rating their experiences, and that untrustworthy actors will be drummed off the platform by bad reviews, rejected by the web’s natural “immune system”. Based on our findings, it is clear that Airbnb on-platform reviews are largely unreliable for the following reasons:
  - Until very recently (August, 2017), customers who had to cancel their bookings were unable to leave reviews - this means that any issues with the listing or host that cause a guest to have to cancel their reservation (dangerous conditions, host not showing up, etc.) would not be accounted for in the reviews of the host or listing.
  - A surprising number of reviewers believed or had proof that their reviews were either screened, edited, or removed by Airbnb, and were therefore incomplete or inaccurate.
  - An overwhelming number of reviews mention poor customer service and customer service failures which lead to discontent with outcomes of customer service and other Airbnb interactions. In fact, 82% of people who had a problem with their Airbnb stay cited customer service as making things worse.

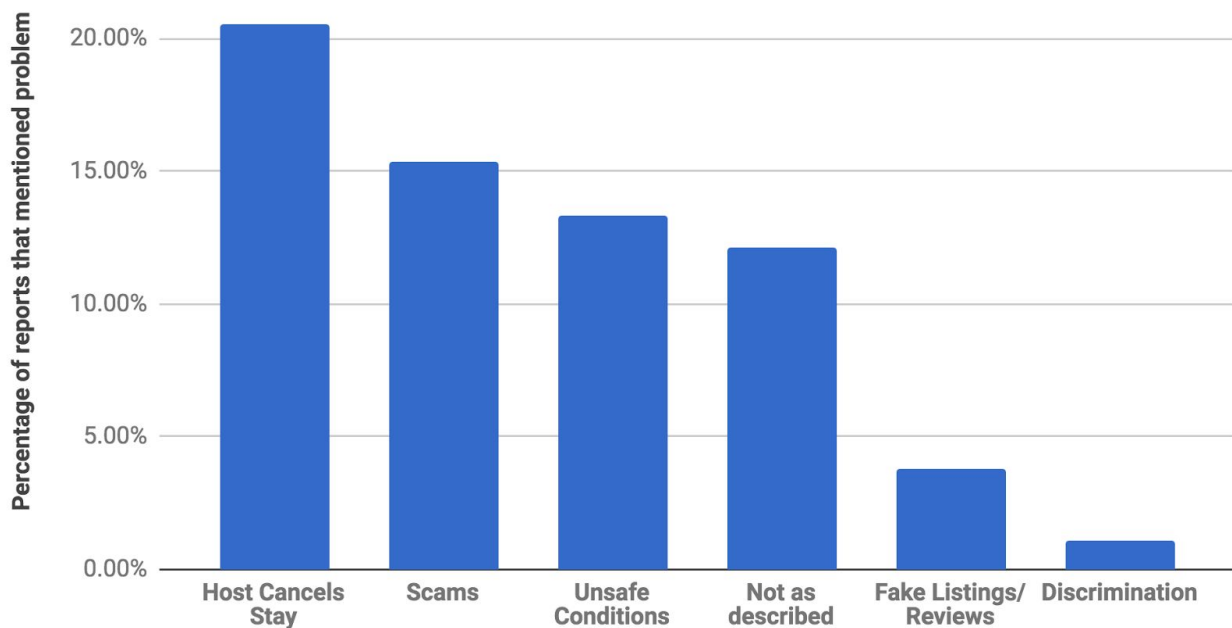
**Our numbers and analysis revealed that the following scenarios were highly common amongst guests who had a problem with their stay:**

1. Hosts cancelling reservations last-minute or without notifying the guest(s) – this can be connected to a scam where the host has multiple listings at different price points and

favors the higher paying customer, and to scams wherein hosts cancel last-minute because policy states that if this happens the host may retain part of the booking fee even if the guest never set foot in or near the rental.

2. Hosts demanding extra money off-platform, often with threats of cancelling reservation
3. Dangerous or unacceptable conditions present in rental location such that guests were forced to find other accommodations
4. Listing not as described, missing key elements that guests entered into contracts and paid for
5. Fake listings, duplicate listings at different prices, and illegal listings are plaguing the Airbnb website and going unchecked. This can cause guests to be scammed or cheated out of money or forcibly removed from rental premises as in the case of many illegal listings.

### The most common causes of Airbnb horror stories



#### Host Cancels Stay (20.5%)

Host-cancelled stays were the top complaint according to reviewers - and these were not voluntary cancellations. Our analysis only included stays which were cancelled by the host or Airbnb without permission of the guest as part of the “host cancels stay” category.

20.5% of reviews included complaints of host cancelled stays, and when guests contacted Airbnb customer service the problem was more likely than not to get worse, as described above.



Also, as already mentioned above, host cancelled stays can be linked to scams with listing price arbitrage, and scams which involve hosts cancelling the reservation but retaining part of the booking fee.

### Scams (15.38%)

This category made up 15.38% of reviews, and includes any descriptions of scams. These almost always involve the host getting more money out of the guest both on and off the Airbnb platform. For example, on the platform, a host can easily create multiple accounts with multiple listings at different prices and then only keep bookings with the guests who are willing to pay the higher price. Another example is when the guest leaves the property the host falsifies damages that cause the guest to pay damages through Airbnb. An example of an off-site scam is one where the host fakes official Airbnb emails in order to get the guest to pay money via wire transfer.

### Unsafe and Unacceptable Conditions (13.35%)

13.35% of reviews that we analyzed cited unsafe and/or unacceptable conditions as a cause for complaint or change of accommodations. Reasons for these complaints include (but are not limited to) infestations of biting or stinging insects (bed bugs, ants, etc.), major mold problems, dangerous heat or cold due to improper climate control, dangerous or hostile host or other guests that were not part of the reviewing party, highly dangerous or unsafe neighborhood, and hidden cameras.

### Not as described (12.16%)

This was quite a common complaint, albeit somewhat less dramatic than other categories. 12.16% of reviews analyzed made note of listings that failed to meet criteria specified in the rental contract. Missing amenities often included heating or air conditioning (these fell into the “Unsafe and/or Unacceptable” category only when they were actually dangerous, otherwise they were categorized “Not as Described”), kitchen access, laundry facilities, and other similar basic needs of travelers. The key here was that listing descriptions and contracts specifically mentioned available amenities, and some or all of those were missing upon check-in or throughout the guest’s stay.

### Fake Listings & Reviews (3.81%)

3.81% of reviews included mentions of fake listings and duplicated listings. This includes situations where a host uses pictures of a property found on the Internet and creates an Airbnb rental listing even though they don’t own or occupy the property.

This category also includes stories that mentioned trouble with on-platform reviews. The most common complaints were that reviews were not allowed in certain situations, reviews were

modified/censored by Airbnb, or reviews were deleted. A startling number of reviewers also mentioned being harassed by hosts for leaving a negative review, and a few mentioned that the reviews on the listing they ended up booking were obviously false or duplicated to give the appearance of more positive reviews than there actually were.

### Discrimination (1.07%)

1.07% of reviews had to do with discrimination. This could be any kind including racial, LGBTQ and disability discrimination.

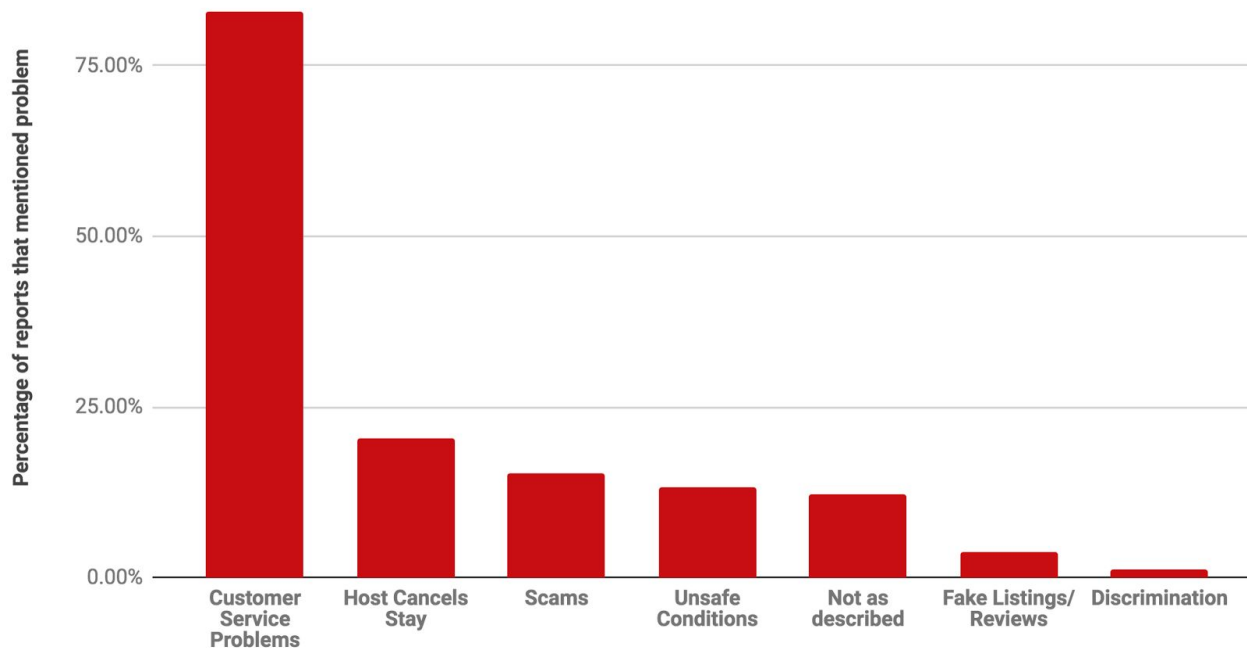
## Airbnb customer service makes everything far worse

82% of reviewers mentioned problems with customer service at Airbnb ranging from difficulties with the site to utter mistreatment by customer service staff.

57.5% of reviewers who mentioned problems with customer service cited it as their #1 complaint.

In fact, if we add “customer service problems” to the first chart, it looks like this:

### The most common causes of Airbnb horror stories when you include customer service



In simple terms, the likelihood of a guest’s problem getting worse when they contact Airbnb Customer Service for help is overwhelming and daunting.

## Recommendations for Airbnb

1. Improve customer service experience.
  - a. Re-train Customer Experience staff
    - i. Handling of complaints
    - ii. Basic emotionality training for high-intensity customer service
    - iii. How to handle tough situations and judgment calls
    - iv. When and how to escalate to a superior
    - v. What and how the Customer Experience Specialists are equipped and empowered to help guests (e.g. what coupons, discounts, refunds, timeframes they can commit to without having to check with a superior first)
    - vi. How to communicate effectively with callers who are angry, scared, etc.
  - b. Utilize an effective support ticket system which includes call-logging, and which all Customer Experience Specialists have access to so that they can view past calls and current tickets, including who is helping the caller with existing issues.
    - i. EVERY call must be logged, and include who called, who provided service, what was discussed, and what the resolution was.
      1. First-time-resolutions are those calls where the problem was solved or the question was answered in one call.
      2. Open tickets are for those calls during which the problem could not be immediately solved, or more information is needed. These get directed to the appropriate team to be “worked” until resolved. This eliminates “too many hands in the pot” and allows the customer to be personally served by a select few individuals that know the status of the ticket.
    - ii. This ticketing system should have a customer-facing element so that customers can track the status of a resolution to their problem.
    - iii. Tickets should have a running log of all calls about that same issue so that new tickets are not opened for an issue that already has a ticket in progress
    - iv. Tickets MUST also include attachments of any and all photos and documents that callers send in so that all supporting information for each situation is in one location, and viewable by any Customer Experience Specialist
  - c. Designate specific teams for certain tasks and complaints, and utilize an effective phone system to correctly “sort” callers into the best team for their call. This allows Specialists to hone and focus their knowledge without becoming overwhelmed by too much information. It also leads to calmer and more empowered customer service teams.

- i. General service and questions team (not for problems or urgent situations)
  - ii. Technical and website team (app and desktop)
  - iii. Urgent care team (for callers with a situation that is time-sensitive or dangerous. This team should ONLY be staffed by very experienced Specialists who have a demonstrated ability to handle tough, sensitive, and fast-paced situations appropriately and with good service)
  - iv. Refunds, payment, and mediation team (mediation between guests and hosts when necessary, and they should handle all refund requests and concerns from hosts regarding payment)
  - v. Resolution team - largest team, and should have sub-groups that specialize in each of the other team areas (this team should be the final stop for every single customer service ticket - its purpose is to review tickets to ensure that all questions were answered, all problems have been resolved, and all parties that need to be contacted have been contacted)
- d. Have a designated superior available for each call team at all times in case of escalation or urgent situations. The Urgent Care Team should have more than one supervisor available, as calls to this team are more likely to require escalation or overrides.
  - e. Make the Airbnb contact information more readily available on the website, and in multiple locations available to both guests and hosts.
  - f. Ensure that prompts on the call-routing system are aligned with new teams and that they route properly

Above all, it's absolutely crucial to execute reorganizations and re-trainings in one fell-swoop, and to address this with existing Customer Experience Specialists as a sort of "new leaf". Customer service and call centers are already infamous for having extremely high turnover rates, and Specialists with Airbnb have been quoted describing Airbnb Customer Experience as a terrible place to work because of the stress, negativity, and burnout. Approaching this as a fresh start will typically re-invigorate existing representatives, and often allows for almost immediate positive results.

2. Require government ID for all hosts and do proper background checks on them.
3. Require a real photo of hosts that matches their government ID and social media accounts, as with guests
4. Do not allow any duplicate listing photos (there is software available for detecting these).
5. If there are duplicate photos used from previous listings, other listings or from other sites around the Internet there should be an immediate red flag for manual review.
6. Require photos to be verified before allowing a listing to go live.
7. Do random, in-person spot checks to ensure your listings match photos and descriptions.

8. Rethink your review system so that it is harder to game and that people actually write honest reviews not just a 5 star or a 1 star.
9. Penalize hosts heavily for cancelling a stay - especially last minute cancellations. Ideally a host would get 3 warnings before being delisted.
10. Require hosts to submit square footage and accurate accommodation layout with measurements for each room.
11. Fix all mobile app and website bugs.

## Limitations

This is the first well-known study to assess the problems guests are having with Airbnb. That being said, there are important limitations to this research. Although we used all available reviews from 2017 (and part of 2016) to capture a wide range of reviews, the nature of review websites is to focus on the negative. Thus, this is not an accurate representation of how many people are experiencing these problems. All we know is that the kind of people who are sufficiently angry and motivated to share their experience publicly experienced these specific problems.

Similarly, because we coded data that already existed, we were unable to follow-up if clarification was needed. We were also unable to determine for certain which problems happened in which order (e.g., did the scam occur before customer service was contacted?), which limits the kinds of statements we can make with regard to our findings. Future research should survey a representative sample of Airbnb guests to address these limitations.

## Summary and Conclusions

Airbnb has grown very quickly over the last couple of years and if they want to keep their guests, hosts, and potential investors happy, they will have no choice but to improve the platform. In our opinion, almost all of the problems found in our study could be solved by requiring hosts to have government ID, not allowing duplicate photos and by improving their customer service experience.

It is likely that these changes could impact Airbnb's short-term bottom line but the long term result would be happier customers and better word-of-mouth referrals. This would lead to higher profitability over time.

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