

TECH

Airbnb Promotes Diversity to Prevent Booking Discrimination by Hosts

Room-sharing company to minimize users' photos and provide antibias training for employees

By Greg Bensinger

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Airbnb Inc. is taking steps to promote more inclusive lodgings on its site after facing accusations from renters who say they were discriminated against by hosts because of race or other characteristics.

The room-sharing company said Thursday it would minimize users' photos during the booking process; require antibias training for its employees; push hosts to use a feature that instantly books rooms; and create a team focused on promoting diversity, among other changes.

Some would-be renters have contended that Airbnb hosts denied them lodging after identifying their race or sexual identity through their photos, names or other means. The San Francisco company has sought to damp the controversies, in part, by hiring former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder and Laura Murphy, a former American Civil Liberties Union director, to advise the company.

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“An increasing number of Airbnb hosts and guests have voiced their concerns about being discriminated against when trying to book a listing because of their race, sexual orientation or gender identity,” wrote Ms. Murphy in an internal report released by Airbnb. “This outcry from the community led Airbnb to closely examine their

nondiscrimination policies and procedures.”

An Airbnb spokesman declined to comment beyond the report.

Silicon Valley companies have come under increasing fire for their lack of diversity in relationships with minorities, particularly in hiring, which critics say hampers their ability to craft products and services that have the broadest appeal. As a result, many have implemented antibias training and detailed their workforce makeups.

The controversy surrounding Airbnb came to a head following a widely cited Harvard University research paper in December that found that customers with names that sounded black were 16% less likely to be accepted for rentals than others with white-sounding names. It spawned the Twitter hashtag campaign, #AirbnbWhileBlack, and later prompted Airbnb Chief Executive Brian Chesky to vow to combat discrimination on the room-sharing site.

In the internal report released Thursday, Airbnb said it would create a team of engineers, researchers and others devoted to fighting bias and offer sensitivity training to hosts. To guard against race discrimination, Airbnb is planning to reduce the prominence of guests' photos when they book rooms while enhancing other parts of their profiles. It will also encourage hosts to use an option that instantly books rooms, rather than relying on hosts to manually approve them.

In November, Airbnb plans to begin requiring users to pledge not to discriminate while using the service. The company said it will remove hosts from the service if they are found to have discriminated against customers seeking lodging.

Airbnb also said it will guarantee customers lodging if they are found to have been discriminated against, though the specifics of that promise weren't immediately clear. And in hiring decisions for senior positions, Airbnb said it must consider more women and minorities.

The room-sharing company was founded eight years ago by Mr. Chesky, Joe Gebbia and Nathan Blecharczyk. In July, Mr. Chesky wrote on Airbnb's blog that he and his co-founders weren't fully conscious of possible discrimination when they designed the site. "I sincerely believe this is the greatest challenge we face as a company," he wrote.

Airbnb is now one of the most highly valued startups in the world, raising roughly \$2.3 billion and commanding a valuation of about \$25.5 billion. It has hosts in more than 30,000 cities worldwide and takes a commission of each booking as well as service fees to customers.

The company said it had consulted with more than a dozen advocacy groups as part of a three-month review of its policies including the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Brennan Center for Justice.

One such group, New York-based nonprofit Color of Change, applauded Airbnb's initial actions. "We feel they've put in a good effort," said executive director Rashad Robinson in an interview

with The Wall Street Journal. “We’ll keep having conversations with Airbnb to see what effect these changes have had.”

“I don’t think there’s a software algorithm you can create that can make people love each other,” Mr. Robinson said.

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