



Universiteit Utrecht

Gender Discrimination on Airbnb: the Effect of Host Ethnicity

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Abstract

Although discrimination is prohibited on the housing market, it was found that Airbnb's current design choices facilitate discrimination against renters. This research aimed to find out to what extent gender and ethnicity of guests influence the extent to which they are trusted and thus accepted by hosts. Using data by Edelman, Luca & Svirsky (2017), multiple analyses were performed to test the hypotheses. We theorised that female guests get approved more often than males, due to the fact that they have more favourable stereotypes ascribed to them. The results showed that there is indeed proof for gender discrimination on Airbnb. Moreover we theorised that this gender preference would be bigger when the host and potential guest do not share the same ethnicity, however this hypothesis was not supported.

Key words

Gender discrimination; Airbnb; Gender preference; Sharing economy; Trust; Gender stereotypes; Group based trust; Ethnic homogeneity

Lois Hardonk (5989477)

Supervisor: Judith Kas

Department of Sociology

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Introduction

Discrimination based on traits such as ethnicity or gender is prohibited on the housing market, this is established in the 1968 fair housing act (Yinger, 1999). Edelman, Luca & Svirsky (2017) found that Airbnb's current design choices facilitate discrimination against renters. This means that although it is technically prohibited, it is easy for house owners to discriminate based on traits such as for example ethnicity or gender. After all, Airbnb currently provides hosts with information about the potential renters such as a full name which often indicates a certain ethnicity and often a photo before the hosts decide whether to accept or reject a guest. Unfortunately the entire picture of discrimination on Airbnb is not clear yet. As far as we are aware no research has really gone into whether the extent of sex discrimination differs between hosts of different ethnicities. It is important to find this out, because in order to prevent or even eliminate discrimination on Airbnb, we have to know what the bigger picture looks like and what variables play a role.

Several researches found some evidence for the occurrence of gender discrimination on the rental housing market. For example, Ahmed & Hammarstedt (2008) concluded in their research that women have less trouble finding a rental apartment than men do in the regular housing market in Sweden. Öblom & Antfolk (2017) found that inquiries including female names were more likely to receive responses than inquiries with male names, and thus concluded that gender discrimination occurs in the private rental housing market in Finland.

Choi & Horvát (2019) and Edelman et al. found some evidence that gender discrimination exists on Airbnb as well. Hosts of accommodations that are up for rental on Airbnb appear to be more trusting towards women rather than men, and thus the acceptance rate by hosts is dependent upon the sex of the potential renter. This phenomenon could be caused by the fact that hosts on Airbnb face a trust problem. They seek to rent out a room or perhaps even a house to a stranger, and this is accompanied by some risks. The potential tenant might not be who he claims to be, he might cause a lot of nuisance, he might destroy the accommodation or personal belongings of the host or might even cause danger to the host's personal safety. There is some level of information asymmetry since the hosts do not know who they can trust and who they cannot.

It could be possible that hosts accept women more often than men due to existing gendered stereotypes, for example, according to West & Zimmerman (1987) women are often expected to behave submissively whereas men are often expected to behave dominantly. Submissive behavior might be more desirable in a tenant than dominant behavior, since it is

associated with introversion (Gilbert & Allan, 1994), and thus a submissive person is less likely to cause trouble during the rental period than a dominant person.

Racial similarity between sellers and buyers on online and offline businesses has been found to have a positive relationship with trust (Ye, Alahmad, Piece & Robert, 2017), which leads us to wonder whether racial similarity between hosts and renters could have an influence on the gender discrimination that apparently takes place on Airbnb. In order to find out whether the ethnicity has an influence on the extent of sex discrimination, some analyses will be performed using the experimental data from Edelman et al.. Hopefully this research will bring more insight into the ways in which discrimination occurs on Airbnb, and perhaps therefore bring us closer to a solution as to how Airbnb can alter their policies in order to reduce or even eliminate discrimination on its platform. Thus, the main question for this research is:

'To what extent do gender and ethnicity of guests influence the extent to which they are trusted by hosts with different ethnicities?'

Theory

As mentioned in the introduction hosts on Airbnb face a trust problem; they do not know who they can trust and who they cannot. Ert, Fleischer & Magen (2016) define trust as a subjective feeling that the trustee will behave in a certain way according to an implicit or explicit promise she makes. Ert et al. state that the presence of trust is essential for transactions on online platforms like Airbnb, since it is unlikely that two strangers will engage in a monetary transaction without it. This is due to the fact that hosts and guests face an economic risk but also other risks, for example safety risks when the host shares the living space with the guest. Since the hosts do not know who they can trust and who they cannot, they will try to find out who they can trust through different ways. For example, they will attempt to solve the information asymmetry and the trust problem by looking at all the information on the potential guest that is available to them.

In order to rent out or book an accommodation, one must have an Airbnb profile. All guests on Airbnb are obligated to provide the following information, among others: a full name, an email address, a confirmed phone number, a message introducing themselves, a confirmation that they have agreed to your House Rules and payment information which

consists of the name, the gender and possibly a photo (Airbnb, n.d.). They can search for an accommodation based on destination specifics, travel dates and party size, and after that the website shows then several results that might be suitable for their stay. There are filter options for price, neighborhood and facilities, and guest can click on the individual accommodations in order to see further information such as pictures, a description and reviews from previous guests (Guttentag, 2015). If a guest is interested in booking a certain accommodation, he or she can send the host a reservation request or ask further questions about the accommodation through a message. Then, the host may respond to the potential questions and/or accept or deny the reservation request. They can only base their decision regarding the acceptance of the guest on the limited information on guest that is available to them.

A similar situation with information asymmetry can be found on the job market. Managers are responsible for hiring someone for a certain job, and often receive multiple applications of people who are interested, but the managers cannot invite all of them for an interview. Therefore, they use applications to assess whether candidates have the required skills, qualifications and attributes. According to Foley & Williamson (2018) certain people are less likely to be invited for an interview because managers tend to use stereotypes to inform their decisions. This results in women being invited for a job interview less often than men, regardless of their resume. It might be possible that a similar process also takes place on Airbnb. Thus, it is possible that hosts on Airbnb look at all of the information on the possible guest that is available to them and connect this information to stereotypes in order to decide who to trust.

As indicated before, gender discrimination is usually directed at women, for example, their wages are generally lower than men's and they get fewer job interviews and job offers (Slonim, 2004). However, according to Slonim people tend to be more trusting towards women, especially in certain contexts. Women benefit more from discrimination when decisions include helping behavior, e.g. hitchhiking, asking for directions, asking for some change. Thus, people tend to be more willing to help women than men when they ask for a favor. Although all of the examples named in Slonim's article take place in face-to-face interactions, this phenomenon might hold true on Airbnb as well, where women ask to be accepted for renting an accommodation. However, Slonim does not give an explanation for why people tend to be more trusting to women than men.

As mentioned before, it could be possible that hosts accept women more often than men due to existing gendered stereotypes. It is likely that hosts or Airbnb value gender a lot, because they have to decide who to accept into their home with very little information

available to them. If they had more information on other traits or qualities of the potential guest, they might focus less on factors such as gender. Although cultures have different gender expectations, and socially assigned gender traits are not universally applicable within sexes or between them, each culture assumes differences between males and females (Bender, 1988). Overall women are taught to become more relational, interdependent, caring and responsive to others' needs than men. Caregiving is a traditional role/characteristic attributed to the gender "woman". Women are raised to become mothers, wives, nurses and homemakers, and learn to expect that of themselves. Orbell, Dawes & Schwartz-Shea (1994) refer to these roles as 'helping roles'. They state that women indeed do occupy these roles more often than men, and that consequently one can expect women to be more cooperative than men. Being cooperative means that you are willing to work together towards a certain common goal. Being cooperative might be a desirable trait in a renter, because cooperative people are less likely to cause trouble due to the fact that they are willing to behave in the way that the host would like them to behave.

We can conclude that female stereotypes are connected to desirable behavior of renters. This leads us to wonder what stereotypes are connected to male behavior. Bender states that some stereotypes connected to manhood are competitiveness, aggressiveness and emotional detachment. One can imagine that considering these stereotypes, hosts might be reluctant to accept a male stranger into their home, because who would want an aggressive, competitive tenant in their house? They might cause a lot of nuisance, destruction, or if the host and guest reside in the same house the tenant might even cause the host some physical harm. This brings us to our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Potential female guests are accepted by hosts on Airbnb more often than potential male guests.

Turner, Brown & Tajfel (1979) state that prejudice or discrimination stems from in- and outgroup identification. According to them, people desire a positive self-image, and this can be enhanced by a positive evaluation of one's own group; the ingroup. The ingroup is evaluated by comparison with other groups, so called outgroups. In order to achieve a positive evaluation of the ingroup, individuals ascribe positive traits to their ingroup, and negative traits to the outgroup. This can lead to biases in evaluations, perception and behavior. The group identification could for example be related to ethnicity. Foddy, Platow & Yamagishi (2009) build on this theory by Turner et al. by adding a trust element. According to them,

people not only trust strangers more easily if they share a salient social category due to ascribed positive traits, but also due to expectations of altruistic and fair behavior from in-group members (i.e., group heuristic-based trust). They refer to this as group-based trust. Therefore, we would expect hosts to be more accepting towards potential renters of their own ethnicity (members of their ingroup) compared to those of other ethnicities (members of their outgroups).

Farmaki & Kladou (2020) state that group-based trust, and discrimination of out-group members are likely taking place on Airbnb, however the evidence on this is not clear yet. There is some proof for this type of homophily in different fields. For example, Ruef, Aldrich & Carter (2003) did some research into the composition of formal groups (e.g. task groups, organizational founding teams) and the effect of homophily. They found that ethnically homogeneous organizational founding teams are a lot more common than teams with mixed ethnicities. They explain that the similarity of individuals disposes them toward a greater level of interpersonal attraction, trust, understanding and consequently greater levels of social affiliation than there would be expected of dissimilar individuals. Moreover, it has been shown by Öberg, Oskarsson & Svensson (2011) that ethnic homogeneity in the workplace and in neighborhoods positively influences trust in both colleagues and neighbors. In this research I will not necessarily look at the effect of in- vs outgroups, but at the interaction with guest gender.

Due to the fact that hosts are comforted by the idea of having a renter of the same ethnicity, one might expect that they are less dependent upon social stereotypes when attempting to judge people's characters. One might see this as a type of automatic trust. However this also goes the other way around; Due to the fact that hosts are less familiar with people of other ethnicities they are still not sure whether or not to trust them and thus accept them into their accommodation, and therefore they tend to fill in the blanks (the information that they do not have about the potential tenant) with stereotypical information, about the race, but perhaps also about the gender of the potential tenant. In accordance with these findings, we would expect hosts to show less sexist behavior towards people of their own ethnicity, and thus their preference for female renters is bigger when it comes to potential renters of different ethnicities.

Hypothesis 2: Hosts on Airbnb show more female guest preferences towards potential tenants of other ethnicities compared to those with whom they share an ethnicity.

Methodology

The data used in this research comes from the article ‘Racial Discrimination in the Sharing Economy: Evidence from a Field Experiment’ by Edelman, Luca & Svirsky (2017). In this article Edelman et al. aimed to investigate the existence and extent of racial discrimination on Airbnb. As of July 2015, they conducted a field experiment in which they inquired about the availability of roughly 6,400 listings on Airbnb in five big American cities: Baltimore, Dallas, Los Angeles, St. Louis, and Washington, DC. They approached every host in these cities, and if a host offered multiple listings the researchers selected one listing using a random number generator. They did this to ensure that one host does not appear multiple times in the dataset, and also to make sure that a host does not receive multiple identical e-mails. Drawing on the methodology of an experiment by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) on labor market discrimination, Edelman et al. created and used guest four accounts, two with African American sounding names, and two with white sounding names. Out of each of those two, one was male, and one was female. Other than that, the accounts were identical.

All of the hosts’ profiles were analyzed for host characteristics such as race, gender and age using Mechanical Turk. Two Mechanical Turk workers were hired to assess each profile picture, and if these two workers disagreed on the race, gender or age of the host, a third Mechanical Turk worker was hired to decide who was right. If all three workers could not agree on a specific race, gender or age, the characteristics of the host were coded as unknown. Moreover Edelman et al. looked at the hosts’ reviews, the guests who had previously reviewed them and their race, gender and age, and they collected a lot of information on the specifics of their listings. The guest profiles inquired about reservations eight weeks in advance. Finally, they checked each listing to see whether hosts were open to renting out their accommodation to the fictive guests.

Variables

The following variables are used in our analyses: Acceptance, same ethnicity, guest gender and some control variables. Moreover an interaction variable of same ethnicity and guest gender is used.

Acceptance

The responses of the hosts to the requests were categorized as follows: 1) asks for higher price, 2) check back later for definitive answer, 3) confused (there was enquired about the

wrong date), 4) I will get back to you, 5) message not sent, 6) no or unavailable, 7) no response, 8) no unless you verify, 9) offers a different place, 10) offers lower price if you book now, 11) only used for events, 12) request for more info (can you verify? How many people?), 13) unsure right now, 14) yes, 15) yes if stay is extended, 16) yes if you verify or give more info. In the dichotomous variable ‘Yes’ for acceptance used in our research, options 10, 14 and 16 are seen as acceptance and the other options are not. However, the options 3, 5 and 9 will be filtered out for our analysis, since they do not indicate an explicit level of acceptance.

Same ethnicity

As mentioned before, the ethnicity of the host was determined by Mechanical Turk Workers. All possible identified ethnicities are 1) Asian, 2) Black, 3) Hispanic, 4) multiracial, 5) NA, 6) NULL, 7) unclear, 8) unclear_three votes, 9) UU, 10) White. Since our hypothesis is focused on whether hosts have the same ethnicity as their guest or not, and we only have Black and White guest profiles, there is no point in looking at hosts of other ethnicities than those two. Therefore we will only be looking at answer options 2 and 10. The other answer options will be filtered out.

The ethnicity of the fictive guest is merely White or Black, therefore this variable has only two categories. In order to use these variables for our analyses, they were merged into a new dichotomous variable, which shows whether the hosts and guests have the same or different ethnicities.

Guest gender

Since the guest profiles are fictive profiles created by Edelman et al., the gender did not have to be assessed by Mechanical Turk Workers. Therefore, guest gender is a dichotomous variable with only two answer options: Male and Female.

Control variables

In the case that we find an interaction between our variables we want to make sure that the effects are not caused by other factors. Therefore we will also be adding a few control variables into our analyses. There are some characteristics of the host that could be added as a control variable. For example, the age of the host might have an influence on their accepting behavior. It has been shown age is related to trust. Schmeets (2018) found that 25 to 35-year-olds are most trusting towards other people, and that this trust declines with each age group.

Especially the over-65s indicate that you should be careful when dealing with others. This could be the case with hosts on Airbnb as well; it might be the case that older people are less likely to trust and accept certain guests. Therefore, the variable old host will be added into some of the analyses. This is a dichotomous variable which indicates whether hosts were considered to be old by the Mechanical Turk workers.

Moreover, the results of the analyses might be influenced by the gender of the host. Buchan, Croson & Solnick (2008) did research into gender differences in trust behavior, and they found that men tend to be more trusting than women. Since men and women appear to differ in their trust behavior, one might assume that male and female hosts on Airbnb also differ in their accepting behavior. Therefore, the variable female host will be added into some of the analyses. The hosts of whom the gender is unclear will be filtered out since they do not indicate a specific gender.

Finally, the ethnicity of the guests and hosts will be added into the analyses as a control variable. This is due to the fact that Edelman & Luca (2014) found that ethnicity has a significant effect on trust, and therefore it might have an effect on the accepting behavior of hosts.

Analyses

In order to find an answer to our first hypothesis, two linear regression analyses will be executed with acceptance as a dependent variable and guest gender as an independent variable. The second analysis will also contain the control variables.

Then, for the second hypothesis two other linear regression analyses will be executed with acceptance as a dependent variable. The independent variables are same ethnicity, guest gender, and an interaction variable of these two. This interaction will show whether the effect of preference of female guests is higher or lower when the host and guest share the same ethnicity compared to when they do not. The second analysis will also contain the control variables.

Although not all assumptions for a linear regression are met since our dependent variable is a dichotomous variable, we decided to use this method anyways. However we must keep in mind that the results of the analyses will indicate a probability of A causing B.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Same_ethnicity	4404	0	1	,510
Yes	4404	0	1	,45
Guest_female	4404	0	1	,52
Femaleguest_sameeth	4404	0	1	,260
Host_female	4404	0	1	,458
Host_old	4404	0	1	,051
Guest_white	4404	0	1	,51
Host_white	4404	0	1	,891

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of all of the variables that are used in the analyses. As you can see in the table, all variables are dichotomous. It becomes clear that for example about 45% of all guest enquiries were accepted in this experiment, and about 45,8% of all hosts were female. Only 5,1% of all hosts were perceived as old by the Mechanical Turk workers. 51% percent of all fictive guests were white, this makes sense because half of the profiles created by Edelman et al. were assigned the white race. Finally, 89,1% of all hosts are white.

Table 2: Summary of regression analyses for hypothesis 1.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Constant	,424***	,011	,436***	,026
Guest_female	,045**	,015	,047**	,015
Host_female	-	-	,004	,015
Host_old	-	-	,031	,034
Guest_white	-	-	,087***	,015
Host_white	-	-	-,068**	,024
R2	,002	-	,012	-
N	4404	-	4404	-

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

The results of the analyses belonging to hypothesis 1 are visible in table 2. Hypothesis 1 is : “*Potential female guests are accepted by hosts on Airbnb more often than potential male guests*”. Model 1 shows that there is a positive relationship between female guests and acceptance. The chance of acceptance is 4,5% higher for female guests than for male guests (b = ,045; t = 2,989; p = ,0015). When the control variables are added in Model 2, the positive relationship between female guests and acceptance remains, and it appears that female guests are 4,7% more likely to be accepted by hosts than male guests (b = ,047; t = 3,127; p = ,001). These results are in support of hypothesis 1. The explained variance in model 1 is only ,002, and in model 2 it is ,012. A different analysis with ‘Yes’ as a dependent variable is conducted in which all variables are added, only Guest_female is added in the second model, and it appears that the change in R2 is ,003. This means that guest gender accounts for only 0,3% of the variation in host acceptance.

Table 3: Summary of regression analyses for hypothesis 2.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Constant	,395***	,016	,441***	,027
Same_ethnicity	,057**	,022	-,008	,028
Guest_female	,034	,021	,036**	,021
Femaleguest_sameeth	,022	,030	,021	,030
Host_female	-	-	,004	,015
Host_old	-	-	,031	,034
Guest_white	-	-	,085***	,024
Host_white	-	-	-,068**	,024
R2	,007	-	,012	-
N	4404	-	4404	-

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

The results of the analyses belonging to hypothesis 2 are visible in Table 3. Hypothesis 2 is “*Hosts on Airbnb show more female guest preferences towards potential tenants of other ethnicities compared to those with whom they share an ethnicity.*”. In order to reject the null hypothesis and therefore accept hypothesis 2, we would expect interaction variable female_sameeth to have a significant negative value. However, this is not the case in Model 1, the interaction variable is not significant (b = ,022; t = ,750; p = ,227). In model 2

which includes the control variables, female_sameeth remains insignificant ($b = ,021$; $t = ,693$; $p = ,244$) Therefore our findings do not support hypothesis 2.

When it comes to the control variables, the results are the same in all of the analyses and models. Some control variables appear not to affect the acceptance behavior of the hosts, as they are insignificant. These two variables are host old and host female. However white guest is positive and significant in both analysis 1 ($b = ,087$; $t = 5,840$; $p < ,001/2$) and in analysis 2 ($b = ,085$; $t = 3,570$; $p < ,001/2$). This means that white guests are 8,5% more likely to be accepted than black guests. Moreover white host is negative and significant in both analysis 1 ($b = -,068$; $t = -2,831$; $p = ,0025$) and analysis 2 ($b = -,068$; $t = -2,825$; $p = ,0025$). This means that white hosts are 6,8% less likely to accept someone than black hosts.

Conclusion and discussion

Conclusion and theoretical implications

The main question we aimed to answer in this research, was “*To what extent do gender and ethnicity of guests influence the extent to which they are trusted by hosts with different ethnicities?*”. The results of the executed analyses show that female guests are 4,7% more likely to be accepted by hosts than male guests. This is in line with our first hypothesis; “*Potential female guests are accepted by hosts on Airbnb more often than potential male guests.*”, and thus supports our theory, so it could be the case that hosts trust and accept women more often than men due to existing gendered stereotypes. However, our analyses only prove that guest gender influences the accepting behavior of hosts, but the underlying mechanism is not confirmed yet. Future research should aim to find out what the exact underlying mechanism is. If our theory were to be correct, people of all genders have gender stereotypes. Some male stereotypes are competitiveness and aggressiveness, which are not desirable traits in a renter. Female stereotypes are generally more positive and connected to cooperativeness, which is a desirable trait in a renter. Therefore hosts tend to accept unknown female guests more easily than unknown male guests. In order to find out whether this theory is true and thus is the underlying mechanism, future research could perhaps entail a qualitative approach, in which the thought process and decision making process of the hosts hopefully become more clear.

Moreover, the results indicate that hosts do not show more female guest preferences towards potential tenants of other ethnicities compared to those with whom they share an

ethnicity. This means that we did not find any support for our second hypothesis “*Hosts show more female guest preferences towards potential tenants of other ethnicities compared to those with whom they share an ethnicity.*” and our theory regarding automatic trust. This theory entails that hosts are comforted by the idea of having a renter of the same ethnicity, and therefore that they are less dependent upon social stereotypes when attempting to judge people’s characters. Moreover this theory stated that when hosts and renters do not have the same ethnicity, the hosts start to depend upon stereotypical information more heavily when deciding to accept or reject a guest. It might be possible that we did not find any significant results regarding this hypothesis because possibly when hosts do have a preference for a guest of their own ethnicity, they always reject the guest of the other ethnicity regardless of their gender. After all, they can pick whatever guest they like, and they are not obligated to choose anyone. This would result in the results that we found. Future research could aim to find out if this is true using qualitative research methods.

Practical implications

Unfortunately our research found that guests are discriminated against by hosts based on their gender. Therefore we conclude that Airbnb could make some changes in order to reduce or eliminate discrimination on its platform. Airbnb has already begun making some changes to fight discrimination (Murphy, 2016). For example, from November 1, 2016 on, all users must agree to uphold the following commitment: “We believe that no matter who you are, where you are from, or where you travel, you should be able to belong in the Airbnb community. By joining this community, you commit to treat all fellow members of this community, regardless of race, religion, national origin, disability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or age, with respect, and without judgment or bias.”. Moreover, Murphy states that Airbnb aimed to make the ‘Instant Book’ option, which allows guest to instantly book an accommodation for a certain date without needing host approval, more prevalent. However this option is not available yet for all listings on Airbnb, as hosts must turn on the ‘Instant Book’ feature themselves (Fradkin, 2017). The ‘Instant Book’ feature might be an effective measure to reduce or eliminate discrimination on Airbnb if it was an option for (nearly) every accommodation on Airbnb. It would be interesting for future research to find out if this could really be an effective measure.

If Airbnb wants to reduce or eliminate gender discrimination on its platform, it could be helpful if the hosts are not able to see any personal information about the potential guests before accepting them. For example, they would not be able to see their gender, a photo or

even a guests name, as a name can give an indication of ethnicity. This should prevent hosts from potentially discriminating the guests. Because as Todisco (2014) states, by providing hosts with information about the prospective guest before the host accepts or declines a guest's request, Airbnb facilitates both implicit and intentional discrimination on its platform.

Limitations

As with any research, there are some limitations to our research. For example, our dataset only allowed us to include black and white ethnicities, excluding many other ethnic groups. Moreover only 11% of the hosts were black, the rest was white. Thus for future research it would be advisable to include more ethnicities and have the ratios be distributed more evenly. Moreover the dataset was only focused on hosts in five cities the US; Baltimore, Dallas, Los Angeles, St. Louis, and Washington, DC.. It is possible that the results would be very different if the data was collected in a different locations, for example in Western Europe. Perhaps future research could attempt to do this, and see if the results differ from ours. And finally, one limitation was the choice of analysis. As mentioned before, not all assumption for a linear regression were met since the dependent variable 'acceptance' is a dichotomous variable.

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