

What drives customers to use access-based sharing options in the hospitality industry?

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Access-based sharing businesses have gained popularity in the hospitality industry. The recent shift of customers' willingness to share accommodation with a host as opposed to using a private hotel room has many implications for the traditional lodging sector. Sharing firms such as Airbnb effectively use an online platform to match a customer's multiple needs with individual service providers and are able to create a unique personalised accommodation experience. This study utilised an abductive research approach to examine the theory and business practice through an iterative process. Following a detailed review of the literature, this study proposes a conceptual model to illustrate the relationship between three participants within the sharing context, namely customers, the sharing firms and the service providers and their relationship with online platforms and social media. This study also provides numerous research directions and practical guidelines for scholars and practitioners in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: access-based sharing, trust, social media, Airbnb, peer-to-peer, online platform, customer relationship

Introduction

Traditionally, firms considered it important to create their own unique identity "image" in an effort to differentiate from other competing firms in the market. In the past, therefore, one of the most important criteria firms used to establish brand image was to standardize products and services that portrayed the firm's brand image. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), through their extended multi-stage research on service firms, indicated that reliability was at the heart of customers' perception of service. Thus consistency of service and standardisation of products were considered a requirement to gain customers' confidence and trust in the service firms (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and, once acquired, the service firms were provided an opportunity to attract and maintain customer loyalty. Therefore, in an effort to gain brand image and customer loyalty, hospitality firms have focused on maintaining consistency through the standardised delivery of service. Hospitality firms that have multiple outlets use their channel partners or networks (franchise, subsidiaries and many other partnerships including online and offline outlets) to communicate consistency of the brand and its standards. Channel partners of the firm, for example, franchisees, merely act as an extension of the firm (Nordin, 2005) to expand services to various geographical locations. By design, these channel partners have very limited autonomy and hence do not have the opportunity to be flexible or to tailor deliverables to customers' individual needs.

Technological advances, such as global access to the Internet, have led to their widespread adoption, with subsequent changes in the life and perceptions of people and society (Romero & Molina, 2011). Dramatic changes in the market through the use of mobile communication and apps

have induced numerous changes in customers' personal and social habits. Firms are therefore exploring new ways by which they could transform themselves to operate within a computer-mediated environment (Yadav & Pavlou, 2014). Furthermore, there have been numerous changes in how customers behave and respond to their access to mobile technology. Customers have become more connected with each other than in the past and have become accustomed to the idea of sharing views and more importantly trusting in the opinions of other customers much more than depending on traditional company produced literature (Kandampully, Zhang, & Bilgihan, 2015). More importantly, sharing and collaborative consumption has become more widely acceptable than that of ownership (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). This new business phenomenon is referred to as a sharing economy (Belk, 2014), where society operates within the principles of trust as the bonding link between networks of social and economic resources (Matzler, Veider, & Kathan, 2015). There are a growing number of customers who are opting for alternatives to ownership, which is referred to as access-based consumption. In this context, customers opt to have access to products or services without the transfer of ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). It is recognised that consumer behaviour has an experiential component (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), therefore consumers are willing to pay for an experience as opposed to actual ownership. This new phenomenon provides new opportunities yet simultaneously poses challenges to many firms given the customer's preference for sharing as opposed to ownership. It is estimated that the access-based sharing economy is projected to reach \$335 billion by 2025 (Zhuo, 2015). Two of the well-recognised and leading firms in this category are Airbnb.com and Uber.com, representing a new way of doing business.

Emerging new business phenomenon

Unlike traditional hospitality firms, Airbnb provides a secure online platform. Through this online platform they facilitate partnering networks of multiple service providers (independent service providers/entrepreneurs) to match the needs of customers. This new opportunity provides customers with multiple choices, offering them a spectrum of selection options. Therefore, a growing number of consumers are able to choose from a large pool of diversified services offered by service providers at a more reasonable price and in turn are willing to share products and services. Moreover, firms and consumers have recognised that sharing is a more flexible, sustainable and profitable alternative to standardised services (Belk, 2007; Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Based in San Francisco, Airbnb was one of the first successful startups which established an online accommodation marketplace within the collaborative consumption systems (Matzler et al., 2015). There are a growing number of firms that have begun to operate within the access-based sharing business model, for example, peer-to-peer accommodation, car sharing, music and video streaming, peer-to-peer finance and online staffing, to name a few that will potentially generate many new opportunities in the market (PwC, n.d.).

Growth in the sharing economy has been accelerated by the Internet particularly with the emergence of social media and mobile technology that facilitates the connections between users interested in sharing their possessions (Lamberton & Rose, 2012). For example, Airbnb has been augmenting brand awareness through the "One Less Stranger" campaign on Twitter and Facebook (Samuely, 2015). By asking participants to upload their creative gestures of hospitality to a stranger, Airbnb utilises social media and has helped to bring people to a global community. Similarly, Uber, an online transportation network company, has enabled people to turn their vehicles into a source of income rather than a financial burden. Uber has successfully attracted numerous users by offering referral credits to influence users who share their unique code on social media and have followers sign up (Campaign, 2014). Social media serve as an online channel providing access for everyone to share and participate in various activities and have become a prominent method to communicate between brands and their target audience (Murdough, 2009). Initiated by brands through social media, social campaigns create additional touch points to facilitate communication between customers and a brand (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Although the role of unstandardised sharing options is deemed an important new business phenomenon, there is limited research on this topic to understand how an access-based sharing option will contribute to the hospitality industry and its management literature. To bridge this gap, this study aims to explore some of the factors that drive customers to use sharing options in the hospitality industry, and the subsequent opportunities and challenges to the hospitality industry. Following a review of the literature, we use a case study on Airbnb to examine and understand this new hospitality sector and how it has been successful in managing to satisfy both customers and multiple service providers.

This study adopted an abductive research approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) to match theory and reality through an iterative process of systematic combinations and inference (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). It is particularly useful for pursuing

theory development through refining existing theories rather than inventing entirely new ones (van Echtelt et al., 2008). Corresponding to this approach, this study first examined some of the important theoretical discussions developed by previous researchers on the sharing economy. Following this, a case study method (Yin, 2009) was adopted to illustrate how firms operate within a sharing context, using online platforms and networks of service providers.

Literature review

The sharing options

This study seeks to understand the growing phenomenon of peer-to-peer based activity, where giving or sharing access to goods and services is made possible through online platforms. While there is no transfer of ownership, these peer-to-peer exchanges utilise trust and reciprocity, which enhance the relationship between service provider and the recipient. As the most basic human economic behaviour, sharing has existed as a form of exchange in human societies for thousands of years (Hellwig et al., 2015). Viewing the phenomenon as a form of consumption, the sharing economy has received growing attention from business practitioners and academic researchers (Belk, 2014; Cusumano, 2014; Matzler et al., 2015). Rather than buying or owning resources, customers are opting to access assets and pay for the experience of their temporary use (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Customers are thus shifting from the traditional idea of ownership to sharing as an access-based consumption phenomena. Access-based consumption is discussed in the literature as "market-mediated transactions that provide customers with temporarily limited access to goods in return for an access fee, while the legal ownership remains with the service provider" (Schaefer, Lawson, & Kukar-Kinney, 2016, 571).

Although several terms have been used by researchers to theorise this phenomenon, the central idea of sharing remains consistent across research. For example, Belk (2007) posits that sharing involves the distribution of what we own to others for their use and in return receiving what they own for our use. Further, Belk (2014) defines collective consumption as peers coordinating the process of acquiring and distributing a resource for compensation. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) refer to access-based consumption as market-mediated transactions where no transfer of ownership occurs in the process. According to Möhlmann (2015, 194), "collaborative consumption takes place in organised systems or networks, in which participants conduct sharing activities in the form of renting, lending, trading, bartering, and swapping of goods, services, transportation solutions, space, or money". From the marketing perspective, Lamberton and Rose (2012) refer to commercial sharing programmes as marketer-controlled systems that enable consumers to enjoy products without owning them.

Collaborative consumption has extended to those areas that were not previously considered acceptable for collaboration by customers (Belk, 2014). Some of the key drivers facilitating the constitution of virtual communities and online networks include the universal availability of the Internet combined with the use of mobile technology and social media. Additionally, there has been a shift in consumers' perceptions, leading to a willingness to trust (Möhlmann, 2015). In the form of collaborative lifestyle or redistribution market, customer-to-customer sharing has

been facilitated by external providers through online platforms (Möhlmann, 2015). The rise and the universal use of social media have contributed to connecting peers with desire to share their possessions (Matzler et al., 2015). Companies like Airbnb have effectively managed their marketing campaigns to increase awareness of their brand through social media (Samuely, 2015). This new business model allows customers to have access to a wide variety of products and services that are offered beyond traditional standardised products and services. Customers associate this with a unique experience component and novelty, thus the sharing option differentiates itself from the traditional offer that is available in the market.

Standardised and non-standardised service

Standardised service is commonly used to help control processes, predict mistakes and minimise deviations from the standards in the hospitality industry (Jones, Nickson, & Taylor, 1994). Brands adopt their own service standards to establish competitive advantages and to differentiate from competing firms in the market (Min, Min, & Chung, 2002). In an effort to maintain consistency, service blueprints (Paules, 1991) are also used by some service managers and employees (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 1998). In addition, many hospitality firms use standards and standard operating procedures to enable managers to minimise the risk of inconsistencies involved in the production of products and services (Sandoff, 2005). Therefore, as a critical strategy, standardisation of service was considered an important function of the organisation (Sandoff, 2005).

Ritzer (1996) discussed the idea of “McDonaldisation” that emphasises predictability by enforcing greater control of fast-food chain restaurants. Representing a notable example of standardisation, McDonalds stands out for the universally recognised golden arches as well as their consistent limited menu items across all of its outlets around the world (Ritzer, 2011). The concept of standardised procedures is engaged to assist employees in performing their work in a predictable manner. The desired expectation is to gain customers’ positive response (Ritzer, 1996). Thus it is well recognised within practice and academic literature that the consistency and predictability brought about by standardised service will lead to higher customer evaluation (Ding & Keh, 2016). Westin Hotels, for example, promise their customers the Westin’s standard – the “heavenly bed”. Westin hotel chain’s standard promise to its customers revolves around the idea of a good night’s sleep (Withiam, 1999).

In contrast, service customisation involves certain levels of adaptation to meet every individual customer’s needs (Shostack, 1987). Due to the dynamic demographical change in the global market, hoteliers have recognised the growing importance in offering a unique and out-of-the-ordinary experience that is tailored to meet individual customer needs (Walls et al., 2011). Vargo and Lusch (2004) posit that service management should focus on the flexibility of service provision instead of making service to be “goods-like” through internal standardisation. Consistent with the economic argument, customised offerings provide a more accurate fit between customer preferences and product/service attributes, leading to greater perceived benefits to customers (Franke, Keinz, & Steger, 2009; Simonson, 2005). It is argued, therefore, that memorable, positive moments-of-truth can be created when

the service provider acknowledges and responds to individual customers’ specific needs (Sandoff, 2005). Furthermore, research suggests that service customisation that caters to customer preferences can increase customers’ willingness to pay more (Franke & Schreier, 2008), develop emotional bonds between customers and brands (Ariffin & Maghzi, 2012), and enhance customer satisfaction (Gagnon & Roh, 2008), leading to customer retention and loyalty (Coelho & Henseler, 2012).

Through redistribution markets, sharing options such as Airbnb offer a form of access that enables peer-to-peer matching; consequently, customers can choose from a variety of options based on their needs (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Car-sharing businesses provide access through club membership where multiple types of automobiles owned by the company can be shared (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). However, car-sharing such as Zipcar is not considered an access-based service because it doesn’t involve peer-to-peer exchange; instead it uses its inventory of cars that serve its customers/members. The more recent sharing business model options allow people with similar interests to band together through collaborative lifestyles in order to share spare time, tools and skills (Botman & Rogers, 2010).

Sharing and trust

An emerging powerful mechanism valued by all in this connected world is trust. Trust has become a critical component of value, whether when customers get into cars with someone they have never met before, or in the case of when customers opt to sleep in the beds of complete strangers and lend assets to others they do not know (Stan, 2016). Scholars refer to trust as “a psychological state that exists when one party has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010, 380). Since services are first sold then experienced, cultivating and managing trust is essential to build and maintain the relationship with customers (Kinard & Capella, 2006). In the online marketplace, the four important roles of intermediate platforms are aggregating demand or supply, reducing the operational cost, matching transaction parties and providing trust (Bailey & Bakos, 1997).

Trust can be seen as the connecting link in the sharing businesses, which is built to strengthen the support provided through technology and social media. Akin to eBay buyers and sellers rating and commenting on each other after purchases, companies in sharing businesses allow both parties to build trust profiles through online ratings after the service transaction (Belk, 2014). Online accommodation marketplaces like Airbnb provide a platform where both hosts and guests can establish reputations based on other parties’ performance evaluations (Weber, 2014). The online intermediaries help to generate trust through a public feedback mechanism that shares information about transactions (Resnick et al., 2000). More importantly, the design of sharing options enables peer-to-peer communication that matches customers with service providers. Rather than a transaction based on the exchange of ownership, sharing options help to build and extend the relationship between customers and service providers after the service experience. In this context of sharing, the value of trust and relationship takes the centre stage, thus allowing a much stronger memory of experience than in the context of ownership. The establishment of trust through intermediaries facilitates the process of active selection or rejection of service

encounters, reducing the uncertainty caused by asymmetric information (Schor et al., 2015). Recorded performances (reviews) shared online simultaneously, therefore, provide the potential to enhance trust and induce higher volume and intensity of sharing activities as well as limit participation due to lack of trustworthiness (Richardson, 2015).

Conceptual model

Based on this review of the literature, we propose a model (Figure 1) which provides a visual illustration of the underlying mechanism that strengthens the relationship among the three participants namely: customer, sharing firm (the firm which provides the online platform offering access-based service) and the service provider. Beginning with the customer's side of Figure 1, the customer's trust in the sharing firm is primarily built on the number and the quality of reviews posted on the website and also those communicated via social media. The trustworthiness of the firm provides the individual service provider with the credibility that is essential and that appeals to the customer. In return, the sharing firm provides an opportunity for service providers (hosts) to offer non-standardised, customised and diversified service packages to customers. Hosts, as self-employed entrepreneurs, have the flexibility to innovate services so that they are functionally capable of offering services that match customers' unique needs and create the all-important relationship with customers. As a consequence, service delivery is personalised and helps to match customer's needs. In effect, service providers design their services to create and build a relationship with their customers, leading to superior customer experiences and the so-called positive moments-of-truth. The most important moment-of-truth is created during the customers' stay at the host's (service provider's) place; thus the host plays a major role in the customer's perception of service and the subsequent review of the experience.

The Internet, mobile technology, and social media play a critical role in bridging customers and service providers through a secured intermediary (online platform) managed by the sharing firm. The profile on social media platforms presents

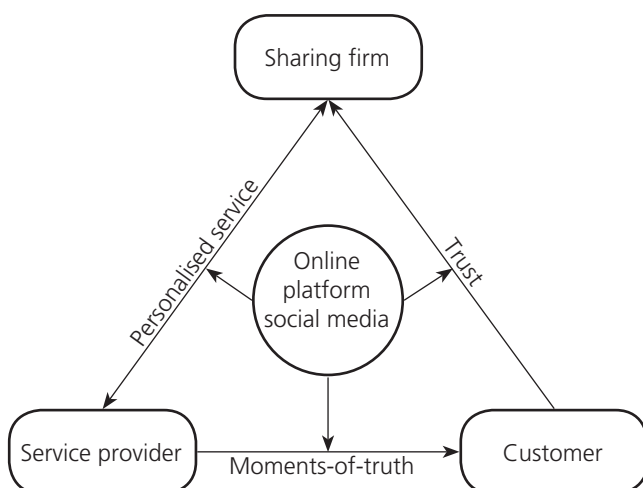


Figure 1: Conceptual model

the characteristics of the service provider to the public. The numerous comments and reviews written by customers on social media showcase the real experience of the customised accommodation services. This provides a clear message to prospective customers and the information they require to make an informed decision to match their personality with the service providers' in pursuit of personalised accommodation services. Technology and social media provide an opportunity for real-time communication between customers and service providers via multiple networks. Thus, the three core participants in these access-based, shared hospitality services are intricately connected to one another and support each other through the exchange of value, trust, relationship and reviews. These exchanges and connections between the three are made possible through online platforms and social media.

The case of Airbnb

The idea for Airbnb originated in 2007, when cofounders Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia, two roommates who were finding it difficult to pay rent for their apartment, set up an air mattress in their living room and rented it out to guests for \$80 a night with the promise of a home-cooked breakfast in the morning. As a trusted community marketplace, Airbnb has created a new segment of choice for travellers who seek accommodation. Although not in direct competition, this new segment of sharing options will continue to outperform the traditional accommodation sector within the hospitality industry. For example, Hilton Corporation has expanded to 775 000 hotel rooms in 104 countries over a period of 96 years, whereas, Airbnb has connected to 2 million homes hosting travellers in 190 countries in less than a decade (Table 1).

The design of Airbnb is different from other accommodation service providers such as hotels in several ways. The idea of sharing as a business centres on designing trust and relationship as part of the business model. Airbnb enables hosts and guests to get to know each other through profiles, effective messaging systems and past reviews. The information accumulated on Airbnb's online platform helps both parties to establish their reputation, as well as publicising their personalities, thereby facilitating the process of finding the best match. Moreover, there are more than six hundred people working in Airbnb's customer service, trust, and safety departments who are devoted to ensuring the provision of trusted services. Airbnb has also designed a number of services that help to keep both guests and hosts safe, which enhances the trustworthiness of the firm. These features include a messaging system that keeps contact information private until a reservation is confirmed and a payment system that holds the funds until 24 hours after the guest's arrival. Reviews and ratings are also used to ensure that customers can read about real-life experiences. Lastly, Airbnb

Table 1: Comparison between Airbnb and Hilton

Company	Airbnb	Hilton
Year of foundation	2008	1919
Rooms	2 000 000	775 000
Countries	191	104

Sources: <https://www.airbnb.com/about/about-us>;
<http://www.hiltonworldwide.com/about/>

requires all hosts to abide by their “Hospitality Standards”, which include expected levels of cleanliness, commitment, and communication. The flexibility, reliability and consistency of Airbnb’s service providers help them to build and maintain the relationship Airbnb enjoys with their guests and hosts.

While hotels have to consider employee salaries and overall property operation costs, Airbnb does not have these costs to pass on to their guests; instead they are able to share the benefits with hosts and guests. At Airbnb, customers are able to find accommodation at a comparatively lower cost than staying at a hotel. In the hotel industry, the hotel brands manage different franchised properties in different locations; however, they do not have the flexibility to offer different room types to match customer needs. Hotel firms recognise the important role of its frontline employees, as they play a critical role as part-time marketers to interact and engage with customers on behalf of the company. Airbnb, on the other hand, sets itself apart from the cookie-cutter hotel industry by unbundling the service packages, offering unique lodging facilities that appeal to various personalities and allowing them to be flexible to fit different customer needs.

Airbnb creates a unique opportunity to connect customers to service providers with a clear intention to ensure a positive customer experience. The diversity of hosts and their unique personal resources and personalised services allows Airbnb to provide comparably more diversified and customised accommodations. As true followers and owners of a sharing business, hosts integrate their own personalities, lifestyles and beliefs into their services, creating individualised customer experiences and engagement. The Airbnb website home page provides information about choices of accommodation, such as a houseboat, a studio loft, or even a castle – just to name a few. This feature enables guests to build a vacation around a unique lodging opportunity, and not settle for the same old bed and bathroom set-up. This notion of not settling for the “same-old” is perfect for Airbnb’s customer base of young professionals all over the world. In order to connect with this target market, Airbnb integrates social media into their online platform, allowing guests to get to know their hosts before booking. Airbnb has become successful in the management of their social media accounts as well as social media marketing. The company continues to stand out with their relatable and interactive website, as well as multiple social media campaigns. In late 2013, Airbnb released the first ever crowd-sourced Vine video, showcasing the importance of travel and adventure. Since making this social media history, Airbnb has continued to focus their social media efforts around storytelling. The web page devoted to “Airbnb Stories” is an area designed for hosts to showcase real moments through their moving stories.

The movement toward peer-to-peer property rental is becoming increasingly popular, causing new competition in other sectors. Although there are many websites that allow customers to find vacation rentals rather than using hotels, Airbnb continues to stand out as being at the forefront among the rest of the competitors like FlipKey, HomeAway and VRBO (Vacation Rentals By Owner).

Conclusion and future research directions

This study and the Airbnb case example illustrate the changing habits and perceptions of a large number of hospitality

customers who are willing to receive hospitality services as part of a new business model that incorporates sharing, peer-to-peer communication, and access-based consumption. This new and evolving sector of access-based hospitality poses a new set of questions for the future direction of the hospitality industry. It can be argued that access-based hospitality services such as Airbnb do not compete or pose a challenge to traditional accommodation services, but extend the concept of hospitality. This provides numerous opportunities for future research on the three groups of participants in access-based hospitality contexts: the independent service provider, the company and the customer. Future research may therefore explore:

- The difference between access-based and traditional hospitality services
- The motivation for customers to engage in access-based hospitality services
- The contribution of social media in promoting access-based hospitality services
- The influence of reviews and the subsequent trust in access-based hospitality services
- The use of apps to support online platforms of access-based hospitality services
- The value customers associate with access-based hospitality services
- The influence of age and gender in the use of access-based hospitality services
- The role of trust and its influence on the purchasing behaviour of access-based hospitality services
- The importance of flexibility and its influence on the choice behaviour of access-based hospitality customers.

Rather than being competitors of hotels, sharing options are more like their counterparts, enriching the variety and flexibility of hospitality services. While hotel chains offer a standardised level of service and price, sharing options provide the potential of matching a single customer’s personal needs. Utilising underutilised assets, sharing options offer peer-to-peer service to fill a gap in customised services.

As a result, this particular market segment of sharing business is designed for those who seek personalised services outside of the traditional lodging services. Embracing the changes brought about by sharing business, hoteliers should recognise their own advantage of standardisation. Business travellers may continue to consider standardised hotel services at the top of their choice in order to reduce uncertainties. To win a larger market share, hotel companies should consider partnering with multiple brands so that more diversified service categories can be offered to match various customer needs. For now, empowering service employees provides them with an opportunity to contribute their emotional intelligence to enhance value to the firm. Learning from sharing businesses, hoteliers should seek creative ways to utilise social media to generate customers’ emotional bonds with the business.

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