RHM
2019
Research in
**Hospitality
Management**

What motivates people to become Airbnb hosts – do we know enough? — an exploration of the literature

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ABSTRACT: Airbnb hosts open their doors to provide hospitality for strangers in 7 million homes in more than 100 000 cities around the world. On top of that, Airbnb hosts offer 40 000 guided local experiences across more than 1 000 cities around the world. Yet, in this article, we found that only a limited number of peer-reviewed studies exist on what motivates people to host. Sharing makes a great deal of sense for the consumer, the environment and for communities if managed and balanced fairly by companies and governments. The holistic and thematic map of Airbnb host motivators offered by this article provides hands-on value to those companies and governments and numerous other stakeholders affected by the sharing economy. The findings map a large span of motivational factors that hosts experience, ranging from financial, safety, and security risks of having to submit and renegotiate one's intimate, affective space and private sphere – to escaping loneliness, connecting with people, making new friends and earning money as a micro-entrepreneur. Finally, the article finds that the thematic categories are interrelated, as the existence of an assurance structure for financial transactions does seem to reduce uncertainty among hosts, allowing them to participate.

KEYWORDS: Airbnb host motivation, Airbnb micro-entrepreneurship, collaborative consumption, sharing economy

Introduction

On average, two million people sleep in a stranger's Airbnb bed each night (https://news.airbnb.com/fast-facts/). These strangers are 650 000 people who have become Airbnb hosts. The strangers are fundamental to the existence of Airbnb and the sharing economy that is transforming societies and the hospitality industry. That is why we need to conduct more research to uncover the mystery of what motives the strangers — the hosts — to supply hospitality experiences to a growing number of guests.

As some hosts offer multiple places to stay, the 650 000 hosts offer in total 7 million listings ready to welcome strangers around the world (https://news.airbnb.com/fast-facts/). This has been achieved in just 11 years since Airbnb was founded in 2008 (https://news.airbnb.com/about-us/).

Sharing makes a great deal of sense for the consumer, the environment and for communities if managed and balanced fairly by companies and governments. From an ecological, societal, and developmental point of view, the sharing economy has become popular (Belk, 2014b; Matzler, Veider & Kathan, 2015). In order to overcome economic and institutional issues, consumers embrace the development of a collaborative lifestyle through the sharing economy (Zhang, Bufquin & Lu, 2019). Airbnb offers have affected the tourism sector by increasing the number of destinations selected, the length of the stay as well as the number of activities pursued (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2015). Today's sharing economy has seen unimaginable growth rates. Pioneering companies such

as Airbnb depend on their ability to motivate a large number of hosts to attract and deliver the experience to the guest, yet research to date has focused mostly on guest motivation, omitting host motivation (Guttentag, 2016; 2019).

Even though Airbnb enjoys enormous success, many potential hosts decide not to become hosts, just as many existing hosts refrain from hosting more often than a few weeks a year. It seems odd that Airbnb hosts often with no hospitality-, experience- or tourism management education or experience can compete so easily with the decades of experience that hotel chains possess. Even though Airbnb grows much faster than i.e. hotel chains, hotels are likely better at managing and monitoring service quality levels, and Airbnb hosts may struggle to compete with hotels' ability to perform standardized service quality and security. However, this seems apparently irrelevant to many guests, as Airbnb offers an alternative value proposition centred around cost-savings and a more authentic local experience (Guttentag, 2016; 2019).

As the sharing economy is a relatively new, growing field, some variations exist when it comes to which terms and definitions apply. This article applies the term *sharing economy*, other terms being applied by researchers are the *collaborative economy*, *peer-to-peer* or *platform economy*. Each term has its own associations and limitations. Sharing is a phenomenon as old as human kind, and sharing is a cultural institution in society exemplified by the fact that parents teach children to share from an early age to be able to function in society. What has fuelled the engine of the sharing economy and its rapid growth is the

widespread use of the internet (Belk, 2014a) combined with more and cheaper ways of travel. The sharing part of the sharing economy refers to the notion of value creation in collaboration with a broader range of stakeholders (Kramer & Porter, 2011). Digital media connects the stakeholders and their resources and needs, enabling the transaction to take place (Zhang et al., 2019). Sharing is perhaps a new paradigm — a radical new way of approaching value creation that might have an enormous potential, not just for tourism, but also for organisations and society in general. Botsman and Rogers (2011) propose that collaborative consumption could be as important as the Industrial Revolution in terms of how we conceptualise and strategise on ownership versus access in business and societal development (Belk, 2014a). The terms *guest* and *host* have been challenged by Slattery (2002), claiming that since an economic transaction is involved, the more accurate term should be *seller* and *buyer*. Even though the relationship is not philanthropic but economic, we find *guest* and *host* to be the most precise labels as these point to the fact that this is not just a physical product being sold, but an intangible service experience being delivered by a real person in the complex role of the host.

Methodology

As Guttentag's (2019) literature review of the progress of Airbnb research only identified two relevant peer-reviewed papers on host motivation, this article considers not only papers on the topic, but also papers relatively close to the topic of Airbnb host motivation. The key words "Airbnb host motivation", "Airbnb host drivers" and "Airbnb micro-entrepreneurship" were used. Each article was carefully examined to make a decision on its inclusion, utilising topic and theme as criteria. Eleven peer-reviewed papers were identified to be able to offer direct value to the aim of this article (see Figure 1). Only papers focusing on Airbnb explicitly but not necessarily exclusively were included (such as papers focusing on Airbnb and other companies).

A thematic content analysis establishing key categories from each paper was conducted. The objective was not to count or to compare the categories, but simply to provide an overview

FIGURE 1: The four Ps of airbnb host motivation (Source: Fischer, Pahus & Bager, simple version)

of host motivation with the identified thematic categories. We found that both the barriers and the motivators were relevant in the thematic categorisation of our findings to provide a clearer and more holistic model of host motivation.

Results

As anyone can become an Airbnb host, the motivational factors behind becoming a host are rich and diverse — which our thematic categorisation also demonstrates (Table 1). The division of the results into four separate categories provides an overview. However, it should be underlined that in reality the categories often appear as a cocktail, being more mixed and interrelated, which the arrows in Figure 1 illustrate.

In the following part, we explain four categories of host motivation and summarise the categories in our model called "The four Ps model of Airbnb host motivation: Pains, people, psychology, profit".

Pains

This part of the findings categorises the pains to host participation and motivation. The fact that many hosts only make their private space available for booking a few weeks a year is not necessarily a problem as overuse of Airbnb can result in negative effects for other stakeholders such as neighbours, other tenants and, of course, for Airbnb's image. However, to understand what motivates hosts, we argue that knowledge of the pains of hosting also need to be made clear as the four categories are interconnected in practice.

We can see from Malazizi, Alipour and Olya's (2018) research, which argues that host satisfaction is negatively influenced by financial, safety and security risks, that the financial aspect functions both as a gain and a pain. However, most pain themes are related to the two other motivational categories of this article — the social and psychological categories.

Roelofsen and Mincas's (2018) article "The Superhost. Biopolitics, home and community in the Airbnb dream-world of global hospitality" takes on a unique perspective investigating the deeper host pains and sociological and psychological costs of participating in peer-to-peer activities. On a similar path, Roelofsen explores and discusses home as a place of belonging versus the Airbnb world as a place of performing (Roelofsen, 2018). The positive emotions of hosting go hand-in-hand with submitting and renegotiating one's most intimate, affective space and private sphere. "Hospitality in the Airbnb sharing economy allows for turning the inside (the home) out, since it is also the outsider who contributes to (re-)determine the borders of the home while sharing the spaces of intimacy with the host" (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018, p. 178). Furthermore, Airbnb hosts run the very likely risk that their personal intimacy will be published to the world through direct and perhaps very personal ratings and public descriptions that might in turn become centre of public debate among several former guests. The ratings and public descriptions will not only focus on tangibles such as square metres or number of beds, but also — and increasingly so — on the intangibles that function as an integral part of the unique, authentic and personal experiences that many guests are looking for (Milanova & Maas, 2017). These intangibles could, for example, be senses, emotions and conversations — which the host might have considered private. It could, most likely, also be selfies and social media posts from the growing millenial
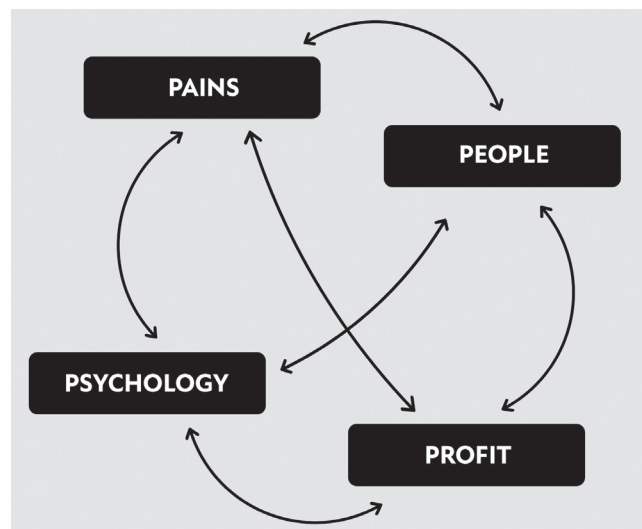
TABLE 1: The four ps model of airbnb host motivation, extended version

The four Ps of Airbnb host motivation	Example/source
Pains	Financial, safety and security risks (Malazizi et al., 2018)
	Stress from guest expectations and guest reviews (Zhang et al., 2019)
	The sacrifice of the "proper" privacy and intimacy (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018)
	Renegotiating one's most intimate, affective space and practices (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018)
	Sharing the spaces of intimacy (Roelofsen, 2018)
	Guests expect deep homely, intimate experiences from the hosts' personal space (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018)
People	Cultural learning (Zhang et al., 2019)
	Ease of operations (Zhang et al., 2019)
	Allows people who have a desire for stronger communities to create and maintain social connections (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2015)
	Guest reviews both motivate hosts to share more information and give hosts a sense of pride; Social interaction and friendship (Malazizi et al., 2018)
	Perceived credibility of peer online profile, peer-to-peer (P2P) face-to-face interaction reciprocity, P2P rapport and P2P dyadic trust were particularly important factors in determining the positive perception (Moon, Miao, Hanks, & Line, 2018)
	The monetary aspect serves as a gateway to the social interaction and many of the "most valued" intrinsic benefits of hosting such as the gratification of being a good host and several "ancillary benefits" (Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016)
	Enjoying the freedom of working as a micro-entrepreneur without (or with less) hierarchies (Zhang et al., 2019).
Psychology	Freedom, flexibility, personal growth, feeling of achievement (Zhang et al., 2019)
	Hosting might create social connectedness and thus less social and emotional loneliness (Malazizi et al., 2018)
	It feels good to see spare rooms or vacant houses as resources that should not be wasted (Zhang et al., 2019)
	Hosts' attachment and psychological ownership positively influences organisational citizenship behaviour toward Airbnb (Lee et al., 2018).
Profit	Financial gains (Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016) and the economic independence of being a micro-entrepreneur in the sharing economy (Zhang et al., 2019)
	The existence of an assurance structure for financial transactions seems to reduce uncertainty and a sense of risk among Airbnb hosts, ultimately paving the way for them to become hosts (Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016)
	When money is involved, the host feels more motivated to act like a host and vice versa, making both more comfortable with rules for the social exchange (Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016).

generation that in turn might not only invade the private sphere, but also lead to burglary if the hosts' design furniture and valuable belongings become visible online.

Personalisation and authenticity are big consumer trends, and the nature of the Airbnb platform design is to market the human beings delivering the authentic, local and personal service experience, while more conventional forms of tourism tend to use faces of unnamed models in their promotional materials (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018). This puts constraints on the personal space or the private versus public sphere of the host. One can argue that this is just part of the game and not necessarily unfair as this also goes for the guest who by using personal photos and description increases his/her chances of having the booking accepted by the host. However, Roelofsen and Minca (2018) emphasise that guests having homely, intimate experiences, nonetheless, represents a pervasive way of interfering with the hosts' daily living spaces (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018).

In the article "Motivators behind information disclosure: Evidence from Airbnb hosts", Liang, Li, Liu, & Schuckert (2019) argue that receiving more reviews and getting higher ratings in a prior period can motivate hosts to disclose more information in the subsequent period. Moreover, hosts are also motivated to offer more information by higher review volume and valence. It is not just about the quantity of reviews because more informative and readable reviews could further motivate sellers to upload information to their profiles (Liang et al., 2019). If hosts add more information, chances are that it will benefit the platform and its guests, ideally contributing to a more trustworthy platform experience and more returning guests.

People

This category concerns the motivational factors to do with the social interaction with guests. Some of the most powerful motivators among hosts have their roots in a need to socialise and establish an emotional bond with others. The people motivator can take place face-to-face during the experience or after the experience online during, for example, reading a guest review.

In "Exploring the effect of Airbnb hosts' attachment and psychological ownership in the sharing economy" (2018), Lee, Yang and Koo find that attachment to a platform plays a vital role in achieving a sense of psychological ownership that ultimately influences host behaviours toward the organisation as well as toward peer hosts. Psychological ownership is defined as "the identification of a particular object as 'mine' or 'ours'" (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004, in Lee et al., 2018, p. 285), thus being significantly connected to a person's "attitude, motivation and behaviour", especially — but not exclusively — in an employee organisation-related context. The study by Lee et al. (2018) proves a link between psychological ownership and organisational citizen behaviour in Airbnb hosts. Lee et al. (2018, p. 285) further explain psychological ownership as a concept that "can be derived from a sense of emotional attachment to other individuals in the firm as well as the firm". This definition underlines the potential advantages for the organisation that has employees who demonstrate psychological ownership. Similarly, employees who exhibit psychological ownership are likely to engage in organisational citizen behaviour, which is defined as "employee behaviour that is not essential in completing job

tasks but supports organizational operation, such as helping co-workers and participating in roles that are not formally required" (Lee & Allen, 2002, in Lee et al., 2018, p. 285). In a traditional organisational context, psychological ownership and organisational citizen behaviour are relevant as both concepts serve to establish an emotional bond between the employee and the organisation, hence providing the organisation with an important human resource advantage. Even though Airbnb hosts cannot be viewed as conventional employees, the existence of a bond between Airbnb and the hosts may hint at traditional ways of motivating them. In their article, Lee et al. (2018) arrive at the following findings:

- Information sharing and outcome expectations positively influence attachment to Airbnb;
- Self-disclosure and similarity (among peer hosts) positively influence attachment to peer hosts (a combination of the psychological and people motivator);
- Hosts' attachment to Airbnb positively influences psychological ownership; and
- Psychological ownership positively influences organisational citizenship behaviour toward peer hosts.

The article thus also supports the notion of our proposed model of host motivations that the categories, in this case People and Psychology, are interrelated, which calls for a holistic and inter-thematic perspective on Airbnb host motivation. Sharing economy platforms have been found to positively influence socialisation and a sense of belonging (Möhlmann, 2015). These social and psychological perspectives are rich and complex and deserve further attention from researchers.

Social interaction and connectedness are potentially some of the beneficial outcomes of the sharing economy (Malazizi et al., 2018). Knowing this can motivate hosts to invest or live with the psychological risk they take to run their business, which leads us to the next category about the psychological aspect of host motivation.

Psychology
According to Malazizi et al. (2018), the hosting experience can lead to social connectedness and thus less social and emotional loneliness. Specifically, Airbnb provides an opportunity to improve the hosts' social interactions and connectedness with other people. The study by Farmarki and Stergiou (2019) "Escaping loneliness through Airbnb host-guest interactions" supports not only that hosts are motivated by social and psychological factors, but also argues that these factors are increasingly important in a time when loneliness troubles more and more people. The perspective that one of the fundamental appeals of the hosting experience are its social and psychological elements, which contributes to countering loneliness and social isolation, is quite new in the field of the sharing economy. However, in tourism research, the idea of understanding tourism from social and psychological perspectives is not new. According to Larsen (2007), tourism as a social force can often function as a means of escaping loneliness, just as tourism may have the potential to strengthen familial relationships and social interactions. Farmaki and Stergiou's article puts an entirely new perspective on the guest-host relationship and host drivers. First, Farmaki and Stergiou highlight Perlman and Peplau's definition of loneliness as "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is significantly deficient in either quality or quantity" (as cited in Farmaki & Stergiou,

2019, p. 1), and Weiss argues that loneliness may stem from either emotional or social isolation (cited in Farmarki & Stergiou, 2019). According to Ditommaso et al. (1993, as cited in Farmaki & Stergiou, 2019), emotional loneliness derives from the absence of close relationships and is concerned with the quality of social interactions, whereas social loneliness emerges from having inadequate social networks. Similarly, it is worth mentioning that although some people are at a high risk of feeling lonely, no age group or part of society is safe from feeling lonely at times — 30 million adults in Europe feel frequently lonely, with 75 million people meeting friends and family at most once a month (Farmaki & Stergiou, 2019).

The fact that loneliness and psychological needs in general can function as key drivers for host participation must be very relevant knowledge for governments and policy makers as this puts a different perspective on understanding and defining the societal value of Airbnb and the sharing economy. Also, the findings offer value to Airbnb and the opportunity to redesign and improve the platform to ensure a better compatibility between hosts and guests who are experiencing loneliness and social isolation. We recommend that Airbnb considers the pairing of its users to specific types of people experiencing different physical or psychological needs, thus tailoring practices to a more personal experience with a better match for each host and guest. This pairing may contribute to more social forms of tourism and in turn have a beneficial effect on the general well-being of society. At first, this might come across as a quite alternative business opportunity for Airbnb, but Airbnb has the size and the skills to capitalise on this exact need for connectedness through appropriate segmentation adjustments on the platform without disturbing those hosts and guests who are on the platform for other reasons. This venture might make even more sense in a time when Airbnb is often the victim of negative press in the media. Perhaps this focus on social and psychological needs might also improve Airbnb's image among sceptical stakeholders such as locals or politicians representing local residents who do not get their slice of the pie but merely experience the negative consequences of the rise of Airbnb (Farmaki & Stergiou, 2019). Finally, hosts can obtain a new identity as micro-entrepreneurs enjoying the feelings of freedom, flexibility, achievement and personal growth (Zhang et al., 2019).

Profit
The fourth and final P concerns profit as a host motivator. As is the case with the other Ps, profit has a separate effect on host motivation together with an effect on the other Ps. In "Hosting via Airbnb – Motivations and assurances in monetized network hospitality" (2016), Lampinen and Cheshire study the area of host motivations by investigating how financial assurance structures such as the Airbnb application may reduce uncertainty for Airbnb hosts and guests. Furthermore, the article put focus on extrinsic versus intrinsic motivations among hosts.

As we mentioned in our category about pains, various forms of risk can demotivate hosts. Lampinen and Cheshire (2016) also take the stance that risk and uncertainty are factors that have the potential to demotivate, but also to motivate hosts and potential hosts. Focusing on the peer-to-peer (P2P) exchange, Lampinen and Cheshire then discuss social exchange theory, host motivation for participating in P2P exchanges and, lastly, the area of network hospitality.

Based on the research question, *How does the primary, negotiated exchange of money for space and hospitality create opportunities for other exchanges between hosts and guests?*, the study itself is founded on 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with future/current/former Airbnb hosts based in the area around San Francisco Bay in California. The twelve interviewees represent a varied segment of hosts — both men and women (3 and 9, respectively), aged from 27 to 65 years. Nine of the 12 interviewees had experience as both hosts and guests, whereas four of them also had experience as couch-surfing hosts as a non-financial alternative to Airbnb.

Among the primary findings, Lampinen and Cheshire (2016) conclude that the existence of an assurance structure for financial transactions seems to reduce uncertainty and a sense of risk among Airbnb hosts, ultimately providing potential hosts with the necessary certainty to decide to become hosts. In fact, even though many of the interviewees mention financial gains as a motivation factor, the study shows that, "[from] the perspective of hosts...the concept of 'sharing' in a system like Airbnb encompasses social interactions that are facilitated by the initial financial exchange" (Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016, p. 1677). In other words, the monetary aspect serves as a gateway into the world of P2P social exchange. The study thus shows how the financial motivation exists side by side with often surprising — but highly rewarding — intrinsic motivations.

The monetary exchange (as a contrast to couch-surfing, which is free) may have the implication that "guests have higher expectations" and are "more willing to ask for things" (Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016, p. 1677), thus to a higher extent turning them into traditional customers. This, however, may also help provide a relatively clear set of expectations for both guests and hosts.

One implication of this is the importance of the service provider (in the study this is often referred to as the "trusted third party" besides the guest and the host, in this case Airbnb) to provide a reliable platform that can manage the monetary exchange, thus providing the gateway to both financial as well as intrinsic benefits for the hosts. The study's relevance to us lies primarily in its investigation of extrinsic/financial versus intrinsic motivations of the hosts.

We have now thematically categorised and explained the identified categories of host motivation. Our proposed model of Airbnb host motivation — The four Ps of Airbnb host motivation — summarises and highlights the findings.

Discussion

This article's ambition to provide a clear, thematic overview of Airbnb host motivation, which resulted in the four Ps model, was both enriched and challenged by the multi-faceted and complex elements that co-exist and co-influence the host experience. Overall, we find that there is a pressing need to focus more primary research on the role of the host rather than the current focus on the guest. As is the nature of service encounters, the interaction between customer (guest) and service provider (in this case the host) is of a reciprocal nature, which means that in order for Airbnb to continue to have satisfied guests, a deeper understanding of the motives of the hosts is required. The guest might either leave a negative review or choose not to use Airbnb for their next stay, which in turn, according to Liang et al. (2019), decreases the motivation for the hosts to use Airbnb for the purpose of lending out their facilities.

Bearing this in mind, in future studies, we intend to delve deeper into the balance between extrinsic/financial versus intrinsic motivations of the hosts as suggested by Lampinen and Cheshire (2016). Especially the relation between the monetary motivators *("I am renting out my apartment on Airbnb to make money")* versus the "softer" motivators *("I am renting out my apartment on Airbnb to meet new people...")* seems obvious.

Our main focus in the upcoming research project will be the city of Aarhus in Denmark. The reason for choosing Aarhus is that Airbnb recently entered into a partnership with the regional municipality and tourism organisation, which would suggest an increasing number of guests using Airbnb as their accommodation provider. Subsequently, the hosts in Aarhus are highly likely to experience an increase in activity, which forms the basis of our assumption that the newfound collaboration will increase the number of service providers (hosts) in the city. Both the increase in activity and the number of hosts, combined with partnership between Airbnb and the municipality, make Aarhus an ideal site for further research into motivational factors of hosts. Our research will be conducted with relevant stakeholders and take place in 2020–2021, and will investigate the motivational factors that concern the hosts.

Conclusion

A thematic map of host motivational factors illustrated by this article's four Ps model of Airbnb host motivation will have solid value for Airbnb's future strategic development of its platform, and clear societal value. National and local governments can use these findings to understand the fundamental driving forces behind the sharing economy and thus navigate better in the complex challenge of making policies and strategies that make the most of the huge power and historical potential that the sharing economy offers to a large number of different stakeholders. As the amount of relevant research into hosts was found to be scarce, we had to broaden the reach of our literature search, which meant including research articles that dealt with peripheral but still relevant topics regarding host motivation. Subsequently, that led us to thematically map out four main motivational elements: Pains, People, Psychology, and Profit.

Dealing with elements that concerned the demotivating factors, concerns about one's privacy and the intimacy of the home were accentuated. When studying the People and Psychology categories, a strong connection between the two was identified in the sense that they both address the socialising element in the sharing economy. Social interaction made it possible for hosts to gain new friends, whereas the psychological motivators dealt with the sharing economy as a means to alleviate loneliness. Finally, the Profit category dealt with elements of trust and security in financial transactions between host and guest, but also with the balance between extrinsic/financial versus intrinsic motivations of the hosts, as suggested by Lampinen and Cheshire (2016). This last element will be the focal point for our research project concerning hosts in the city of Aarhus, Denmark, in 2020–2021.

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