

Spend Less and Experience More: Understanding the Social Contact in Airbnb Context

Considering the existing literature in Airbnb and social contact, several concerns are raised. First, the majority of the literature is exploring the contact between tourists and hosts, other kinds of contact encountered during travel are largely overlooked. Second, as an emerging and popular accommodation platform, Airbnb calls for more in-depth investigations to help understand this new platform and how individuals behave under this unique form of accommodation. Last, previous research emphasized on the types of social contact as well as the measurement of social contact, however, limited efforts have been made to explore the antecedents and consequences of social contact. In that case, the current study aims to bridge those research gaps by exploring the social contact between guests and the possible groups, identifying the antecedents and consequences of the social contact for Airbnb guests and hence providing implications for the industry and communities.

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, the current study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the rich content of the social contact, its antecedents and consequences in Airbnb context. Individuals who have the accommodation experience booked on the Airbnb platform in the last two years were viewed as qualified informants for the current study. Convenience sampling were used to find the respondents. Respondents were also asked to invite their friends and relatives who were qualified for this research to participate. In particular, two focus groups and 25 in-depth interviews were conducted, involving 39 individuals in total.

At the beginning of the focus groups/interviews, respondents were asked to share their contacts with others during their stays in Airbnb. They were also enquired about the perceived antecedents and consequences of those contacts encountered when staying in Airbnb. Textual

data from the transcripts were interpreted and analyzed with thematic analysis via the qualitative analytical software Nvivo 11.

As a result, determinants of social contact were explored among Airbnb guests. In particular, 20 activities of contact were obtained, including asking for information, casually chatting, accommodation service, transportation service and sharing experience. Those activities can be further classified into three types according to the contact groups, namely, guest-Airbnb host contact (12 items), guest-community contact (5 items) and guest-guest peer contact (3 items). Regarding the determinants of social contact, respondents provided a wide range of items, which may facilitate or constrain guests' interactions with other parties. In general, items such as language competence, cultural/political sensitivity, travel companions' communication competence, and character of guests can influence guests' contacts with Airbnb hosts, local communities and peer guests. By contact group, Airbnb guests' contacts with the hosts can be determined by hosts' taste, staying with the hosts in the same units (or not), and potential business opportunities for staying in host's other properties. Guests' contacts with the communities can be influenced by travel schedule, characters of the locals, and security level of the destinations. Guests' contacts with peer guests can be determined by other guests' characters. In addition, social contact can influence guests in the following ways, such as reinforcing the experience of local customs and lifestyle, self-improvement, developing the destination images, sense of belonging etc..

The social interaction between tourists and hosts may be considered as a key factor to determine tourists' perceived value, enjoyment (Tussyadiah, 2016) and satisfaction (Heo, 2016). The unique local experience (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2015) and meaningful social encounter (Cheng, 2016) highlight the differentiations between Peer to Peer (P2P) and traditional accommodation

service. By reading “digital word-of-mouth”, users have power to control their decision (Forno & Garibaldi, 2015). This study identified the unique social contact determinants of Airbnb platform users which contributes to traditional accommodation providers’ understanding of the trend of sharing economy as well as provide better service.