Exploring the customer experience with Airbnb

Jing Li, Simon Hudson and Kevin Kam Fung So

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the multi-dimensional structure of the Airbnb customer experience and to examine the influences of this experience on behavioral outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – A multi-phase methodology was adopted using a survey questionnaire to explore the dimensions. Data were collected from a sample of 561 Airbnb users in the USA. Exploratory factor analysis and confirmed factor analysis were conducted to evaluate the reliability and validity of the scale.

Findings – First, the results support the hypothesis that the Airbnb customer experience comprises four dimensions: home benefits, personalized services, authenticity and social connection. Second, the study demonstrates that these dimensions significantly influence customers’ behavioral intentions.

Research limitations/implications – The use of a US Airbnb users sample may affect the generalizability of the results.

Practical implications – The findings of this study provide insights for Airbnb hosts and hotel managers. More specifically, this study offers suggestions to Airbnb hosts about how to enhance their services to customers based on the four experience dimensions and to hotels about how they can compete with Airbnb on the four experience dimensions.

Originality/value – This study provides an important theoretical framework for measuring the Airbnb customer experience through an empirical examination.

Keywords Airbnb, Experience, Scale development

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The sharing economy is having a disruptive influence on the travel industry as a whole (Guttentag, 2015) and is significantly impacting the hospitality and tourism sector (Zhu et al., 2017). Entire communities and cities around the world are using network technologies to do more with less, by renting, lending, swapping, bartering, gifting and sharing products on a scale never seen before (Botsman and Rogers, 2011). The companies driving the sharing economy cross different sectors; Airbnb and CouchSurfing in lodging, Lyft and Uber in transportation and Feastly and EatWith in the restaurant sector. For consumers, these companies are attractive because they offer lower prices, better accessibility, greater flexibility, ease of use and ‘a user focused mission’, including transparency and interactive communication (Clark, 2014; ITB, 2014).

In the global tourism industry, Airbnb is significantly changing consumption patterns with the social and economic appeals of this new phenomenon affecting expansion in destination selection, increase in travel frequency, length of stay and the range of activities participated in tourism destinations (Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2016b). The aim of Airbnb is to let tourists “live like a local”. In 2016, the company rolled out a new feature called Trips designed to provide travelers with a one-stop shop. The feature focuses on three areas – experiences, places and homes, providing not only accommodations, but also local

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experiences. The hallmark of Airbnb Experiences is a new category of bookable one- or two-day excursions, which are designed and led by inspiring locals. Also, Airbnb advertisements address the whole experiential aspect of staying with Airbnb in contrast to the experience of a hotel stay. Airbnb hosts can offer unique experiences and meaningful interactions, allowing customers to try different activities while traveling.

The rise of Airbnb has resulted in an emerging body of academic literature on the topic, covering areas such as: the acceptance of online purchase technology, risk, trust, regulation and reputation of the sharing platform (Chen and Xie, 2017; Ert et al., 2016; Lamberton and Rose, 2012; Mao and Lyu, 2017; Mauri et al., 2018); motivations and constrains to use Airbnb (Cheng and Jin, 2019; Gibbs et al., 2018; Guttentag et al., 2017; Lalicic and Weismayer, 2018; So et al., 2018; Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2016a; Tussyadiah and Zach, 2017); adoption and participation intention (Amaro et al., 2018; Boateng et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018; Parguel et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2017); repurchase intention (Liang et al., 2018a; Liang et al., 2018b; Mao and Lyu, 2017; Wang and Jeong, 2018); pricing strategies (Gibbs et al., 2018; Wang and Nicolau, 2017; Zhang et al., 2018); value co-creation and co-destruction with Airbnb (Camilleri and Neuhofer, 2017; Sthapit, 2018; Johnson and Neuhofer, 2017; Zhang et al., 2018); and the impact of Airbnb on the hotel industry (Akbar and Tracogna, 2018; Blai et al., 2018; Cheng and Foley, 2018; Guttentag, 2015; Zervas et al., 2017). More specifically, So et al. (2018) found that the price value, enjoyment and home benefits significantly influence customers overall attitude toward Airbnb. Regarding behavioral intentions, only enjoyment showed great significant effect.

These studies have enriched the literature on the consumer perspectives of Airbnb, yet little is known about the actual consumer experience. Despite an increasing interest in consumer experiences in tourism and hospitality in general (Agapito et al., 2013; Gentile et al., 2007; Oh et al., 2007), empirical research on the conceptualization and measurement of customer experience in the Airbnb sector remains sparse. According to Gilmore and Pine (2002), the society has moved from the commodities economy, goods economy and service economy to the fourth economic stage – experience economy. This transition has significant implications for the tourism and hospitality industry. In the experience economy, people not only seek high-quality products and services, but also want unique and memorable experiences (Guttentag, 2015). Therefore, to better attract and satisfy customers, there is a need for accommodation providers in the sharing economy to understand their customers from an experiential perspective. Hotels would also benefit from a deeper understanding of the sharing economy experience. Hotels often cannot compete with Airbnb on price, but they can compete on experiences (Mody et al., 2017). The research objective of this current study, therefore, is to conceptualize and examine the multi-dimensional structure of Airbnb customer experience and to measure the influence of this experience on customer behavioral intentions.

2. Literature review

This section provides an extensive review of the literature pertaining to customer experience and specifically the dimensions of the Airbnb customer experience proposed in this study. The discussion of previous research and relative theories serves to provide the theoretical foundation for this study.

2.1 Customer experience

The definition of customer experience has been discussed by researchers in the field of business, marketing, tourism and hospitality. But there is no consensus about this definition. Pine and Gilmore (1998) were the first to define customer experience as “events that engage individuals in a personal way”. Similarly, Sheth et al. (1999)
demonstrated that customer experience is shaped by social, cultural and personal variables. Furthermore, customer experience has been conceptualized as a psychological construct, which “originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organization” (Shaw and Ivens, 2005, p.16). Gentile et al. (2007) defined customer experience as a multi-dimensional construct of elementary components, including sensorial, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle and relational components. Finally, according to Meyer and Schwager (2007, p.118), “customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company”.

In the context of tourism and hospitality, various studies have examined the dimensions of customer experience (Clemes et al., 2011; Ismail, 2011; Hemmington, 2007; Khan and Rahman, 2017; Knutson et al., 2009; McIntosh and Siggs, 2005; Otto and Ritchie, 1996; Oh et al., 2007; Rageh and Melewar, 2013; Ren et al., 2016; Walls et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2018) and these studies are summarized in Table I. For example, Knutson et al. (2009) identified the dimensions of a hotel experience and found such an experience consists of four factors: benefit, convenience, incentive and environment. More recently, Khan and Rahman (2017) developed a scale to measure hotel brand experiences which include five dimensions – hotel location, hotel stay and ambience, hotel staff competence, hotel website and social media experience and guest-to-guest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
<th>Prior studies on customer experience in hospitality services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autor(s), Year</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dimensions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otto and Ritchie (1996)</td>
<td>Hedonics, peace of mind, involvement and recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIntosh and Siggs (2005)</td>
<td>Unique character, personalized service, hominess, quality and value added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemmington (2007)</td>
<td>Host–guest relationship, generosity, theater and performance, numerous small surprises and safety and security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh et al. (2007)</td>
<td>Entertainment, education, escapism and esthetics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Theme and activities, social interactions and physical environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knutson et al. (2009)</td>
<td>Environment, convenience, driving benefit and incentive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clemes et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Interaction, physical environment and outcome quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ismail (2011)</td>
<td>Advertising, price, employees, servicescape, core service, word-of-mouth and mood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rageh and Melewar (2013)</td>
<td>Comfort, educational, hedonic, novelty, recognition, relational, safety and beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walls et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Physical environment, human interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ren et al. (2016)</td>
<td>Tangible and sensorial experience, staff aspect, aesthetic perception and location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khan and Rahman (2017)</td>
<td>Hotel location, hotel stay and ambience, hotel staff competence, hotel website and social media experience and guest-to-guest experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
experience. Similarly, five experiential dimensions were identified in the boutique accommodation sector: unique character, personalized service, hominess, quality and value added (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005). Relatedly, Ren et al. (2016) identified four dimensions of customer experience with budget hotels in China, namely, tangible-sensorial experience, staff relational and interactional experience, aesthetic perception and location. Finally, Oh et al. (2007) have developed a measurement scale of tourists’ destination lodging experiences in the bed-and-breakfast (B&B) setting on the basis of Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) four realms of experience – entertainment, education, escapism and esthetics – and found that these experiences influence customers’ memories and satisfaction. However, the dimensionalities mentioned above are based on full-service hotel setting, boutique accommodation setting and B&B setting, which may not apply into the new consumption model offered by Airbnb sector. Given a lack of reliable and valid scale to measure the Airbnb customer experience, this study initially attempted to develop such a scale.

A few studies have explored the dimensions or variables that influence customer intentions in the sharing economy (Amaro et al., 2018; Camilleri and Neuhofer, 2017; Wang and Nicolau, 2017). Amaro et al. (2018), for example, conducted an empirical study to explore millennials’ intentions to book Airbnb. The results showed that subjective norm, economic benefits and attitude are important determinants of booking intentions for millennials. Millennials prefer authenticity, value for money, flexibility and experiences-over-possessions in their consumption. However, neither did Amaro et al. (2018) consider the social interactions perspective of Airbnb nor did Wang and Nicolau (2018), who identified five categories that determine the price of sharing economy, namely, host attributes, site and property attributes, amenities and services, rental rules and number of online reviews and ratings. More specifically, they found that factors such as accommodation location, the number of bathrooms, bedrooms, real bed, wireless internet and free parking have a significantly positive influence on Airbnb price. Relatedly, Camilleri and Neuhofer (2017) identified the factors in shaping customer value formation, which include welcoming, expressing feelings, evaluating location and accommodation, helping and interaction, recommending and thanking. Their study underlined the importance of basic elements of Airbnb accommodations and addressed the interactions between hosts and guests. More recently, Ju et al. (2019) found that social interaction influences the overall consumer experience in the sharing economy.

2.2 Dimensions of the Airbnb customer experience

Four dimensions were identified in this current study as a result of a comprehensive review of the extant literature on Airbnb experience, namely, home benefits, personalized service, social interactions and authenticity. Each of these dimensions is discussed further in the ensuring section.

Home benefits: More than 85 per cent of people choose Airbnb because of its home benefits (Guttentag, 2015), and several researchers have found that home benefits and physical utility are important aspects of the Airbnb customer experience (Lyu et al., 2018; Wang and Jeong, 2018). Previous literature indicates that physical environment (Knutson et al., 2009), amenities (Tussyadiah, 2015; Wang and Jeong, 2018), physical utility (Guttentag, 2015; So et al., 2018) and the location convenience (Guttentag, 2015) of Airbnb are attractive to customers. Camilleri and Neuhofer (2017) also addressed the importance of basic elements of value co-creation with Airbnb accommodations, such as locations and quiet and local environments. Compared to traditional hotels, Airbnb users are able to choose from a shared airbed to a luxury villa and can use home basic offering like kitchenware, washer and dryer during their stay with Airbnb. These functional attributes of a home enhance the customer experience (Guttentag, 2015). Atmospherics theory, proposed by Kotler (1973), provides a theoretical foundation for this dimension. As suggested by
Kotler (1973), the term atmospherics was used to describe the layout and designing of the surrounding environment to create effects on customers, which aims to enhance customers' purchasing intention. The theory emphasizes the influence of the physical environment on customer experience and purchase decision. Therefore, home benefits were proposed as one dimension of the Airbnb customer experience.

Personalized service: In the service area, personalization refers to the interaction between different parties (Tseng and Piller, 2011), and Google's data show that 36 per cent of consumers are willing to pay more for personalized experiences (Deloitte, 2015). Personalization can also be defined as the process of using a customer's information to deliver a targeted solution to that customer based on interaction (Vesanen, 2007). Marketers are increasingly addressing the importance of personalization knowing that it influences customer satisfaction and loyalty (Ball et al., 2006). In the lodging industry, customers respond positively to accommodations that deliver services based on their names, preferences and other personal information (Nyheim et al., 2015). Airbnb users expect to be treated uniquely (Lyu et al., 2018). As Airbnb does not provide standardized rooms or service, customers may often obtain special and unexpected experiences from their hosts (Lyu et al., 2018). Relatedly, Mody et al. (2017) confirmed that in the provision of accommodation experiences, Airbnb outperformed hotels in localness, communitas and personalization. The above-mentioned discussion underlines the importance of personalization service to the Airbnb customer experience. The theory of self-identity supports this dimension of the Airbnb customer experience. In line with the nature of Airbnb, the self-identity theory suggests that customers can identify their values, status, preference and activities (Becker, 1974) and it further explains why people want personalized products and services (Marathe and Sundar, 2011). Therefore, personalized service was also proposed as another dimension of the Airbnb customer experience.

Social interaction: Another dimension identified in the Airbnb customer experience literature is social interaction, which refers to the interactions between customer and host and customer and customer (Lyu et al., 2018). Mattila and Enz (2002) indicated that interpersonal relationships are a crucial part of the customer experience, and in the Airbnb context, the interaction and relationship between guest and host are important in shaping the customer experience (Guttentag, 2015; Ren et al., 2016). Airbnb customers like to communicate with their hosts via social media in advance of visiting and often expect to meet the hosts on arrival (Camilleri and Neuhofer, 2017; Lyu et al., 2018). In addition, a shared house with Airbnb provides the opportunity for customer-to-customer interaction (Tussyadiah, 2015). These interactions and relationships between guests have been shown to provide a pleasant experience (Lyu et al., 2018; Huang and Hsu, 2010). In addition, the favorable interactions between guests and hosts, such as showing guests around the house and providing a tour around the neighborhood, help shape the co-creation value formation (Camilleri and Neuhofer, 2017).

The theoretical underpinning of the social interaction dimension is social sharing of emotions theory (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Social sharing of emotions is a phenomenon in the field of psychology that concerns the tendency to recount and share emotional experiences with others (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Christophe and Rime, 1997). Numerous tourism researchers have used the social sharing of emotions theory to explain why people express emotions in their social media accounts and to explain how people interact with each other based on their emotions (Bazarova, et al., 2015; Kivran-Swaine et al., 2013). The empirical findings from these studies have demonstrated that people’s overall satisfaction after sharing emotions and experiences are highly based on interaction and social communication. For these reasons, social interaction constitutes an important dimension of Airbnb customer experience.

Authenticity: The link between customer experience and authenticity has been discussed by tourism researchers for decades (Sharpley, 1994; Wang, 1999). In the
context of tourism and hospitality, authenticity refers to a sense of uniqueness which originates from the local culture (Sharpley, 1994). Previous research has also shown how authenticity plays a crucial role in cultural tourism and that it helps in understanding tourists’ behavior, motivation and customer loyalty (Chhabra et al., 2003; Hargrove, 2002; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). For example, in heritage tourism, authenticity has been perceived as a critical factor of a meaningful customer experience (Hargrove, 2002). In the context of sharing economy, researchers have consistently highlighted authenticity as a critical dimension of the Airbnb customer experience (Birinci et al., 2018; Lyu et al., 2018; Paulauskaite et al., 2017), especially for millennials (Amaro et al., 2018). Self-determination theory provides the theoretical base for the dimension of authenticity. According to the self-determination theory, when customers’ actions reflect their true-self, in other words, when they are self-determining, they are authentic (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

In retrospect, it is proposed that the Airbnb customer experience is composed of four reflective dimensions; home benefits, personalized service, social interaction and authenticity (Table II), and it is the objective of this research to test this hypothesis to develop a reliable measurement scale for the Airbnb customer experience.

3. Method

Following Churchill (1979) and Netemeyer et al. (2003), a multi-phase study was conducted to develop the Airbnb experience measurement scale, which included item generation, item purification and reliability and validity assessment.

3.1 Item generation

Based on the research reviewed above, an initial pool of 25 items was generated to measure the Airbnb customer experience (Table III). The content validity was assessed by a panel of experts, which included three professors, experienced in hospitality and tourism research. They were invited to discuss and evaluate the degree to which each item represented the Airbnb customer experience. They were asked to provide comments on the survey layout, content, wording and understandability and to identify the redundant scale items and other scale problems to improve the proposed survey. Based on their suggestions, all of the items were revised and reorganized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table II</th>
<th>Potential dimensions of Airbnb customer experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimension</td>
<td>Conceptual definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized service</td>
<td>The services that guests can obtain from hosts, including basic services, personalized services and surprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td>The interaction between guest and host and customer and customer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Item purification

Subsequently, a pilot study with a convenience sample of 191 college students was conducted. An online data collection company, Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), was employed to access and approach the potential respondents. Respondents were asked to comment on a seven-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) and to indicate the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with the 25 items regarding their overall Airbnb experience.

Of the 300 potential respondents, 191 respondents completed the survey, a response rate of approximately 63.7 per cent. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) of sampling adequacy and Bartlett’s test of sphericity were calculated to ensure the adequacy of the sample and the appropriateness of exploratory factor analysis (EFA). KMO values for social interaction, authenticity, home benefits and personalized services were 0.91, 0.88, 0.84 and 0.87, respectively. All the values were greater than the recommended level of 0.60 (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001). Additionally, the Bartlett’s test of sphericity was 2,592.86 \( (p < 0.01) \), indicating EFA is appropriate. Subsequently, an EFA was conducted and six items (IN5, IN6, IN7, AU1, AU6 and HB5) with factor loadings lower than 0.4, and items with cross-loadings (i.e. one item was loaded on two factors with factor loading higher than 0.4) were eliminated (Field, 2013). To expect correlated factors, a factor analysis using the maximum likelihood estimation method with oblique rotation was performed on the remaining 19 items. After the factor extraction, a final four-factor model with 19 items explaining 69.61 per cent of the total variance was achieved. As shown in Table IV, the Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) value of each factor was higher than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006) and all items loaded on the intended factor.
To refine the measurement items, a main study was conducted. The target population included adult consumers (i.e. individual over the age of 18) who had used Airbnb during their previous trips in the USA within past 12 months. The survey was developed on Qualtrics and the data were collected through MTurk in March 2018. To begin with, one screening question “Have you ever used Airbnb in the last 12 months?” was used to identify eligible respondents. Thus, only respondents that had used Airbnb in the past 12 months were qualified in this current study. In addition, three attention questions were included to identify careless responses. Respondents who failed to check the attention questions were eliminated from this study. Finally, each respondent who completed the survey was compensated US$0.50. In total, 789 respondents participated in the survey. After data cleaning, 561 valid samples were retained for data analysis, resulting in a response rate of approximately 71.1 per cent.

### Table IV Exploratory factor analysis results for initial measurement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension and item description</th>
<th>Social interaction</th>
<th>Authenticity</th>
<th>Home benefits</th>
<th>Personalized services</th>
<th>( \delta )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN1. The hosts/local community were interacted with me</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN2. The hosts/local community were genuinely friendly</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN3. The hosts/local community were genuinely helpful</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN4. Staying with Airbnb allowed for interaction with other guests</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU2. I felt more engaged with the local community when I stayed with Airbnb</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU3. I closely experienced the local culture when I stayed with Airbnb</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AU4. I was exposed to authentic local villages and markets when I stayed with Airbnb</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AU5. I could immerse myself in local festivals and other cultural ceremonies during my stay with Airbnb</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AU7. Airbnb gave me an opportunity to experience the real day-to-day life of locals</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home benefits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB1. The design and decoration of my Airbnb accommodation were attractive</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB2. Airbnb offered a feeling of a real home for my trip</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB3. Using Airbnb when traveling delivered a sense of belonging</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>HB4. I like home-like amenities when I stayed with Airbnb</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personalized services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS1. Airbnb offered an entertaining accommodation experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CS2. During my stay with Airbnb, local hosts provided me with personalized guidance</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS3. Airbnb communications and services provided me with recommendations that were tailor-made for me</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS4. Personalized communication and services from Airbnb made me feel that I was a unique customer</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CS5. I received unexpected benefits/advantages during my stay with Airbnb</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CS6. I experienced unplanned and unexpected good experiences during my stay with Airbnb</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.63</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.3 Reliability and validity assessment

To refine the measurement items, a main study was conducted. The target population included adult consumers (i.e. individual over the age of 18) who had used Airbnb during their previous trips in the USA within past 12 months. The survey was developed on Qualtrics and the data were collected through MTurk in March 2018. To begin with, one screening question “Have you ever used Airbnb in the last 12 months?” was used to identify eligible respondents. Thus, only respondents that had used Airbnb in the past 12 months were qualified in this current study. In addition, three attention questions were included to identify careless responses. Respondents who failed to check the attention questions were eliminated from this study. Finally, each respondent who completed the survey was compensated US$0.50. In total, 789 respondents participated in the survey. After data cleaning, 561 valid samples were retained for data analysis, resulting in a response rate of approximately 71.1 per cent.

Within the sample, 55.6 per cent of the respondents were female and 44.4 per cent of the respondents were male. Regarding the distribution of age, there were 55.8 per cent of the respondents were between age 21 and 30 years, 27.6 per cent were between age 31 and 40 years, 11.2 per cent were between age 41 and 50 years, 3.4 per cent were between age...
51 and 60 years, 1.7 per cent were between age 61 and 70 years and 0.3 per cent were over age 70 years. Hence, among the 561 respondents representing adults in the USA who have stayed with Airbnb during their previous trips, gender was evenly distributed with slightly more female respondents in the sample. Most of the respondents were between 21 and 40 years old (83.4 per cent). The demographic variables of this study are in line with a recent industry report. According to the report provided by Pew Research Center (2016), the general age of Airbnb users is between 18 and 35 years.

3.1.1 Calibration sample. To establish the construct reliability and validity, the entire sample (N = 561) was randomly split into two subsamples: calibration sample (N = 281) and validation sample (N = 280) (Hinkin, 1995; Netemeyer et al., 2003). Subsequently, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on the calibration sample to assess the measurement model. AMOS 22.0 was used to analyze the data. The initial CFA was evaluated with all four latent factors correlated with each other as first-order factors. The model goodness-of-fit indices indicated a moderately fitted model: \( \chi^2 = 569.09, df = 164, \chi^2/df = 3.47, p < 0.01, \) comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.87, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.92, normed fit index (NFI) = 0.86, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.09 and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.09.

To improve the model fit, Kline (2011) indicated that modification indices should be examined. Allowing covariance between pairs of error will significantly improve the model fit. Covariance was drawn between the error of “CS3” (Airbnb communications and services provided me with recommendations that were tailor-made to me) and “CS2” (During my stay with Airbnb, local hosts provided me with personalized guidance). Additionally, modification indices indicated that covariance between error of “HB1” (The design and decoration of my Airbnb accommodation were attractive) and “HB4” (I like home-like amenities when I stayed with Airbnb); covariance between error of “AU4” (I was exposed to authentic local villages and markets when I stayed with Airbnb) and “AU5” (I could immerse myself in local festivals and other cultural ceremonies during my stay with Airbnb) improved the model fit. After allowing the covariance between three pairs of errors, the revised model indicated a reasonable model fit: \( \chi^2 = 458.758, df = 143, \chi^2/df = 3.20, p < 0.01, \) CFI = 0.947, TLI = 0.94, NFI = 0.925, RMSEA = 0.064 and SRMR = 0.079. Table V shows the results.

3.1.2 Construct reliability and validity. Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) value was adopted to assess the construct reliability (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table IV, Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) values of all factors were greater than the cut-off value of 0.7 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), with composite reliability values ranging from 0.85 to 0.89. Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all the constructs was above the accepted cut-off value of 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Construct validity was tested through convergent and discriminant validity of the measured constructs. Convergent validity was evaluated by inspecting the magnitude and statistical significance of the factor loadings of the measurement items, as well as the AVE of each factor exceeded 0.50 (Netemeyer et al., 2003; Hair et al., 2006). As Table IV shows, standardized factor loadings for all items were greater than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006). The \( t \)-values for all loadings exceeded the critical value of 2.57, supporting the convergent validity (Netemeyer et al., 2003). Furthermore, discriminant validity was also supported – the square root of the AVE of each factor is greater than their correlations with other factors (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Therefore, the results show that the scales were valid and reliable. Table VI presents the results.

3.1.3 Dimensionality. To confirm the appropriateness of the dimensionality of the scale, a comparison between different dimensional models was examined (DeVellis, 2016; So et al., 2014). First, a CFA was conducted with all 19 items loading on one factor, as suggested by So et al. (2014). The one-factor model demonstrated worse model fit than the four-factor model with \( \chi^2 = 1,678.47, p < 0.01 \) (Table VII). Additionally, a three-factor model was
tested by allowing two factors unchanged and allowing two most highly correlated factors (social interaction and authenticity) into one factor. The three-factor model showed worse model fit than the four-factor model with $\chi^2 = 454.43$, $p < 0.01$ (Table VII). Therefore, the results of dimensionality analysis supported the appropriateness of the four-factor model.
3.1.4 Validation sample. Similarly, a CFA was conducted on the validation sample (N = 280) (Table VIII). The composite reliability (CR) of all four factors were greater than the recommended cut-off of 0.7 and the AVEs were greater than 0.5. In addition, the standardized factor loadings were strong and t-values exceeded the critical value of 2.75. The results supported the proposed model with $\chi^2 = 509.05$, $\chi^2/df = 3.51$, $p < 0.01$, $CFI = 0.94$, $TLI = 0.93$, $NFI = 0.92$, $RMSEA = 0.07$ and $SRMR = 0.08$.

3.1.5 Factor invariance test. To get a valid scale, a multi-group CFA was conducted to examine the equality of the factor loadings across the calibration and validation samples. Both the unconstrained model and fully constrained model were tested. The results of both unconstrained and constrained models suggested good model fit. The chi-square difference between the two models was non-significant ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the factor loadings were invariant across the calibration and validation samples.

3.1.6 Test the effect of Airbnb customer experience on behavioral intentions. To examine the predictive validity, this study used behavioral intentions as a predictive variable. Past research has shown that customer experience has an impact on behavioral intentions (Brakus et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2012; Ren et al., 2016; Oh et al., 2007). Therefore, Airbnb customer experience was hypothesized to significantly influence customer behavioral intentions. The results of the model test showed that the model fit was accepted for the entire sample (N = 581) with $\chi^2 = 1,143.52$, $\chi^2/df = 5.61$, $p < 0.01$, $CFI = 0.88$, $TLI = 0.92$, $NFI = 0.87$, $RMSEA = 0.07$ and $SRMR = 0.06$ (Figure 1). The results suggested that Airbnb customer experience is a significant predictor of behavioral intentions ($\beta = 0.64$, $t = 11.23$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 62 per cent of the variance. Therefore, the results show that the Airbnb customer experience plays an important role in influencing customers’ behavioral intentions.

### Table VIII | Confirmatory factor analysis results (validation sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension and item description</th>
<th>SL</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social interaction</strong></td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN1. The hosts/local community were interacted with me</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>18.72</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>18.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN2. The hosts/local community were genuinely friendly</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>18.32</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>18.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN3. The hosts/local community were genuinely helpful</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>17.81</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>17.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN4. Staying with Airbnb allowed for interaction with other guests</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authenticity</strong></td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU2. I felt more engaged with the local community when I stayed with Airbnb</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>18.74</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>18.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU3. I closely experienced the local culture when I stayed with Airbnb</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>20.93</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>20.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU4. I was exposed to authentic local villages and markets when I stayed with Airbnb</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>17.91</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>17.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU5. I could immerse myself in local festivals and other cultural ceremonies during my stay with Airbnb</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>17.38</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>17.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AU7. Airbnb gave me an opportunity to experience the real day-to-day life of locals</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home benefits</strong></td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB1. The design and decoration of my Airbnb accommodation were attractive</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>20.64</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>20.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB2. Airbnb offered a feeling of a real home for my trip</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>15.59</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>15.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB3. Using Airbnb when traveling delivered a sense of belonging</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>17.59</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>17.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB4. I like home-amenities when I stayed with Airbnb</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personalized services</strong></td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS1. Airbnb offered an entertaining accommodation experience</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>16.31</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>16.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS2. During my stay with Airbnb, local hosts provided me with personalized guidance</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>14.36</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>14.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS3. Airbnb communications and services provided me with recommendations that were tailor-made for me</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>15.50</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>15.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS4. Personalized communication and services from Airbnb made me feel that I was a unique customer</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>16.39</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>16.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS5. I received unexpected benefits during my stay with Airbnb</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>13.84</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>13.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS6. I experienced unexpected good experiences during my stay with Airbnb</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** $\chi^2 = 509.05$; $\chi^2/df = 3.51$; $p < 0.01$; goodness-of-fit index = 0.91; comparative fit index = 0.94; Tucker–Lewis index = 0.93; normed fit index = 0.92; root mean square error of approximation = 0.07 and standardized root mean square residual = 0.08; SL = standardized loadings; TV = t-value, CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted and N/A = not applicable.
4. Discussion

The study aimed to understand the multi-dimensions of the customer experience with Airbnb and to develop a reliable and valid measurement scale. To achieve this, a multi-phase research study was designed to explore four dimensions of the Airbnb customer experience – home benefits, personalized services, authenticity and social interactions. Factor analysis was used to identify the latent factors and CFA was used to refine the measurement scale. The comparison of three competing models provided strong support for the proposed four-factor model. Reliability and validity were assessed based on the results. The study also investigated the relationships between Airbnb experiences and behavioral intentions.

The results confirmed that the basic elements of accommodation, like cleanliness, home atmosphere and home amenities, were important for Airbnb customers. Consumers are eager to explore different styles of accommodations (Elizaveta, 2016), and the Airbnb platform provides various types of accommodations all over the world, from cabins to boats to castles. For all these categories of accommodation, home benefits are important. This finding is in line with prior research. For example, Guttentag et al. (2017) suggest that functional value, like home facilities and convenient location, often explain why customers choose Airbnb.

Personalized service is also found to be a critical component of customer experience with Airbnb. Personalized service is not only a major motivation that attracts customers but also
a highlight of their stay (Lyu et al., 2018). The personalized service creates a feeling of “a home away from home” for the customers (Trivett and Staff, 2013). In addition, this personalized service means that customers get access to the local knowledge and culture with the help of Airbnb hosts. That local information adds to the enjoyment of customers. Customers feel more unique and more satisfied with personalized service, which also helps to build customer loyalty (Mcintosh and Siggs, 2005).

But the two dimensions of authenticity and social interaction were particularly important for consumers of Airbnb. Through the Airbnb experience platform, customers can immerse themselves in the local community by attending hand-made classes hosted by local residents. In addition to Airbnb, there are other types of sharing economy platforms that have focused on authenticity. For example, ToursbyLocals and Your Local Cousin are offering visitors with authentic tours from ‘people who loved their cities’ (Hudson and Li, 2018). Social interaction with hosts and local community is also a critical construct to be considered when looking at the Airbnb lodging experience (Mody et al., 2017). This supports previous research that suggests that travelers are demanding unique experiences which involve meaningful interactions with locals (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2016a, 2016b).

4.1 Theoretical implications

The results demonstrate that the Airbnb customer experiences are reflected in the four underlying dimensions proposed in this study. From a theoretical perspective, the scale can serve as a foundation for future studies and enhance the understanding of Airbnb customer experience by empirically exploring the determinants and outcomes of the experience. For example, Larsen (2007) and Wijaya et al. (2013) proposed that factors influencing Airbnb customer experience include past experience, familiarity, personal memories and brand image. Knutson et al. (2010) proposed that customer experience influences both brand-related behaviors (i.e. brand attachment, brand loyalty and brand satisfaction) and behavioral-related intentions (i.e. repurchases intentions, willingness to pay and word-of-mouth). These relationships can be empirically examined using the Airbnb customer experience scale presented in this study.

4.2 Managerial implications

The sharing economy has expanded in recent years but is facing increased competition, particularly from budget hotels and boutique hotels. Players in the sharing economy, therefore, need to develop distinctive markets and brand positions to differentiate themselves from the competition. A deeper understanding of the customer experience will allow them to do this. For example, Airbnb hosts should continue to enhance each of the dimensions identified in this study, especially by focusing on authenticity and social interaction, given their high factor loadings. To improve authenticity, hosts could provide more local information and cultural resources, like local cuisine, local festival and events and local activities (Ramkissoon and Uysal, 2011). Social interaction can be enhanced by providing engagement opportunities between customers and local community, between customers and customers (Levy et al., 2011). Today’s consumers are seeking activities in local neighborhoods and communities, like carving, cooking, painting, dancing and hat-making classes (Airbnb, 2018).

Furthermore, this study indicates that the Airbnb experience has a positive influence on customer future behavioral intentions. Therefore, marketers and Airbnb hosts should focus on creating comfortable, clean and attractive lodging attributes, along with providing personalized services and access to unique local cultures.

The scale developed in this study could also be applied outside the sharing economy. In the past few years, Airbnb has taken more and more market share from the hotel industry –
particularly from lower-end hotels (Zervas et al., 2017). While big hotel chains are satisfied to simply monitor the development of Airbnb, others are seeking to counteract the possible threat of loss of business (Varma et al., 2016; Hudson and Li, 2018). By applying this measurement scale, hotel managers could better understand how to compete with Airbnb and focus on the enhancement of each experience dimension. For example, a sense of home can be enhanced by room decoration and providing customers a communal room to share a kitchen, dining room and lounge area. Marriott’s Element hotel has already done this (Trejos, 2017). Moreover, to increase social interaction, hotel managers need to establish an emotional connection with guests, to address place identity and psychological connection to a destination (Taylor, 2016). In response to a growing demand for authentic experiences on behalf of travelers, hotels need to introduce experiences and excursions that offer a sense of place and insight into their locality (Hudson and Li, 2018). Finally, personalized service at hotels may be improved before the stay (i.e. targeted advertisement), during the stay (i.e. meet customers’ preferences) and after the stay (i.e. send personal email to check satisfaction) (Lad, 2018; Mody et al., 2016). In sum, to compete with the sharing economy, hotels of future need to completely change and build more personal connections with and between guests (Deloitte, 2016).

5. Conclusion

This study furthered our understanding of consumer evaluations of Airbnb by presenting the conceptualization and measurement of the Airbnb customer experience. As a result of conducting this research, a reliable and valid four-dimensional Airbnb customer experience scale was developed through the multi-stage scale development process. Three competing models were compared, and the results confirmed that the proposed four-factor model fits the data best and indicated that the Airbnb customer experience predicts future behavioral intentions. The Airbnb customer experience scale can be used to examine the linkages between focal construct of the Airbnb customer experience and other theoretically relevant but underexplored constructs within the growing body of literature. Overall, the findings in this study provide a fruitful foundation for future research.

5.1 Limitations and future research directions

Like most studies, this research does have some limitations. First, the sample frame of this study were Airbnb users in the USA, which may influence the generalizability of the scale. Future studies could explore the differences between the Airbnb experience of US users and those of other countries. More research of this type across different cultures and regions would be beneficial to both Airbnb hosts and hotel managers. Second, the demographic characteristics of the respondents may limit the generalization of this study. More than half of the respondents were aged between 21 and 30 years. Such a young sample may not represent the whole population. Future research could, therefore, explore the Airbnb customer experience across different generations (i.e. baby boomers, generation X and millennials). Additionally, this study has investigated the Airbnb customer experience from a positive perspective. However, the experience can also be influenced by negative dimensions. Therefore, future studies could explore how negative Airbnb customer experiences may influence related outcomes.

Finally, to build on this study, future research could conduct an empirical study to compare and contrast customers’ experiences of Airbnb and hotels. As more customers are choosing Airbnb over traditional hotels, the results would be of particular interest to hotel managers. Future research can also assess factors that might be affected by the Airbnb customer experience. For example, the experience can lead to various consequences, such as brand attachment (Brakus et al., 2009; Mälär et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2005), customer emotions (Lee and Kim, 2018; Ryu et al., 2010), customer values (Smith and Colgate, 2007), brand-related behaviors and behavioral-
related intentions (Knutson et al., 2010). These consequences can be tested using the scale presented in this study. This would provide a holistic understanding of the customer experience in the context of Airbnb.

References


Pew Research Center (2016), “How many Americans use home-sharing services?”, available at: www.pewinternet.org/2016/05/19/shared-home-sharing-services/


Further reading


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