

# Accommodating guests during pandemic times: a case-study of the Airbnb Host Community in Aarhus, Denmark

Simon Lind Fischer and Maartje Roelofsen

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper explores how Airbnb hosts' experiences with and responses to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) health crisis may differ according to their motivations to host and to the type and spatial layout of their Airbnb accommodation. Based on these insights, the paper reflects on the lessons that are learned for the future of short-term rentals.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This is a qualitative multi-method small-scale case study, which relies on in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion carried out with a group of hosts affiliated to the Airbnb Host Community in Aarhus, Denmark. Informed by an interpretivist approach, the study aims to make sense of people's subjective experiences with hosting on the Airbnb platform, and how they have continued and adapted their hospitality practices during the pandemic.

**Findings** – Participants' adaptive practices vary according to their motivations to host and the type of accommodation that they rent out. Although all hosts in this study now implement more intensive cleaning practices, hosts who stay with their guests onsite tend to take stricter preventative measures to avoid contamination and transmission of the virus in their social interactions with guests. On the contrary, hosts who rent out their entire properties and have minimal contact with their guests found themselves less affected by the pandemic's impacts and have had a continued demand for their properties.

**Social implications** – The COVID-19 pandemic has unevenly affected Airbnb hosts. Hosts who share their homes with guests require different adaptations to their daily behaviour and cleaning practices at home than hosts who do not stay with their guests and rent out entire properties. However, unlike professional hosts who largely or solely rely on Airbnb for their income, occasional home-sharing hosts tend to be more flexible in coping with cancelled or fewer bookings.

**Originality/value** – This study provides novel insights into the uneven impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants in the platform economies of tourism. It contributes to existing literature on the impacts of the pandemic on Airbnb's operations by showing how hosts' adaptive practices are informed by their subjective living conditions and the type of accommodation they can offer their guests.

**Keywords** Airbnb, Denmark, COVID-19 pandemic, Host motivations, Inequalities

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Like other businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry, accommodation rental platform Airbnb has been affected by the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Mobility bans within and between countries, lockdowns and social distancing rules have not only resulted in large numbers of cancelled bookings but have also ensured that new bookings of accommodations have been postponed (Roelofsen and Minca, 2021). In response to the health crisis, Airbnb has made several substantial changes to its protocols, standards and digital infrastructure, suggesting that the company is shifting towards a market for mid- and long-term rentals, which can be booked under more flexible conditions (Roelofsen and Minca, 2021).

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Relatedly, hosts are now incentivized to adopt a new ethos of liability, flexibility and long-term commitment to accommodate for shifts in consumer behaviour. Recent reports suggest that Airbnb (the company) has been facing a declining user base because of this shift in operating principles and has sought various strategies to recruit new hosts to sustain its offer of accommodation (Schaal, 2021). In response to the impact of the pandemic on the Airbnb platform and its hosts, a small but growing number of studies have started to explore hosts' lived experiences of the pandemic within specific contexts (Fairley et al., 2021; Farmaki et al., 2020). This article intends to contribute to these debates by examining how Airbnb hosts' experiences *with* and responses *to* the health crisis may differ according to their motivations to host and to the type and spatial layout of their Airbnb accommodation. Relying on in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion, this article provides a qualitative multi-method case study that explores the adaptive practices of a group of 10 Airbnb hosts who are affiliated to the Airbnb Host Community in Aarhus (Denmark). It firstly questions what has motivated these hosts to rent out their homes through the platform and, secondly, if and how their hosting practices have been impacted and transformed by the pandemic. In answering these questions, the article sheds light on the implications that health crises may have for the future of platform-mediated tourism, and the "short-term rental" economy in particular. It engages with "crisis" and disruption as lenses through which already existing malfunctions and contradictions in (platform-mediated) tourism may be revealed, and "through which we contemplate how broader transformations could play out in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis" (Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020, p. 626). Drawing on existing scholarship that highlights the systematic inequalities that have prevailed in the Airbnb economy since its inception, the article asks what a "new transformative normal" may look like regarding the kind of hospitality and accommodation that is provided through Airbnb? The paper is outlined as follows. First, an overview of relevant literature is presented in relation to Airbnb and its development leading up to the pandemic as well as a review of literature related to Airbnb hosts' motivations. After describing the case study and methodology, the findings are presented, which are structured according to the main themes that emerged in the analysis of the data. The paper concludes by suggesting the possible implications of these findings for the future of short-term rental platforms in—what has been termed—the "new normal", taking into account the likelihood of recurring outbreaks of epidemics and pandemics (Benjamin et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2021).

### *Literature review*

*Airbnb and its development leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic.* Over the past 13 years, Airbnb has enabled millions of hosts to rent out various forms of accommodation for limited periods of time, usually (but not exclusively) for touristic purposes. The platform's proliferation has equally led to the development of expansive scholarship on Airbnb, including myriad case studies detailing the platform's operations across regions, nations, cities and more recently, rural areas (Oskam, 2019; Morales-Pérez et al., 2020). Hosts often capitalize on the historicity and materialities of their homes to provide their guests with "authentic" stays, and, in some cases, stay with their guests to engage them in the social and intimate practices of their everyday lives (Roelofsen, 2018). Neighbours who live in close vicinity of Airbnb-ed homes have often found themselves implicated in such provision of hospitality (Spangler, 2020). Hospitable practices in the Airbnb economy may lead to value co-creation and include "welcoming", "expressing feelings", "evaluating location and accommodation", "helping and interacting", "recommending" and "thanking" (Camilleri and Neuhofer, 2017). Intense interactions between hosts and guests have often been considered one of the key points of attraction of "home-sharing". Because local hosts (and their neighbours) share knowledge on their surroundings, this would lead guests to explore and stay in a destination for a longer period (Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2016).

However, over the years, processes of commercialization and professionalization have permeated the platform and Airbnb has become an attractive business opportunity for professional operators such as landlords and property managers (for other examples of Airbnb professionalization see Bosma, 2022). These actors rent out multiple and/or entire properties on a full-time basis to tourists

rather than residents in need of housing, often undermining local housing policies (Cocola Gant *et al.*, 2021). This is particularly problematic in places that already face a shortage in supply of (affordable) housing and has led to displacement of residents (Richards *et al.*, 2020). Whilst Airbnb has often claimed to help struggling households “make ends meet” by assisting them in the provision of lodging as a source of supplemental income—a practice with historical precedents long before the advent of digital platforms—it has done so “at the expense of housing resources required for social reproduction of residents” (Goyette, 2021, p. 16). Rather than challenging the causes of housing inequality, it has contributed to the marketization and commodification of housing as a neoliberal strategy (Roelofsen, 2021). Myriad studies have now confirmed that in many cities the majority of Airbnb accommodation on offer concerns entire properties that are usually available for rent for extensive periods of time throughout the year (Cocola Gant *et al.*, 2021). They have little to do with practices of “home-sharing” in the sense that many of these homes are not actually inhabited by those who enlist them on Airbnb (Cocola Gant *et al.*, 2021). This notion makes it questionable that they “exhibit the local authenticity of an actual home”, or that they lead to transformative travel experiences (Guttentag, 2019, p. 181).

The development of Airbnb activity in neighbourhoods has also resulted in a mix of attitudes and responses among non-host residents (Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Mody *et al.*, 2019; Petruzzi *et al.*, 2020). Negative impacts on residents include increase in noise issues, changes to the local culture, rising rents and evictions, and “loss of community” as guests replace residents as neighbours (Stergiou and Farmaki, 2020). Positive impacts include interactions with tourists and the possibility of economic gains for local commerce (Stergiou and Farmaki, 2020). Notwithstanding its commercial success, Airbnb is now widely considered a “disruptive innovation”, as it has frequently unsettled public interests and existing urban policy and rulemaking in cities around the world (Garay *et al.*, 2020; Ioannides *et al.*, 2019; Minoia and Jokela, 2021; Oskam, 2019; Söderström and Mermet, 2020).

### *Airbnb after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic*

In April 2020, a few months after the outbreak of the pandemic, Airbnb vowed to diversify its business by developing new products such as multi-month and extended stays, targeting other-than-touristic user groups, including students and expats (Clark and Newcomer, 2020). Recent studies have indeed confirmed Airbnb’s concerted efforts to encourage its hosts to provide mid-term and long-term stays, also in response to the pandemic and related changes in guests’ demands (Roelofsen and Minca, 2021). This suggests that Airbnb is moving away from being merely a tourism-accommodation platform towards a real estate platform, providing rental accommodation for all purposes (Roelofsen and Minca, 2021). According to the company, Airbnb guests now increasingly prefer renting entire accommodations and will want to have limited contact with their hosts (Airbnb, 2020). Changes to health and safety policies on the platform also suggest that hosts are expected to adapt their existing cleaning and hospitality practices to protocols similarly adopted in commercial hospitality. For example, hosts are advised to hire cleaning professionals recommended by Airbnb to carry out cleaning tasks and are encouraged to apply Airbnb-preferred cleaning products (Airbnb, 2021).

A handful of studies have detailed how Airbnb hosts have responded to the crisis so far. Farmaki *et al.* (2020) argue that Airbnb hosts in popular southern European tourist destinations Croatia, Cyprus, Greece and Spain have been affected because flight bans prevented their mostly international clientele coming to their countries. Many interviewed hosts could be considered “professional hosts” who depended on Airbnb for most of their income and rented out entire homes and/or multiple listings. Unlike “occasional home-sharers”, these hosts experienced great difficulty paying their mortgages or rents, or the salaries of those they employed to clean (Farmaki *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, Fairley *et al.* (2021) noted that 35% of the 40 hosts they surveyed (based in Canada, the UK, the US, New Zealand and Australia) reported they were “experiencing trouble paying their bills, including mortgage repayments”. Some of these hosts moved their listings to the long-term rental market temporarily, indefinitely or sold their properties (Fairley *et al.*, 2021). Hosts

in both studies made changes to their cleaning protocols and the time and money they spent managing and cleaning the property. The degree of optimism/pessimism among hosts about the future differed in both studies. The more optimistic hosts employed different strategies to cope with the crisis in the longer term such as focussing on domestic tourism. Other hosts considered moving their listings to other short-term rental platforms such as VRBO, which supposedly incorporated friendlier or more host-oriented cancellation policies (Roelofsen and Minca, 2021). To discern the relationship between hosts' responses to the pandemic and hosts' motivations in this study, a summary of the studies on the motivational aspects of Airbnb hosting is provided.

### *Airbnb host motivations*

In the existing literature, there has been a tendency to attribute certain intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics to Airbnb host motivations; that is, whether one engages in the practice of hosting for its own sake (intrinsic) or for other reasons that are usually disconnected from the nature of the practice itself (extrinsic), including economic benefits (Fischer *et al.*, 2019). A growing number of studies have confirmed that financial gains play a major role in motivating Airbnb hosts to host on the platform (Crommelin *et al.*, 2018; Lampinen and Cheshire, 2016; Schor, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). The main motivation for hosts in Sydney and Melbourne (Australia) was to host on Airbnb to earn additional money from their properties (Crommelin *et al.*, 2018, p. 37). As a new "middle-class strategy" hosts may capitalize on their housing assets and skills to maintain their social status and related lifestyles, including owning a second home (Semi and Tonetta, 2020, p. 17). Besides producing economic outputs, Airbnb's centralized financial assurance structure reduces feelings of uncertainty and risk and makes it easier for some to become a host and to enjoy social interactions with their guests (Lampinen and Cheshire, 2016). Financial assurance structures and credit systems, such as the ones operated in Airbnb, abstract "trust from personal relations and enables it to circulate within society in rational and objective manner" (Molz, 2012, p. 87). These mechanisms instead allow for strangers, such as Airbnb hosts and guests, to place "trust in currency rather than in one another" (Molz, 2012) affording them to stay relatively detached from one another. This suggests that intrinsic motivations like experiencing the "joy of hosting" can be conditional upon extrinsic and economic-oriented motivations such as the desire to generate income.

Aside from having extrinsic benefits, hosting on Airbnb comes with a range of intrinsic benefits. A number of hosts associate hosting on the platform with freedom, flexibility, personal growth and a feeling of achievement (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Several studies mention that hosts consider it a major motivating factor to have social interactions with their guests and to share and gain cultural knowledge (Zhang *et al.*, 2019; Lampinen and Cheshire, 2016; Karlsson and Dolnicar, 2016). In Ladegaard's study (2018), hosts claim that hosting "foreigners and/or well-travelled people in their lives", is like travelling whilst staying at home (Ladegaard, 2018, p. 391). It might be argued, then, that hosting on Airbnb can be conceived of as a "staycation" for some of these hosts, where (selectively) experiencing other cultures at home represents an alternative way of travelling.

Other studies have argued that the hosting experience may similarly mitigate loneliness as hosts increase the number of social interactions they have in everyday life (Farmarki and Stergiou, 2019). However, unlike in non-profit platform economies like Couchsurfing where hosts and guests are usually expected to interact with each other during their stay, social interactions between Airbnb hosts and guests are not the norm (Lampinen and Cheshire, 2016). In fact, most host-guest interactions on Airbnb do not lead to friendship or a deeper relation (Ladegaard, 2018) also because the majority of Airbnb accommodation on offer concerns entire properties, which implies that guests stay in the rented properties by themselves rather than staying in the presence of their hosts (e.g. Adamiak, 2019; Jokela and Minoia, 2020).

Drawing inspiration from these two strands of literature on hosts' motivations and Airbnb's developments over the last decade, the paper now moves on to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Airbnb hosts in Aarhus, Denmark.

## Methodology

Informed by an interpretivist theoretical perspective, this study employs qualitative mixed-methods to make sense of people's subjective experiences *with* and attitudes *towards* hosting on the Airbnb platform during pandemic times. Using in-depth interviews and a focus-group discussion, this research aims to shed light on the complexities that surround hosts' individual circumstances, which may significantly shape their abilities to adapt hospitable practices. Wanting to know more about the hosts' lifeworlds, the methods used in this study are "people-centred" and participatory in nature. This methodology and related methods do not intend to generalize to the population from the sample but have the purpose of developing critical, analytical and in-depth insights. Before describing the methods and sample, a brief consideration of Aarhus as a case-study is in order, because Airbnb and its hosts' performances are enabled by and productive of the specific socio-cultural, socio-institutional and political contexts in which they operate (Christensen, 2020).

### *Description of the case-study: Airbnb in Aarhus, Denmark*

The Municipality of Aarhus has been actively involved in the establishment of a public-private partnership between short-term rental platform company Airbnb and VisitAarhus (Aarhus' tourist information service), which was made effective early 2019. Directly and indirectly involved in this partnership were hosts involved in the local Airbnb Host Community (from here on AHC). The AHC is a small but formally recognized organization of "outstanding" Airbnb hosts who operate in the city and receive certain privileges on part of Airbnb. The collaboration between Airbnb, VisitAarhus and the AHC was considered an opportunity to attract more visitors to the city and to involve resident hosts in marketing Aarhus as a tourist destination (VisitAarhus, 2019). The partnership could be seen as the first of its kind in Denmark and is also somewhat exceptional considering the opposition and regulation that Airbnb has faced in other municipalities, including the country's capital Copenhagen (Stenbæk Christoffersen, 2018; Meged and Christensen, 2017). Hosts in Copenhagen adopt different strategies to navigate existing legislation regarding their Airbnb rentals, but also welcome legislation and regulation and they especially adhere to the moral imperative to reside in the dwelling that is rented out to Airbnb guests (Meged and Christensen, 2017). Similar studies are yet to be conducted in Aarhus municipality, which is currently pre-occupied with the pressing issue of providing its residents with (affordable) housing (Kommune, 2016). According to web-scraping platform AirDNA, Aarhus currently has 644 active Airbnb listings (Airdna, 2021). In relation to Aarhus' population, this number might be relatively low if compared to Airbnb listings in Copenhagen. However, over 80% of these listings concern entire homes, thus raising similar questions about the extent to which Airbnb activity in the municipality can be categorized as "home-sharing" (Airdna, 2021).

### *Recruitment and sample*

The research objective and methodology of this study have been adapted to account for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that concurred with the initial round of data collection. Initially, the main research objective of this study was to explore Airbnb host motivations within the context of Aarhus. From March 2020 onwards, when the gravity of the pandemic became more apparent, the study's objectives and methodology were reconsidered to include an investigation of the new circumstances within which the hosts were operating and how hosts had adapted their hosting practices. This was made possible because some participants who had already participated in the first round of data collection in this study, generously agreed to participate in another round of data collection. For this study, VisitAarhus assisted in the recruitment of participants who were part of the AHC. The first author and a research assistant were invited to participate in a planned AHC meeting between 17 Airbnb hosts in November 2019, before the coronavirus was first identified. The face-to-face meeting was arranged by the four hosts who oversee the AHC's activities, in cooperation with VisitAarhus and Airbnb. This meeting took on the format of a focus group discussion, which focussed on Airbnb host motivations and the

various issues that hosts encountered during guests' stays. During this focus group discussion, the hosts were informed about the purpose of the research and the researchers took on the peripheral role of observant since the discussion was led organically by different members of the AHC. The discussion continued to take place in smaller groups and the researchers took notes of individuals' accounts. Shortly after the meeting had taken place, the pandemic quickly evolved. The four organizing hosts were contacted again via text messages to set up individual interviews, which included additional questions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their hosting practices. An additional six participants were then recruited for interviews through posts in the Facebook AHC group and through LinkedIn. These latter six interviews incorporated the same set of questions regarding host motivations as well as questions that dealt with their responses to the pandemic. The findings represented below are thus based on the same set of questions that all interviewed hosts have been asked. The focus group discussion has provided important insights on hosts' motivations but also functioned as an event that prepared for the individual interviews, which we refer to in the findings. The initial four interviews were carried out face to face at a time when this was still deemed safe enough, the other six interviews were carried out through video-conferencing software in light of increased infection levels and related health risks. All interviews followed a list of predetermined set of questions, although the order of the questions was left open according to the flow of the interview. Taking an overt approach to the study, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how the results would be communicated. With the hosts' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed ad-verbatim and translated into English. The interviews were thematically analysed by both researchers, building on the thematical content analysis as presented by Fischer *et al.* in their study of Airbnb host motivations (2019). The study followed several ethical principles to avoid risk or harm to the participants. The interviews were based on informed consent and all informants in this research were involved entirely voluntarily. To ensure privacy of the informants, pseudonyms have been used in this study.

Seven women and three men took part in this study. Half of the participants earned their primary income from their current employment and the other half received a (state) pension. The relatively high number of pensioners in the sample is reflected in the age brackets: three participants were in their 50s, two were in their 60s, four were in their 70s and one host was 38-years old. Out of these ten participants, seven hosts rented out a room or a separate section in the house in which they lived. Two hosts rented out their second homes (summer house or cottage) located outside of Aarhus, which they also occupied themselves when taking holidays and owned and operated together with their family members. Only one of the participating hosts rented out an entire apartment, whilst residing elsewhere. Although the sample thus includes hosts that offer different kinds of Airbnb listings (i.e. entire homes, rooms, shared rooms) they are not proportional to the share of Airbnb listing types in Aarhus indicated by AirDNA. The findings will reflect upon the demographics and listing characteristics and how they relate to hosts' motivations and coping strategies during the pandemics.

## Results

The following results have been clustered according to the main themes that emerged from the interviews. The first two sections discuss what has motivated hosts to participate in the Airbnb economy, and the third section considers how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on hosting practices.

### *Sociality and cultural knowledge*

For most hosts in this study, important intrinsic rewards are derived from the social aspects and interactive nature of hosting. The encounters that hosts have with their guests provide them with companionship, conviviality, and social and cultural knowledge. For Victoria (69) who rents out a separate part of her house "the cultural aspect is [ ... ] the most amusing part of the host experience. The world arrives at my doorstep. I learn from other people's way of thinking and

acting". In line with [Ladegaard's \(2018\)](#) argument, hosts accrue "cosmopolitan capital" in the forms of cultural and social capital when they are exposed to and learn from the "otherness" of their guests. Hosts Rose (86) and Theodor (75), both widowers and pensioners who rent out rooms within their homes, mention companionship as an additional motivational factor. For them, accommodating Airbnb guests helps them overcome the loneliness they were confronted with after the death of their partners ([Farmarki and Stergiou, 2019](#)). Theodor (75) notes: "I had a very hard time the first year after I became a widower. So having company, getting my four rooms filled is rewarding both personally and puts a few bucks in my pocket". Rose echoes that one of the reasons she started hosting was because she felt lonely and sharing her house with others gave her a sense of security: "If I would fall down and I die somebody would still have an extra key". Rose and Theodor, like pensioner hosts Alexandra (71) and Victoria (69) argue that they are selective when it comes to the "types" of guests they spend time with, resonating [Ladegaard's conclusion \(2018\)](#) that hosts tend to select the "comfortably exotic". They have certain strategies in place to avoid prolonged or unwanted social interactions. Upon arrival they will assess their guests' personalities, their needs for social interaction and their socio-cultural compatibility. Beatrice (56), who is employed and rents out a room in her house, generally enjoys the chance she gets to be in contact with new people through Airbnb but also had to "learn to find out which guests preferred contact with us during the stay – and which guests preferred to be on their own". Hosts Peter (59), Kate (71) and Josh (38) who rent out entire properties also mention that they enjoy the contact they have with their guests via Airbnb's communication software. However, they rarely meet and talk to their guests in person and usually use key boxes for the guests to pick up the keys or leave the key drop-off to others.

### *Profit, "pocket-money" and control*

All hosts in this study are motivated by the financial rewards that they receive through hosting and for some hosts it precedes intrinsic rewards. For Peter (59), who is the only host in this study who rents out his entire home without living there, "it's all about the money". He mentions that the term "sharing economy"—with which Airbnb has often been associated—troubles him because his first and foremost aim is to make profit out of his Airbnb listing. For hosts Josh (38) and Kate (71), who rent out their summer houses when they do not stay there themselves, Airbnb income is used to cover the property tax and other maintenance expenses. As such, Airbnb has indeed become a way for them to maintain their social status as "second-home owners" ([Semi and Tonetta, 2020](#)). For all other hosts in this study who rent out rooms or sections of their homes, Airbnb income mainly supplements the income that they already have. Termed "pocket money" by host Alexandra, Airbnb income is primarily used to finance discretionary spending on non-essential goods. The general expenses that these hosts have are already covered by the income they receive through their salaried jobs or pensions.

Although financial reward is certainly seen as an incentive, having the power to set the conditions and price of exchange also brings about a set of ethical questions regarding the meaning and practice of commercialized hospitality in a private setting. As a principle, hosts deem it acceptable that they can capitalize on their otherwise non-commercial properties and services. However, there appears to be an ideological tension between the commodification of private space and the provision of "true hospitality" ([Lampinen and Cheshire, 2016](#), p. 1677). Some hosts agree that taking advantage of temporary accommodation scarcity in Aarhus by asking more for their listings than they usually do, is morally reprehensible. Maja (63) notes that "Profit is most definitely a motivational factor but it does not mean that I will increase prices during popular events like the Northside Festival. So no, I do not use what you refer to as 'revenue management' to optimise my prices and revenue such as a hotel would. I would not like that because it sends out the wrong signals in relation to sharing". As a "lifestyle entrepreneur", Maja's main motivation is to find a sufficient and comfortable way of living, rather than prioritizing profit or gaining competitive advantage ([Andersson Cederholm and Hultman, 2010](#)). For host Alexandra, the involvement of money takes away some of the ambiguity around the socio-cultural norms and practices of

hospitality that she experienced when she was hosting people for free on Couchsurfing. Evidently, commercial hospitality also *a priori* excludes those guests who cannot afford to pay for a stay. According to host Maria “Money matters. Otherwise, I might as well have continued as a Couchsurfing host. When money is part of the concept, I avoid homeless people and it makes it easier to get rid of the guest again”. Being able to “set the price” thus provides hosts like Maria with a sense of control over the terms and conditions of the transaction (Ikkala and Lampinen, 2015, p. 1034). Moreover, what Maria’s comment also shows is that, while guests with a higher socio-economic status tend to book more exclusive listings than those with a lower socio-economic status (Lutz and Newlands, 2018, p. 191), Airbnb’s centralized financial assurance structure similarly assists hosts to (indirectly) preclude the less “affluent” guests from booking their listings.

### *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on hosts*

All Airbnb hosts in this study indicate that they have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic to some extent. However, what they perceive as “impacts” and the severity of these impacts differs considerably according to their motivations to host and the type of housing they offer. Maria (56) who rents out a separate section of her home and is employed full-time, decided to pro-actively cancel all bookings between March and May because she shares her bathroom with her guests, which increased the risk of viral transmission. She considered her time away from Airbnb as an opportunity to redecorate the room for her future guests. Other hosts in this study did not cancel existing bookings but had their bookings cancelled by their guests. Cancellations mostly occurred during the initial months of the pandemic when strict lockdown and mobility measures were put in place in Denmark (March, April and May). Most hosts continued hosting Airbnb guests shortly after the strictest of measures were lifted and their bookings picked up again towards the summer. Their new guests were predominantly domestic tourists or international workers and students who had remained in Denmark during the pandemic. Second-homeowners, Josh and Kate, continued renting out their homes on Airbnb rather than using their second homes to seek shelter for the pandemic themselves—a trend that took hold in other European contexts (Zožal *et al.*, 2020). Notably, hosts like Josh (38) who does not share the same space with his guests but rents out an entire home, profited from a sharp increase in demand for space for longer periods of time: “The summer was very normal and the spring was a bit quiet. However, in the fall, it was completely crammed. People were absolutely crazy about coming”.

Another notable impact of the pandemic that affected all hosts were the new cleaning and safety standards and protocols that were implemented by Airbnb soon after the outbreak. All participants indicated that their cleaning practices had substantially changed and that they were now more conscious about cleaning than before the pandemic. Rose (74), who shares all the communal spaces with her guests, was weary that surfaces and objects in her house were prone to becoming matters of contagion. Aside from asking her guests to bring masks and using hand sanitizers, she asked them to bring their own toilet paper because “a lot of people do not realise that you have your hands on there, you keep on sanitising your hands all the time”. Most hosts were wary that guests brought with them a risk of contagion and took more time between bookings to clean their space and to clean surfaces more thoroughly, avoiding contamination “for both the guests and our own sake”, according to Josh. At the same time, most hosts admitted that Airbnb’s new and extensive cleaning protocols were not reasonable, and that they did not follow them up in detail. Kate (71) who rents out her summer house was in fact the only host to hire a professional cleaner since the outbreak of the pandemic, mentioning that it has “increased the quality of the cleaning and general safety”.

Pandemic-provoked health measures such as “social distancing” have also changed the social and cultural dimensions of hosting, particularly for hosts who stay with their guests in the same home. Rose (74), Alexandra (71) and Theodor (75) mention that they no longer shake hands and keep a safe distance to their guests upon arrival and departure. Hand sanitizers and other types of disinfectant have now become an established part of an Airbnb stay and most hosts now instruct their guests on how to make use of their homes safely. Still, within the communal spaces of

Airbnb-ed homes, some health and safety measures are considered easier to keep up with than others. The use of face masks in the house, for example, was only brought up by Rose (74) who soon abandoned this preventive measure as she considered a physical distance between her and her guests to be sufficient. What clearly emerged from the interviews was that hosting or “guesting” in pandemic times came with a new set of cultural practices imbued with meaning regarding health, safety and care for the other. Whereas handshakes may have been a common way of greeting guests in pre-pandemic times, host Theodor (75) now briefly attempts to “bump” into his guests’ elbows upon arrival. However, he highlights the emergence of a new “culture clash” in respect to this practice not being globally recognized: “I welcome with the elbow even though not all guests know about this way of greeting”.

During the first months of the pandemic, Rose (74) was the only host who took up Airbnb’s suggestion to offer housing for free to healthcare providers, relief workers or first responders to the pandemic. This provision of emergency support is but one of many initiatives that Airbnb has promoted over the years among its hosts, also to consolidate its infrastructural role in cities (Bosma, 2020; van Doorn, 2020 ; Zare and Dolnicar, 2021). Under these special circumstances Rose had accepted a booking from an English traveller who turned out to be, in Rose’s words “a predator” who had merely come to Denmark to look for work. It soon appeared that he had only opportunistically made use of Airbnb’s and Rose’s philanthropic gesture. In pandemic times when prolonged stays seem to become the norm rather than an exception, Rose insists that “vetting” guests before accepting a booking is therefore essential.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to explore how a group of hosts affiliated to the Airbnb Host Community in Aarhus (Denmark) responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how their responses differed according to the spatial layout of their homes and their motivations to host. By means of conclusion, this section discusses what the findings can tell us about the role of Airbnb in shaping “post-pandemic tourism” that is ideally “more equitable and just, in terms of how it operates” and effects people and place (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020, p. 477).

First, the motivations that hosts in this study initially had to host on the platform have also shaped their perceptions about the gravity of the pandemic’s impacts and, relatedly, their responses. Most hosts in this study stay with their guests in their homes and the social benefits they derive from hosting are just as important as the financial gains. In fact, nine out of ten interviewed hosts indicated they rented out their space on Airbnb to gain supplemental income and most hosts did not mention financial losses as a major impact. This deviates from findings in similar Airbnb studies that predominantly surveyed hosts who rented out entire homes and/or multiple listings for extensive periods of time, often termed “professional hosts”. Whilst those hosts struggled to pay off their mortgages, rents or wages of their cleaning staff after bookings were cancelled (Farmaki *et al.*, 2020; Fairley *et al.*, 2021), the group of “home-sharing” hosts in this study could cease their hosting activities intermittently without experiencing major (financial) repercussions. This also accounted for those hosts who rented out their own summer houses, or, holiday homes where they spent time themselves.

The second point that this study has brought forward is that pandemic-related impacts also differ according to the type of accommodation that hosts offer, as well as the spatial characteristics of hosts’ listings. Hosts who rented out rooms or sections of their homes found themselves in close and prolonged social contact with their guests, which prompted them to take measures to limit their exposure and risk of infection with the virus within their own homes. This has had a major impact on their hosting practices, unlike the hosts who rented out entire properties and already had the liberty to ask their guests to use “key boxes” or pick-up the keys and instructions elsewhere. This also reveals some of the inequalities that are re-produced in Airbnb’s platform economy through the pandemic: clearly those who do not have the type of properties that allow for appropriate social distancing to their guests will be at increased risk of contracting the virus.

Third, and relatedly, the pandemic has evidently reshaped the ethics and practices of care and hospitality within the Airbnb economy. Notions of potential contagion and disease as well as the implementation of new cleaning and safety protocols have altered common acts of hospitality and spaces of sociality for hosts in this study. In the future of Airbnb's platform economy, the changing regulatory landscape of hosting and hospitality will likely have an even greater effect on those hosts who are engaged in both the menial work of cleaning as well as for those who stay on-site with their guests. This includes learning about and applying the various "cultural codes" that are embedded in "COVID-safe" greeting practices and other embodied forms of hospitality.

Circling back to the negative effects of commercialization and professionalization on the platform (Cocola Gant *et al.*, 2021) for Airbnb to contribute to a more equitable and just "new normal" in the world of platform-mediated tourism, the company could value and support the wellbeing of its "home-sharing" hosts more profoundly. At present, this group of hosts forms a minority group within a larger pool of hosts who rent out entire properties without being present during a stay. Yet this study has shown that actual "home-sharers" could be crucial in shaping the future of short-term rental markets, as they appear to cope with unexpected shocks, such as cancelled bookings, in a more flexible manner than their professional counterparts (Farmaki *et al.*, 2020; Fairley *et al.*, 2021). Because these hosts are usually compelled to share communal spaces with their guests they will likely (be expected to) adapt their hosting practices even more rigorously in the event of new health crises, as evidenced in the findings. This group of hosts could therefore be better aided in the provision of safer and healthier hosting environments in the future, for example through supplies of protective gear, risk-mitigation tools such as COVID-19 testing kits, and evaluation services by health and safety experts, similar to those provided in the hotel and accommodation sector (WHO, 2020). Moreover, whilst "professional" hosts have been central to Airbnb's highly contested role in the disruption of housing availability and affordability in the last decade, the group of home-sharers in this study have shown to aspire and inspire a more sociable form of tourism that is not primarily profit-driven. Their commitments to hospitality (in all its COVID-induced alterations) may have the potential to transform the "values and experiences" of what tourism should be (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020, p. 481). Future research could therefore perhaps further examine which conditions and regulations enable this particular group of hosts to continue to flourish in other contexts, as they are likely to endure ongoing crises and changing measures and restrictions.

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