

## **Early adopters' responses to a virtual tourism product: Airbnb's Online Experiences.**

### Structured Abstract

- Purpose

In April 2020, Airbnb launched “Online Experiences,” a virtual tourism product responding to pandemic-related restrictions on physical travel. The goals of the study were to explore the characteristics of this innovative product that were most salient to consumers, and in so doing, to provide preliminary insights into the factors related to its success.

- Design/methodology/approach

Using a grounded theory approach in this qualitative study, we investigated a sample of 500 online consumer reviews of 100 different Airbnb Online Experiences. Our analysis identified five major themes associated with reviewers' positive evaluations of OEs.

- Findings

The study's findings corroborate prior research on P2P businesses regarding the centrality of the host and the social appeal of such services, yet they also reveal newer, multifaceted expectations for OEs' hosts. Further, consumers reacted positively to both the entertaining and educational aspects of OEs. Finally, reviewers' comments reflect factors related to pandemic-related conditions, such as seeking social interaction and virtual escape, yet they also identify factors that suggest the durative appeal of OEs as a tourism product (e.g., “repeatability” of OEs; OEs as sites for virtual connection with family/friends; OEs as a marketing tool for future travel).

- Originality

To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first study investigating this recently launched virtual tourism product. Our findings thus represent an important empirical baseline for future research on this topic.

## **1 Introduction**

Every sector of the tourism industry has been impacted by the global coronavirus pandemic, with countries around the world imposing travel restrictions, airlines decreasing their number of flights, cruise lines freezing their operations, and hotels and restaurants closing for business temporarily or seriously reducing their operating capacities. Facing such challenges, Airbnb attempted to adapt to these current constraints on physical travel by launching new services. Harnessing the immersive, educational and interactive appeals of tourism, in early April 2020 Airbnb began offering a digitally-mediated alternative to traditional tourism, a service called “Online Experiences” (OE). Indeed, during the first COVID self-isolation period, several services and activities shifted from face-to-face to fully digital/virtual formats (as happened, for instance, in the case of teaching, social- and work-related meetings, conferences etc.). OEs embody a paradigmatic example of this COVID-related service adaptation within the field of tourism. Despite this substantial change in format, in the six months since their launch on Airbnb's

platform, the number of OEs on offer has increased more than tenfold, an indication of early success characterized by an enthusiastic response from at least some segment of the travel market.

Given the current pervasiveness of virtual formats for both social activities and business services (Gammon and Ramshaw, 2020), and the positive reception of OEs by consumers, Airbnb's OEs represent a timely and important topic of investigation for tourism research, especially during the current and ongoing COVID crisis. Therefore, our main goals are to explore the characteristics of this recently-launched tourism product from the consumer perspective and in so doing, to provide preliminary insights into some of the factors related to the success of Airbnb's response to current travel restrictions. In order to fulfil these aims our study adopts a qualitative design, applying a grounded theory approach, to investigate a sample of 500 reviews about 100 different OEs. We explore which aspects of experience are discussed in favorable terms by reviewers of OE, thereby offering an exploratory investigation into OEs which highlights consumer perspectives.

In addition, this study contributes to the literature on the sharing economy (particularly Airbnb). More specifically, our study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of consumers' voices and perspectives focusing on the most recent fully virtual Airbnb tourism product. Due to the recent launch of this tourism product, this is among the first studies of OEs (but see also Cenni & Vásquez, 2021). It is our hope that this research can serve as a point of departure for further research about OEs.

We begin the following section with a brief background describing the emergence of OEs and some of their main features. Next, we present an overview of the most relevant findings emerging from recent literature on Airbnb, focusing, in particular, on the key role of the host as well as the social appeal of Airbnb accommodations, which are the factors that are most applicable to Online Experiences. Finally, we provide a concise review of qualitative research focusing on online consumer reviews, highlighting the contributions of these studies to the field of tourism research.

## 1.1 Airbnb Online Experiences: the latest evolution of Airbnb

Described as a 'disruptive innovation' within the lodging sector (Guttentag, 2015) Airbnb has emerged as a global leader in the peer-to-peer sharing economy (Ju *et al.*, 2019). Airbnb's growth and success is attributable to providing consumers with an alternative to traditional travel accommodations, with the company serving as a middleman connecting individual consumers with individual service providers. Indeed, Airbnb is traditionally marketed as providing low-cost accommodations, a home-like environment, and direct interactions with local community

members, as well as for providing opportunities for authentic travel, all of which differentiates it from the hotel industry (Luo and Tang, 2019). Following the company’s success in offering alternative travel accommodations, in 2016 Airbnb tapped into the potential of further connecting tourists with locals, by introducing a new service called “Experiences,” which, for instance, enabled travelers to connect with local guides for (eno)gastronomy tours and nature-related activities (Moro et al., 2019; Rosenblum, 2016).

Adapting quickly to the travel restrictions brought on by COVID-19, in April 2020 Airbnb re-imagined their Experiences, using an exclusively online format.

In sum, Airbnb now offers 3 categories of products (see also Figure 1):

- 1) Accommodations, launched in 2008
- 2) Experiences (offline/in person), launched in 2016
- 3) Online Experiences, launched in 2020

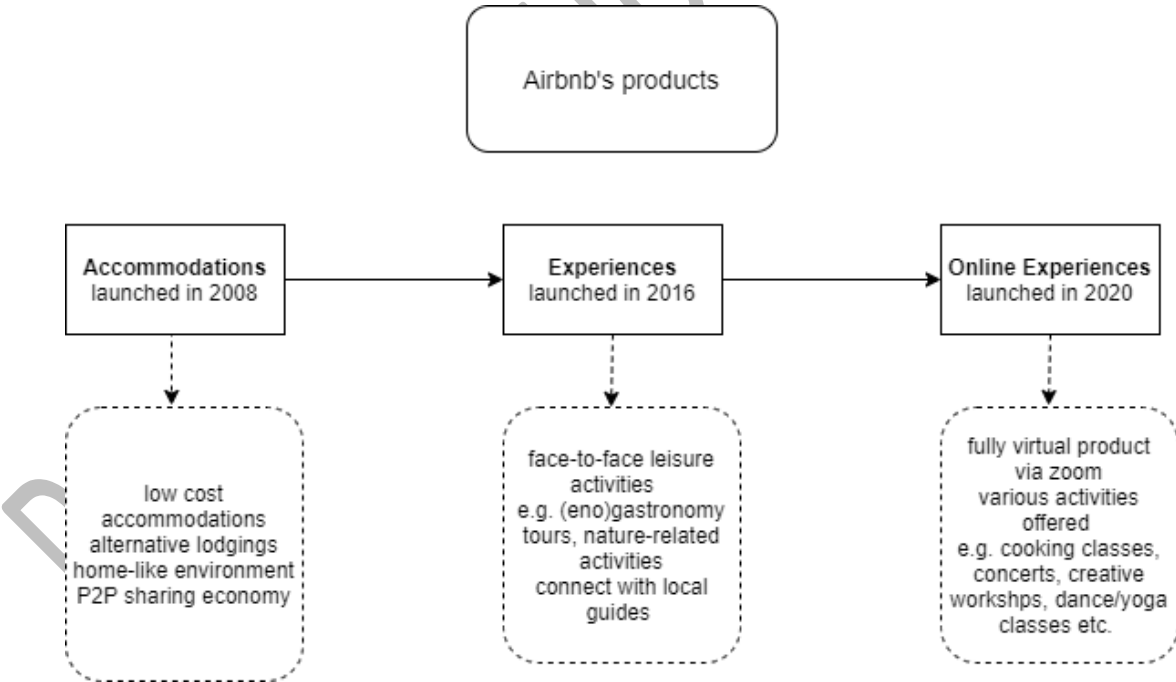


Figure 1. The evolution of Airbnb’s tourism products.

The present work focuses on the exploration of the latest evolution of Airbnb products: Online Experiences. This new virtual tourism product enables hosts to connect with a small group

of guests, who can be located anywhere in the world. Hosts connect with guests via the popular videotelephony platform, Zoom, and offer 60-90 minute virtual experiences, ranging from activities such as a pasta-making class with an Italian grandmother who teaches online from her kitchen in Tuscany, to attending a virtual concert with a musician in Iceland (Pogue, 2020). Currently Airbnb's platform classifies OEs into fifteen main categories, namely: animals; arts & writing; baking; cooking; dance; drinks; entertainment; fitness; history & culture; magic; music; social impact; wellness; Olympians & Paralympians; designed for accessibility. In order to join an OE, participants must have (or sign up for) an Airbnb account and have an internet connection. Additionally, prices of OEs range from \$2 to \$100, with an average price of \$10 (Pogue 2020). Payments are hosted on the Airbnb platform and can be delivered through several methods (e.g. PayPal; bank transfer, debit cards) with Airbnb retaining a service fee (Airbnb.com). According to Airbnb's statistics, guests who book OEs come from around 50 countries, indicating a cross-cultural audience. Unfortunately Airbnb does not offer, yet, a systematic description of the OEs geographical pattern of distribution. What we observed on the platform, though, suggests a varied offer of OEs from various locations (especially from Europe, Asia and North and South America). Finally, every prospective OE host is vetted by Airbnb before appearing on the site in order to guarantee the quality of the OE offered. Concerning the practical operationalization of this new service, by partnering with Zoom, the technological threshold is relatively low, which makes for a service that is technically easy to implement, and accessible to many consumers and service providers.

Despite being launched only a few months ago, the rapid growth of this product points to early success and adoption by a rapidly-growing user base. For instance, the number of OEs available has increased exponentially, from around 60 at the time of launch to over 800 at the time of writing, 12 months later. Several OEs have already received over 1,000 consumer reviews, and OEs are now offered in 14 different languages – which points again to the global appeal of this new online tourism product.

## 1.2 The role of hosts and the social appeal of Airbnb

Owing to its rapid success since its emergence in 2008, Airbnb has inspired an extensive and multifaceted body of research from the fields of tourism and marketing studies. The last five years have witnessed a proliferation of studies about Airbnb's accommodations products, which have investigated topics as wide-ranging as Airbnb's impact on the hotel sector (e.g. Zervas *et al.*, 2017), regulations/legislation related to the company's business model (e.g. Guttentag, 2015), issues of trust (e.g. Mao *et al.*, 2020) as well as, more predictably, factors affecting Airbnb consumer attitudes, satisfaction and loyalty (e.g. Cheng and Jin, 2019; Liang *et al.*, 2018; Möhlmann, 2015). For extensive literature reviews see Dann *et al.* (2019) and Guttentag (2019). Remarkably, nearly

all of these studies published so far have focused on Airbnb accommodations, which are obviously a very different type of product from OEs. Unfortunately, a number of research articles investigating Airbnb accommodations include the word(s) ‘Experience’/‘Airbnb Experiences’ in their title, which may lead to some confusion. To the best of our knowledge, there has been only one study that has examined Airbnb’s (offline) Experience product: Moro et al. (2019), whose aims and approach differs considerably from our own. Moro et al. provide a quantitative, sentiment analytic approach to understanding the interaction among user characteristics, experience descriptions and overall consumer satisfaction, whereas our goal is to account for the salient factors of OEs that appeal to consumers, as expressed in their reviews. However, two key elements are relevant to both Airbnb accommodations and OEs: the role of host and the social appeal of these peer-to-peer services.

Unsurprisingly, the host plays a fundamental role in Airbnb stays, with several studies identifying positive interaction and good communication with the host as crucial aspects associated with guest satisfaction (e.g. Baute-Díaz *et al.*, 2019; Ju *et al.*, 2019;). In their study of Airbnb consumer reviews, Ju *et al.* (2019) found that “host” was the most frequent word in their dataset. Other studies have identified specific characteristics that an Airbnb host is expected to have, such as being helpful, responsive and friendly (Johnson and Neuhofer, 2017; Luo and Tang, 2019). Beyond host-guest relations, scholars have also called attention to the role of other Airbnb actors, highlighting guest-community and guest-guest contacts (Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2018; Lyu *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, some findings indicate that Airbnb guests have positive attitudes towards interactions with fellow travelers who share similar interests (Lin *et al.*, 2019). Contact with these various parties is thought to promote a sense of belonging (Möhlmann, 2015) and to contribute towards the alleviation of loneliness and social isolation (Farmaki and Stergiou, 2019), emphasizing the importance of the social aspects of the P2P economy. The present study builds on this research which addresses consumer expectations regarding the role of the Airbnb host as well as the social appeals of peer-to-peer tourism. Thus, we began our analysis by focusing on how reviewers discussed the role of the host as well as the social dimensions of OEs. In addition, our inductive approach to analysis, described in more detail below (2.2), allowed us to identify other emergent factors in our dataset, several of which appear to be specific to OEs.

### 1.3 Airbnb’s online consumer reviews

The digital revolution has impacted the tourism and hospitality sector and has produced new sources of information, extremely valuable for consumers, service providers and researchers (Cheng and Jin, 2019). One of these is online consumer reviews (OCRs). Airbnb’s OCRs have been investigated as a form of electronic word of mouth, or eWOM, which may influence tourists in

their travel-related decisions process, by reassuring other potential consumers about the quality of the prospective experience (Guttentag, 2019). Airbnb OCRs offer unique insights into those aspects of tourism products and services that are most valued by consumers (e.g. Liang et al., 2018; Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto 2018; Tussyadiah, 2016), and also provide consumer-generated data for monitoring destination image and reputation (e.g. Marine-Roig, 2021).

The majority of studies in hospitality and tourism that have relied on OCRs as a primary data source have taken a quantitative approach (Sthapit and Jiménez-Barreto 2018). However, complementing this body of research are a handful of studies focusing on consumer reviews, which have instead utilized qualitative methods in order to offer a deeper and fine-grained understanding of Airbnb from the consumer standpoint (e.g., Johnson and Neuhofer, 2017; Sthapit and Björk, 2019). Indeed, several authors highlighted the relevance for the hospitality industry of conducting qualitative investigations, which encourage more reflective ways of exploring a tourism phenomenon, and which also pay special attention to the situational context in which it takes place (e.g. Mura and Khoo-Lattimore 2018). Qualitative methods, enable researchers to report on a topic from the participants' perspective, by privileging the voices of individuals directly impacted by a phenomenon and are thus appropriate in exploratory situations, for instance, in the case of building knowledge about a timely phenomenon, such as OEs. Given the exploratory nature of this research as well the newness of the product under investigation, we adopted the qualitative approach of grounded theory (see section 2.2), in order to develop an initial nuanced understanding of the OE features that appear to be most salient to Airbnb consumers, as reported in their OCRs.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Dataset

Our dataset consists of 500 OE reviews posted on Airbnb's website. All OE reviews posted between April 23 and May 10, 2020 were scraped using Python. At the time of data collection, a total of 128 online experiences and 9624 reviews were available on Airbnb's website. After selecting the 100 experiences with the highest number of reviews, we randomly sampled 5 reviews for each OE that met our criteria of: a) having been written in English, and b) consisting of more than 10 words. We included reviews of 100 different online experiences to ensure a representative and varied set of reviews. At the same time, to create a dataset of a manageable size that would be suitable for qualitative analysis, we sampled 5 reviews per experience (N=500). This sample size falls well within the range of qualitative studies that have relied on review data to address questions related to the field of tourism studies. Reviews in our dataset ranged from 12 to 125 words, with an average review length of approximately 50 words. All of the reviews collected had 5-star ratings. Airbnb is known for its strong positivity bias (Zervas *et al.*, 2017) and reviews of OEs are no

exception. In their guidelines for prospective OE hosts, Airbnb makes explicit that any OE receiving several reviews below 5 stars will be removed from the platform.

### 2.1.1 Types of online experiences

Table 1 provides a summary of the specific types of experiences that are represented by our dataset. As can be seen, the vast majority involve a learning component; 73/100 of the OEs in our dataset were tagged as classes or coaching sessions. Cooking classes are the most popular format, followed by classes that involve some type of creative process or product. Also popular are yoga classes, as well as virtual tours, live concerts and other performances.

Table 1. Types of OE included in dataset

Specific type of Online Experience (OE)	N
Cooking/Tasting class	24
Creative class (e.g., drawing/writing/crafts)	15
Yoga/Meditation class	12
Virtual tour	12
Concert/Performance	11
Dance class	9
Coaching session with Olympian	7
Fortune reading/astrology	4
Cultural/historical class	4
Wildlife class	2
Total	100

### 2.2 Data analysis and coding procedure

Given the exploratory nature of our investigation, a grounded theory research design (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used for the data analysis. This inductive qualitative methodology was chosen since its main purpose is not to build universal laws, but gain insights about a phenomenon (in our case the latest Airbnb service of OEs) and to offer theoretical propositions where little is known (Matteucci and Gnoth 2017).

In line with grounded theory principles, our analytic procedures consisted of several iterative cycles of coding. Recurring themes were identified inductively, allowing for variations in themes to emerge from the texts (Patton, 1990). As new themes and dimensions were identified, additional

categories were added until saturation was reached (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). More specifically, the coding procedure had three distinctive steps: (1) open coding (2) axial coding (3) selective coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In the interpretative process of open coding, data were broken down analytically into distinct units of meaning. This procedure was followed by axial coding to find relational patterns between the themes and reduce the database to a smaller set of themes/categories (Matteucci and Gnoth, 2017). Finally, selective coding was performed to identify core categories and subcategories, by integrating the categories derived from the open and axial coding procedures. This process helped more thoroughly identify the salient dimensions of OEs from consumers' perspectives, and led to the development of a set of core themes, elaborated in Table 2. Adopting this methodology, enabled us to holistically account for all of the verbal data in our dataset (i.e., every section of every review was coded), and from this we created an overarching taxonomy of themes found in OCRs of OEs. The QSR NVivo 12– which facilitates the development of categories and subcategories during the analytical procedure – was used to classify and code the data.

Table 2 shows the final coding scheme, with each category illustrated by examples from the dataset. Twenty-two themes were identified and further aggregated into five macro categories: (i) host, (ii) interaction and connection, (iii) characteristics of the experience (iv) feelings generated by the experience, (v) consumer motivations and outcomes.

Table 2. Themes illustrated with examples from the dataset

Host	Examples
<i>host's personality (general)</i>	Joana is incredibly <u>caring and fun!</u>
<i>host's expertise/ability/talent</i>	Ricardo is <u>a coffee pro.</u>
<i>host as educator</i>	Jerry is <u>master</u> when it comes to teaching podcasting.
<i>host as facilitator</i>	Lucrezia and Mama <u>were absolutely amazing hosts and facilitators</u> of the pasta-making experience.
<b>Interaction and connection</b>	
<i>general/underspecified</i>	Great experience and very <u>interactive.</u>
<i>with host</i>	<u>He made sure there was constant interaction between himself and guests.</u>
<i>with other participants</i>	<u>We all collaborated with each other.</u>
<b>Characteristics of the experience</b>	
<i>fun/entertaining/enjoyable</i>	This was such a <u>fun</u> experience!
<i>learning</i>	I felt like <u>I learned a lot.</u>
<i>product made during experience</i>	We <u>made some delicious Swedish buns.</u>
<i>easy to follow</i>	The food was <u>easy</u> to prepare.
<i>unique/original</i>	Such a <u>unique</u> experience!
<i>physical setting/location of experience</i>	<u>The farm was beautiful.</u>
<i>technology</i>	Great tour with well researched information, and <u>very high quality video components.</u>
<i>value for money</i>	<u>Terrific value</u>
<b>Feelings generated in participants by the experience</b>	
<i>inspiring/motivating</i>	This experience was <u>such an inspiration</u> for me!
<i>calming/relaxing</i>	It was so <u>relaxing!</u>
<i>feeling transported/ immersive/ simulated experience</i>	Even though we weren't in Italy this time it <u>felt like we were there with her!</u>
<b>Consumer motivations and outcomes</b>	
<i>special occasion</i>	I organized this for someone as a surprise <u>birthday gift.</u>
<i>escape from lockdown</i>	Being in <u>quarantine</u> for over a month, I have felt so disconnected from friends and family.
<i>repeat the experience</i>	I can't wait to <u>book my next class.</u>
<i>future travel</i>	Made me want to put this on my wish <u>list to visit in person.</u>

### 3 Findings

#### 3.1 Frequencies

We now examine in more detail the aspects of OEs that consumers made most salient in their reviews. Table 3 shows the numeric results of our analysis, displaying the frequencies for each theme. The second column shows the total number of reviews in which the category occurred at least once and the third column shows the percentage of occurrence for each theme in the total of 500 reviews. Different subcategories belonging to the same macro category can appear in a single review: e.g., the same review may include positive comments about the entertaining AND learning facets of the experience. For this reason, adding up the frequencies of the different subcategories may result in a higher number than the total number of reviews in which at least one instance belonging to the macro category has been identified. Quantifying this information indicates the extent to which consumers attended to these different aspects of OE in their reviews.

Table 3. Themes and subthemes in Reviews, in decreasing order of frequency.

	N	%
<b>Characteristics of experience</b>	386	77%
Fun/Entertaining/Enjoyable	220	44%
Learning	205	41%
Product made during experience	60	12%
Uniqueness/originality	50	10%
Easy	28	6%
Technology	25	5%
Physical setting /location	16	3%
Value for money	11	2%
<b>Host</b>	354	71%
Host's personality	144	29%
Host's expertise	148	30%
Host as educator	178	36%
Host as facilitator	118	24%
<b>Consumer motivations and outcomes</b>	199	40%
Reference to lockdown/COVID-19	89	18%
Repeat experience	69	14%
Future travel	50	10%
Special occasion	48	10%
<b>Interaction and connection</b>	150	30%
With host	89	18%
With other participants	55	11%
General/underspecified	26	5%

<b>Feelings generated by experience</b>	123	25%
Inspiring/motivating	62	12%
Feeling transported	43	9%
Relaxing/calming	25	5%

The categories ‘characteristics of experience’ and ‘host’ represent the most recurrent topics, appearing in more than 70% of our dataset. Next, ‘consumer motivations and outcomes’ appear in 40% of reviews. Finally, ‘interaction/connection/meeting’ and ‘feelings generated by the experience’ are found in 30% and 25% of reviews, respectively.

In the following sections, we illustrate and discuss each of these macro categories and their subcategories. Where relevant, we also identify the themes that appear to be more/less frequent depending on the type of OE being reviewed. We begin our discussion with the more ‘interpersonal’ dimension of the OEs: the categories ‘host’ and ‘interaction/connection/meeting.’ We then proceed with the subcategories connected to the experience itself: ‘characteristics of the experience’ and ‘feelings promoted by the experience.’ Finally, we conclude by discussing the ‘motivations and outcomes’ mentioned by consumers in their reviews, which offer interesting insights on the pandemic context in which OEs take place, the decision process of the participants and their future (purchase/travel) intentions.

### 3.2 The host

Prior studies have found that the host plays an essential role within the Airbnb peer-to-peer economy (Ju *et al.* 2019; \*anonymized\*). Not surprisingly, the host remains a highly salient feature of Airbnb OEs as well and appears to be a critical factor contributing to success of this online service. Within OEs, hosts are viewed as serving multiple roles and functions. Not only valued for their personality and overall disposition, as has been found with ‘traditional’ Airbnb lodging experiences (Johnson and Neuhofer, 2017; Luo and Tang, 2019), hosts are also appreciated from other perspectives: as facilitators who plan, organize and structure experiences; as educators, who provide information, answer questions, and explain procedures; and as experts, with specialized knowledge, unique talents, or mastery in a particular discipline or subject area. We observed several instances in which the multiple roles occupied by the host are referred to by the same reviewer (1).

(1) Katija was friendly, knowledgeable, and a great teacher!

Positive evaluations of the different hosts’ roles are almost evenly distributed, with each of the four subcategories occurring in around 30% of the reviews.

The host's personality is clearly relevant to the success of the experience. In this subcategory, general descriptive adjectives (e.g., 'awesome', 'kind' or 'friendly') were very common; however, other, more specific personality traits appreciated by OE participants include enthusiasm, charisma, and a sense of humor as in (2-3).

(2) The hosts enthusiasm and charisma made the whole experience worth it.

(3) Luca and Lorenzo are hilarious!

The 'host as educator' is the most frequent host-related subcategory, and includes general compliments such as 'great teacher,' as well as numerous comments which detail the host's instructional practices, capabilities, and talents (4-5). In example 5, in which the reviewer draws a favorable comparison between the instructional aspect of the OE and "in-person classes." Again, this indicates consumers' positive responses to the learning dimension of OEs.

(4) They were in control of the lesson but weren't strict.

(5) Took the time to fully explain steps and watch us to offer pointers (like you'd expect in an in-person class)

In the next subcategory, 'host's expertise,' many reviewers express their appreciation for the host sharing their knowledge. This 'sharing' facet represents an essential characteristic of Airbnb's business principles (Lyu *et al.*, 2019). Within Airbnb lodging services, 'sharing' mostly refers to one's living space and, to a lesser extent, may also refer to sharing information about things to do in the surroundings (Lin *et al.*, 2019). In OEs, the 'sharing' principle still applies, but is usually translated into 'sharing knowledge or expertise', as observed in (6).

(6) She was generous with her knowledge and expertise.

Finally, many reviewers offered positive comments regarding the host as facilitator. In Airbnb lodging transactions, facilitation mostly consists of changing reservations, or handling complaints or reimbursements accurately and efficiently (Luo and Tang, 2019). In contrast, in OCRs of OEs, reviewers typically refer to the host's flexibility and their willingness/ability to customize the activity, for instance by adapting the ingredients needed to participate in a cooking class (7) or adapting the class to target certain participants (e.g. for young children, or for a special occasion) (8). Around 30% of 'host as facilitator' comments mention the customization of the experience, suggesting that this is an important aspect of OEs.

(7) I really appreciated their ability to quickly recommend substitutions on the fly, for anyone that did not have the ideal ingredients.

(8) He was very good with my 8 year old too and made her feel very included.

### 3.3 Interaction and connection

As mentioned, the social dimension has been previously attested as an important feature of the P2P economy (Cheng and Jin, 2019; Lin *et al.*, 2019; Lyu *et al.*, 2019). In OEs as well, interacting and connecting with others is considered a positive feature, and appears as a topic in 30% of our dataset (Table 3). The importance of the interaction with the host is not surprising, as discussed above. However the host is not the only person who participants take into account when considering the interactive dimension of their OE: 10% of reviewers mention their fellow OE participants. In some cases, reviewers appreciate being able to interact with participants with similar interests (9). However, in most cases, reviewers were positive about the presence of, and interaction with, other participants joining the OE from around the world (10-12), highlighting the international and multicultural potential of OEs.

(9) It was so nice to spend some time chatting with fellow animal lovers.

(10) So good to laugh and connect with people all around the world!

(11) Amazing to experience it with people on 3 continents!

(12) An incredible yoga session in with new friends across the globe.

Meeting and connecting with people living in a different part of the world is one of the appeals of physical travel and international tourism (Lin *et al.*, 2019). Our data indicate that at least some OEs manage to reproduce this global/intercultural connection in a virtual environment. Participating in an OE as a group appears to promote a sense of belonging and connection with other participants, described by some reviewers as “new friends” (12).

### 3.4 Characteristics of experience

#### 3.4.1 Enjoyment

In line with previous research, which identified ‘enjoyment’ as a determining factor contributing to Airbnb customers’ satisfaction (Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2018), the highest number of experience-related comments in our dataset (44%) spoke to the enjoyable dimension of OEs (i.e., “fun,” “enjoyable,” “entertaining”) (14), suggesting this is one of their key attributes. Some reviewers mentioned how quickly the time passed during the OEs (15), highlighting the immersive potential of OEs.

(14) So fun!

(15) 1 hour flew by and was honestly not enough time!

### 3.4.2 Learning

The second most frequent experience-related category mentioned was 'learning'. Learning is a well-established aspect of tourism, with several studies finding that travelling embodies a learning opportunity, adding practical skills, knowledge and wisdom to travelers (e.g., Huang *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, our data show that the learning component is a key attribute of OEs: references to teaching/learning occur consistently, with reviewers commenting both on the host as educator (as we discussed above) and on the experience itself – not surprising, considering that the 'class' format represents the most common type of OE (section 2.1.1). In around 20% of the instances in the 'learning experience' category, reviewers specified that they were glad to be acquiring a 'new skill' (16).

(16) So excited to have this new skill!

Furthermore, the personalized feedback each participant can potentially receive in real time during the OEs is highly appreciated by many reviewers, and is obviously a crucial element which differentiates OEs from other online learning formats, such as asynchronous, pre-recorded instructional videos on YouTube (17).

(17) My friend made fun of me for signing up - said I could get the same thing free on YouTube. Wrong! Dora provided a well-curated personal feedback, with opportunities for interaction all along the way.

### 3.4.3 Unique/original

Uniqueness has been discussed as an attribute positively valued by Airbnb lodging consumers (Lin *et al.*, 2019). In these studies, uniqueness was mostly derived from connecting with local community members and local surroundings in 'authentic' ways. In OEs however, 50% of instances in the 'unique' category were found in reviews that involved 'meeting an Olympian' (n 22/50). Several OEs feature Olympic athletes (e.g. bobsledders, runners), who share with participants the secrets of their athletic achievements, workout tips, as well as goal-setting sessions. Meeting and interacting in small groups with world-class athletes is perceived by many consumers as an extraordinary opportunity (18).

(18) It was a great honor to meet with Ilija today. It is once-a-lifetime experience for me.

### 3.4.4 Product made during the experience

Another aspect reviewers expressed appreciation for was the 'product' created during the experience (19-21): e.g., a drawing, a song, or a meal. Many comments indicate that consumers value having something tangible at the end of the virtual experience: a concrete product, or material

outcome. Many reviewers express satisfaction at having successfully created the product themselves (19), in some cases with assistance (20), and in the process, learning skills needed to re-create that product independently in the future (21).

(19) I ended up with the best pasta I've had in my life!

(20) She helped me craft my ideas into two beautiful (and catchy!) songs.

(21) Not sure I'll ever buy store-bought ricotta again!

#### 3.4.5 Value for money

We found value for money/price mentions to be very infrequent in OE reviews, appearing in only 2% of our dataset. Although price has been identified as a significant factor in customer satisfaction in previous studies of the Airbnb accommodation sector (Luo and Tang, 2019), it does not appear to be as significant a variable in OEs – perhaps because of the associated costs falling within the budget of a wider segment of consumers (see section 1.1). In this way, the OE as a virtual tourism product may make international experiences more accessible to a wider range of potential consumers.

### 3.5 Feelings generated by experience

In 25% of our dataset consumers described their feelings after participating in the OE. These feelings comprise three general emotional states: 'relaxed/calm' (22); 'inspired/motivated' (23) and 'transported' (24-25). As may be expected, different feelings are associated with different types of OEs – e.g., 'relaxed/calm' with yoga/meditation OEs and 'inspired/motivated' with goal setting/coaching OEs.

(22) This yoga class was fun and so relaxing and restorative. I am relaxed beyond words.

(23) Her sheer resilience is awe inspiring. I feel energised and motivated.

Offering a slightly different angle on 'feelings' were reviewers whose comments referred to 'feeling transported.' These appeared in a surprisingly wide range of OEs. Reviewers 'felt transported' not only in virtual city tours with a specific geographic focus (e.g., "Zoom Around Paris with a Parisian"), but also in other experiences, such as cooking or dance classes (24-25):

(24) This tapas class was a lovely virtual escape to Portugal!

(25) I felt for an hour I left my apartment in the US and flew to Argentina to experience it's culture through the dance.

These instances suggest that certain OEs appear to “overcome” the virtual dimension, offering a substitute for physical travel to at least some set of consumers. Indeed, these comments point out a valuable characteristic of (some) OEs: they can potentially promote an ‘easy escape’ from daily life – similar to feelings associated with physical travel – but without leaving home.

### 3.6 Consumer motivation and outcomes

As mentioned in section 1.2, online reviews provide a valuable source of consumer information, which is useful not only for peer consumers but also for businesses and service providers (Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz, 2014). In their reviews, consumers not only discussed the features of OEs they found most satisfying, but in 40% of our reviews, consumers also provided personal information, such as the background or motivations behind their OE purchase as well as their future purchase/travel intentions.

#### 3.6.1 References to lockdown/COVID-19

The fact that OEs emerged as an adaptation to travel restrictions stemming from the global pandemic is reflected in almost 20% of our dataset. The examples below demonstrate how this online service– and possibly its success – is strongly associated with the current reality, in which many people around the world are physically isolated in their homes, yet still able to connect digitally with others around the world. In particular, consumers appear to appreciate the chance ‘to make the most’ out this forced ‘shelter in place’ period, for instance learning a new skill (26) or breaking the monotony associated with remaining in place (27).

(26) It was really cool to be able to have this experience even during quarantine season and now I can try to make pasta while I'm stuck at home!

(27) This was such a lovely break from my working from home monotony.

Other reviewers indicated that OEs offered some psychological relief during these challenging times (28-29).

(28) During such crazy times, it is magical to find a grounding and liberating moment like the experience Sandrine provides.

(29) Amidst such a trying time, he lifted our spirits in a positive way and made us smile and laugh.

Previous studies have established the importance of the social dimension in the peer-to-peer economy (Lyu *et al.*, 2019), highlighting how P2P businesses contribute to a sense of belonging (Möhlmann, 2015) and help mitigate feelings of solitude and social isolation (Farmaki and Stergiou, 2019). The examples in the ‘COVID-19’ subcategory confirm and elaborate on these

earlier findings. Indeed, some consumers explicitly describe OEs as promoting connection (30) – especially relevant during a time when practicing social distancing is recommended in many countries around the world.

(30) In these strange times that we're in, at first it seems like with social distancing we all would be less connected to others, but with experiences like this, technology gives us the opportunity to connect deeper than we were ever able to before.

### 3.6.2 Special occasions

Several consumers (10%) indicated that they used OEs to celebrate special occasions, such as birthdays (31), holidays (32), or date nights (33). Additionally, OEs offer a means for family members, friends, or co-workers who are not physically co-present, to have a shared experience by participating together in the same activity virtually (31, 34). This aspect seems particularly relevant currently, given COVID-related travel restrictions. However, the potential for using OEs as the focus of virtual celebrations clearly extends beyond the present moment into the future – for instance, for partners in a long-distance relationship to be able to engage in the same activity together.

(31) Invited friends and family in 5 different countries to join me to celebrate my birthday.

(32) The best Mother's day present ever!

(33) Since we're quarantined, I decided to surprise my fiancé with a date-night in for our anniversary and it was a success!

(34) Great experience for my team as we are all working from home.

### 3.6.3 Repeat experience

In our dataset 14% of consumers referred to future purchase intentions, indicating that they would participate in an OE again. Some reviewers expressed their interest in trying a different OE (35), and a few even indicated that they would repeat the same OE (36), or perhaps another OE organized by the same host (37):

(35) I will be looking for more classes similar to this.

(36) Would happily do it again, and again, and again!

(37) I would readily take another class with Kit.

Remarkably, a handful of reviewers indicated that they had already participated in the same OE more than once, as in (38).

(38) 3rd time round for me with Dean's live music

Examples such as these indicate that OEs are not necessarily a one-time activity but are potentially 'repeatable', which has numerous implications for promotion and development, as we discuss in our conclusions.

#### 3.6.4 Future travel

Our final category, 'future travel,' which appeared in 10% of the dataset, also concerns consumers' future purchasing intentions. In these cases, reviewers express their desire to visit the geographic location of the host/experience (39-40). The majority of these appeared in response to 'virtual tour' OEs that were provided by a local host.

(39) This experience made me want to visit Japan ASAP!

(40) We can't wait to eventually make it to Singapore and do a tour with her in person!

These examples demonstrate a connection between online experiences and future purchasing intentions, showing enhancement of tourists' positive attitudes towards specific destinations after their participation in an OE. OEs thus seem to hold marketing potential, possibly motivating future travel as well as future participation in *non*-virtual Airbnb Experiences with the same host (40).

3.7 Airbnb Online Experiences - an analysis of early adopters' perspectives.

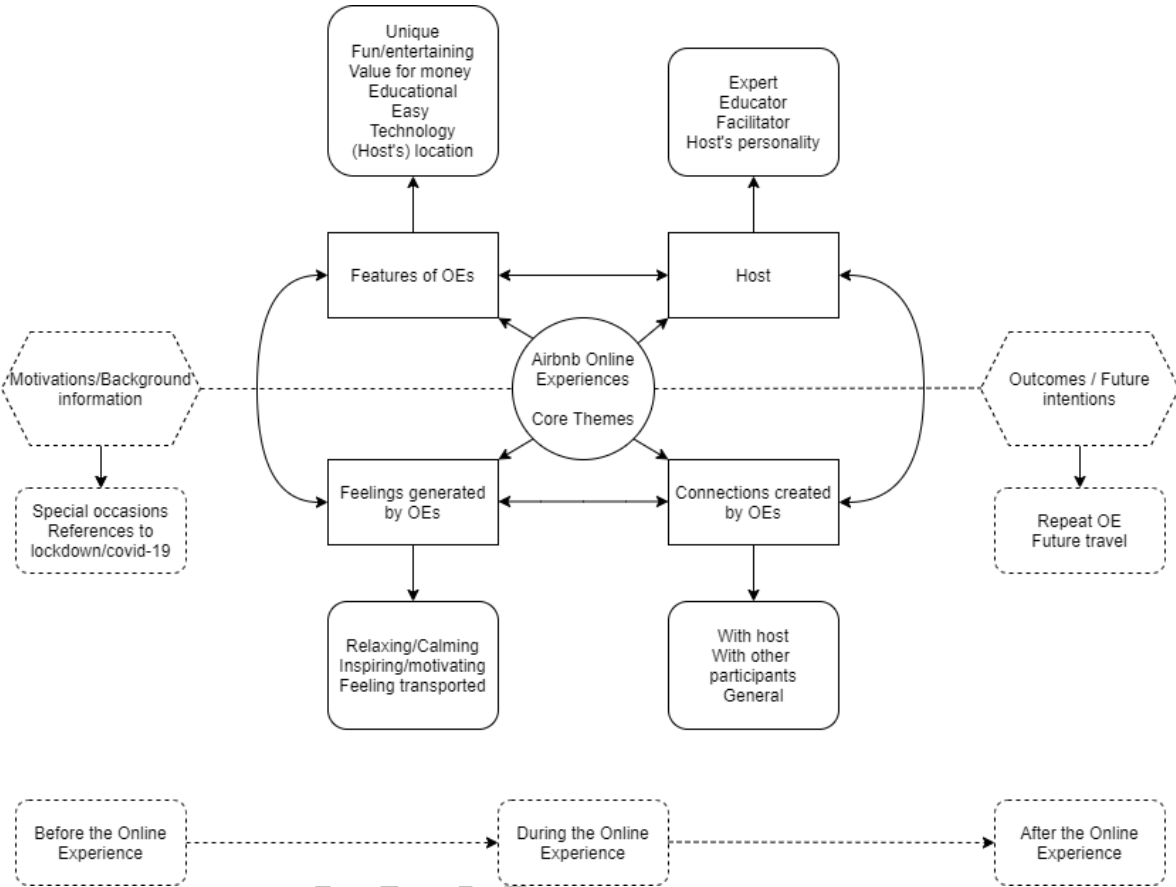


Figure 2. Core themes of Online Experiences: Consumers' perspectives.

Figure 2, based directly on consumer comments about OEs, suggests a temporal/chronological progression: from first planning and motivation (e.g., COVID circumstances), to the experience itself, which is multidimensional (including factors like host, connections with other participants, technology etc.), to finally outcomes (implications such as repeating the experience, booking a different experience, or planning future travel to the location of the OE host). Within the experience itself, we see some overlap with Pine and Gilmore's theorization of the Experience economy (1999), such as their dimensions of Entertainment and Education. However, both the current contextual circumstances (i.e., virtual participation, COVID-related travel restrictions) – and the data on which our analysis is based (actual user comments versus elicited data) – illuminate other, more socio-historically specific and practical factors that are relevant to consumers participating to OEs.

## 4 Implications

As international travel restrictions resulting from the coronavirus outbreak continue to be the norm for many across the globe, OEs represents an option for at least some segment of consumers who wish to explore the world, while sheltering in place. Indeed, OEs allow consumers to connect with local experts from around the world, who facilitate a group activity related to their individual expertise, in real-time. In the present study, we explored consumer reviews about this new travel product – OEs, which emerged as Airbnb’s adaptation to pandemic-related travel restrictions in April 2020. However, some comments suggest that OEs may continue to appeal to consumers even after the pandemic has passed and more widespread physical travel resumes. A number of reviewers pointed out that OEs can be a way for individuals and groups to celebrate special occasions, such as birthdays or holidays. Airbnb could continue to market OEs as a way to celebrate special occasions for people who are place-bound, or for family members and friends who are geographically separated (e.g., perfect for “long distance dates”). Moreover, several consumers addressed the repeatability of OEs. This suggests that Airbnb could use direct marketing or automated recommendations with previous OE participants for new OEs; that Airbnb could help successful hosts develop additional OEs; and that, when physical travel resumes, OEs could be offered as complimentary products to physical Experiences during low travel seasons.

Our data suggest that OEs might also function as effective destination marketing tools. Several consumers appreciated the immersive nature of these virtual experiences and the reproduction of some elements typical of ‘physical’ travel, such as interacting with people living in other parts of the world, seeing new places and (virtually) exploring new destinations, and learning about other cultures through their gastronomy, music, dance, and history. OEs seem to promote an escape from consumers’ daily lives into another reality, allowing them to experience something different, new and possibly unique. In addition, OEs can also offer consumers a preview of a future travel experience, allowing consumer to partly test the ‘tourism good’ prior to purchase, and possibly influencing their decision-making. Indeed, future research could address how effective OEs actually are as motivators of future travel.

## 5 Conclusions

Our study has provided an exploratory snapshot of early adopters’ responses to a virtual tourism product created in response to COVID-19. We have focused on online customer reviews (OCRs), because of their potential for providing information about which aspects of products and services are most valued by actual consumers (Cheng and Jin, 2019).

Our analysis of OE reviews contributes to scholarship on the P2P economy in several ways. First, our results confirm and extend previous findings concerning the role of the host. Similar to

findings from previous research on Airbnb accommodations, the host remains a crucial factor in consumer reactions to OEs. However, in the OE context, consumers value not only the personality and communication skills of the host, but also the host's specialized expertise as well as their instructional abilities, which points to the multidimensional requirements for OE hosts. Beyond the central role of hosts, our analysis of OCRs also found that while all reviewers evaluated OEs in highly positive terms (consistent with the platform's well-documented positivity bias), almost half of the reviewers addressed the entertaining/enjoyable aspects of OEs, while an equal proportion addressed their educative appeal, reflecting the fact that the majority of OEs are presented as classes, or some other type of learning opportunity.

Nearly 20% of reviewers' comments referenced the extraordinary nature of our unprecedented circumstances. For instance, the social dimension of OEs was especially salient for many consumers, who included positive evaluations about the sense of belonging and connection engendered by OEs. Often, these remarks co-occurred with references to the current global pandemic, indicating that in the present state of social distancing, lockdown, and quarantine, the function of virtually connecting and interacting with others (hosts, other consumers, or both) located in different countries is, for many, an especially appealing feature of OEs at this particular moment in time. Airbnb now groups OEs, applying labels such as "best sellers" or "great experiences to start with." One of their categories is "guests said they left with sense of friendship." This suggests that the social dimension we observed in our sample is likely relevant to other reviews as well.

To the best of our knowledge, this study is among the first accounts investigating the latest product launched by Airbnb. One of the limitations of this study is represented by the fact that our dataset captures only the initial phase of reception to this recent product and provides insights into the immediate reactions to it from consumers. Future research will likely reveal similarities as well as differences in consumer reactions to this product, once its initial novelty has worn off. Secondly, we focused here only on the consumer perspective, thus the service providers' (hosts') point of view is not included in the present investigation. We envision that future research involving interviews with both guests and hosts of OEs will provide a more complete picture of this phenomenon. Moreover, longitudinal data as well as other research approaches (e.g., big data, surveys, participant observation), would likely yield other valuable insights about consumers attitudes and behavior towards OEs. In particular, the evolution of this product – and responses to it – after the current health emergency has ended will be especially interesting to explore. Finally, we believe that the cross-cultural dimensions of OEs (i.e., participants, hosts, and their respective locations) holds much potential for further inquiry. In sum, the present study provides an entry

point to a better understanding of this newly released online tourism product, and thus represents an important empirical baseline for future research on this topic.

## References

- Baute-Díaz, N., Gutiérrez-Taño, D. and Díaz-Armas, R. (2019), “Interaction and reputation in Airbnb: an exploratory analysis”, *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 370-383.
- Cenni, I., and Vásquez, C. (2021), “Reflection : Airbnb’s Food-Related ‘Online Experiences’: A Recipe for Connection and Escape”, *Food & Foodways*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 97–107.
- Cheng, M. and Jin, X. (2019), “What do Airbnb users care about? An analysis of online review comments”, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 76, pp. 58-70.
- Dann, D., Teubner, T. and Weinhardt, C. (2019), “Poster child and guinea pig—insights from a structured literature review on Airbnb”, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 427-473.
- Farmaki, A. and Stergiou, D.P. (2019), “Escaping loneliness through Airbnb host-guest interactions”, *Tourism Management*, Vol. 74, pp. 331-333.
- Gammon, S., and Ramshaw, G. (2020), “Distancing from the Present: Nostalgia and Leisure in Lockdown”, *Leisure Sciences*, pp. 1-7.
- Glaser, B. G., and Strauss, A. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory – strategies for qualitative research*. Sociology Press, Mill Valley, CA.
- Guttentag, D. (2015), “Airbnb: Disruptive innovation and the rise of an informal tourism accommodation sector”, *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 18 No. 12, pp. 1192–1297.
- Guttentag, D. (2019), “Progress on Airbnb: a literature review”, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp. 814-844.
- Johnson, A.G. and Neuhofer, B. (2017), “Airbnb—an exploration of value co-creation experiences in Jamaica”, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 29 No. 9, pp. 2361–2376.
- Ju, Y., Back, K.J., Choi, Y., and Lee, J.S. (2019), “Exploring Airbnb service quality attributes and their asymmetric effects on customer satisfaction”, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 77, pp. 342–352.
- Khoo-Lattimore, C. and Ekiz, E.H. (2014), “Power in praise: Exploring online compliments on luxury hotels in Malaysia”, *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 14, pp. 152-159.
- Lin, P.M., Fan, D.X., Zhang, H.Q. and Lau, C. (2019), “Spend less and experience more: Understanding tourists’ social contact in the Airbnb context”, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 83, pp. 65-73.

- Liang, L.J., Choi, H.C. and Joppe, M. (2018), “Exploring the relationship between satisfaction, trust and switching intention, repurchase intention in the context of Airbnb”, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 69, pp. 41-48.
- Luo, Y. And Tang, R. L. (2019), “Understanding hidden dimensions in textual reviews on Airbnb: An application of modified latent aspect rating analysis (LARA)”, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 80, pp. 144-154.
- Lyu, J., Li, M. and Law, R. (2019), “Experiencing P2P accommodations: Anecdotes from Chinese customers”, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 77, pp. 323-332.
- Mao, Z. E., Jones, M. F., Li, M., Wei, W. and Lyu, J. (2020). “Sleeping in a stranger’s home: A trust formation model for Airbnb”. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, Vol. 42, 67-76.
- Marine-Roig, E. (2021). “Measuring Online Destination Image, Satisfaction, and Loyalty: Evidence from Barcelona Districts”. *Tourism and Hospitality*, Vol. 2, pp. 62–78.
- Matteucci, X., and Gnoth, J. (2017). “Elaborating on grounded theory in tourism research”. *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 65, 49-59.
- Möhlmann, M. (2015). “Collaborative consumption: Determinants of satisfaction and the likelihood of using a sharing economy option again”, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 193-207.
- Moro, S., Rita, P., Esmerado, J. & Oliveira, C. (2019). “Unfolding the drivers for sentiments generated by Airbnb experiences”. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism, and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 430-442.
- Mura, P. and Khoo-Lattimore, C. (Eds.) (2018), *Asian qualitative research in tourism: Ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and methods*, Springer Nature Singapore, Singapore.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Pine, B., and Gilmore, J. H. (1999). *The Experience Economy*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.
- Pogue, D. (2020). “I Spent a Weekend Bingeing Airbnb’s Virtual Experiences. Was it Worth It?”, *The New York Times*, 4 May.
- Rosenbloom, S. (2016). “Navigating the New Airbnb”, *The New York Times*, 28 November.
- Sthapit, E. and Jiménez-Barreto, J. (2018), “You never know what you will get in an Airbnb: poor communication destroys value for guests”, *Current Issues in Tourism*, pp. 1-4.
- Sthapit, E. and Björk, P. (2019), “Sources of distrust: Airbnb guests' perspective”, *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 31, pp. 245-253.
- Strauss, A. L. (1987), *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Strauss, A., and Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage, London.

Tussyadiah, I.P. (2016), "Factors of satisfaction and intention to use peer-to-peer accommodation", *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 55, pp. 70-80.

Tussyadiah, I.P. and Pesonen, J. (2018). "Drivers and barriers of peer-to-peer accommodation stay - an exploratory study with American and Finnish travelers", *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 21 No.6, pp. 703–720.

Zervas, G., Proserpio, D. and Byers, J. (2017), "The rise of the sharing economy: estimating the impact of Airbnb on the hotel industry", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 54 No. 5, pp. 687–705.

Pre-publication version