7 Consumer perception of service quality: The case of Airbnb and Couchsurfing

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The objectives of this chapter are to:

☐ Provide a better understanding of the service evaluation process in peer-to-peer accommodation services.

☐ Highlight differences in the assessment of service quality between two types of platform: Airbnb and Couchsurfing.

☐ Challenge the scale's dimensions used to assess the service quality in the sharing economy (i.e., CC-QUAL).

☐ Recommend a holistic assessment of service quality in evaluating together offline and online interactions.

☐ Highlight the differences between commercial and non-commercial platforms in terms of expected roles and governance norms (institutional governance vs. community-based governance).

Introduction

Recent economic, social and environmental concerns have drawn attention to the necessity to rethink our consumption patterns (Barnes & Mattsson, 2016) and call for alternative forms of consumption. In parallel, digitalization dramatically changes the way we live, work, consume and travel (OECD, 2020). As a result, new consumption practices have emerged in the last years, privileging access over ownership (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Those practices, labelled as sharing economy or collaborative consumption (Belk, 2014; Benoit et al., 2017; Botsman & Rogers, 2010), involve most of the time peer-to-peer exchanges (for a fee or for free) that are coordinated through community-based online services (Hamari, Sjoklint & Ukkonen, 2016). Such collaborative services have recently boomed, impacting many sectors, including the hospitality and tourism industry (Sigala, 2017), with well-known initiatives such as Airbnb or Couchsurfing.

Peer-to-peer accommodation services are transforming the tourism industry (PWC, 2015) by enabling consumers to share and access goods escaping traditional services like hotels and travel agencies. According to Hotrec (2014), peer-to-peer accommodation is twice bigger than the conventional tourism accommodation industry in Europe. The World Bank Group estimates a 31% annual growth of this new accommodation type between 2013 and 2025, which is six times bigger than the annual growth of the conventional bed and breakfast and hotel industry. In total, peer-to-peer accommodation makes up about 7% of accommodation worldwide (Bakker & Twining-Ward, 2018).

Two of the most sucessful sharing economy unicorns, AirBnB and Couchsurfing, have very different business models. Airbnb is an online peer-to-peer marketplace that matches hosts wishing to share their home with travelers (i.e. guests) who are looking for accommodation. Valued at 38 billion USD (Forbes, 2018), Airbnb has more than 60 million customers and around two million accommodations in the world (OECD, 2016). At the opposite, Couchsurfing is a free online hospitality exchange network that connects travelers looking for a place to sleep with people offering their 'couch' for a couple of nights. The community gathers around ten million members around the world.

Driven by the idea of new, original and authentic experiences, travelers turn more and more to such collaborative initiatives with the aim of sharing moments of intimacy and individuating their experience as far as possible (Bialski, 2012; Steylaerts & Dubhghaill, 2012). Those platforms also

respond to the traditional industry limitation, as for instance high transaction costs, distorted information between market actors, asymmetrical regulations, and impersonal tourism experiences (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). Although these factors contribute to explain the emergence of collaborative tourism, little is known about how consumers evaluate such collaborative services. However, this question is crucial given the challenges involved in this new type of exchange.

The first challenge is related to the peer-to-peer interactions (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). As such, consumers are co-creating the service, blurring the frontier between the consumer and the peer provider. The second challenge is related to the platforms and the market logic they follow. Indeed, peer-to-peer exchanges are often mediated or facilitated by an online platform that can be monetized or not. The monetization of the service makes the whole expectation and experience different from one collaborative initiative to another. Monetization also impacts the nature of hospitality. This nature can be conditional (i.e. involving automatic reciprocity) or unconditional (i.e. involving no reciprocity or generalized reciprocity) depending on the monetization of the exchange (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015). Also, depending on the conditional or unconditional nature of hospitality, peer-to-peer accommodation services are positioned between pure sharing – a non-reciprocal prosocial behavior (Benkler, 2004) – and pure market exchange, which is driven by a business logic inducing reciprocity and monetary compensation (Belk, 2014).

This chapter seeks to better understand the service evaluation process in the particular case of the peer-to-peer accommodation sector. We investigate how differences between commercial initiatives, such as Airbnb, and non-commercial initiatives, such as Couchsurfing, may influence the consumer evaluation. Based on an analysis of online archival data and narratives, the study provides insights about how the type of intermediary and the specificities of each initiative affect perceived service quality assessment.

Context and related work

Facilitated by information technologies and Web 2.0 (Belk, 2014; Hamari, Sjöklint & Ukkonen, 2016) that enable the transformation of online interactions into offline experiences, "collaborative consumption is the latest addition to numerous developments and trends in the marketplace that have substantially transformed traveler behavior and disrupted the industry dynamics" (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016: 1025). According to the most