

What do Airbnb users care about? An analysis of online review comments

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the attributes that influence Airbnb users' experiences by analysing a "big data" set of online review comments through the process of text mining and sentiment analysis. Findings reveal that Airbnb users tend to evaluate their experience based on a frame of reference derived from past hotel stays. Three key attributes identified in the data include 'location', 'amenities' and 'host'. Surprisingly, 'price' is not identified as a key influencer. The analysis suggests a positivity bias in Airbnb users' comments while negative sentiments are mostly caused by 'noise'. This research offers an alternative approach and more coherent understanding of the Airbnb experience. Methodologically, it contributes by illustrating how big data can be used and visually interpreted in tourism and hospitality studies.

1. Introduction

The sharing economy phenomenon is driven by people's desire for sustainability, enjoyment of the activity and economic gains (Hamari et al., 2015), which has sparked mounting interest from researchers and business. The sharing economy has enabled people to engage in selling services through reputable online platforms such as Uber or Airbnb. The focus of this article is on Airbnb, a peer-to-peer internet platform provider that has become one of the most successful models in the sharing economy. Airbnb has gained rapid popularity among its users across the world. Since its establishment in San Francisco in 2008, it has experienced rapid growth connecting a total number of more than 200 million guests across more than 65,000 cities (Airbnb, 2017). Its rapid growth has changed the way the business community have come to view it (Cheng, 2016). Arguably, Airbnb disrupted the whole established hotel system with an estimated value of \$30 billion, which is ahead of most hospitality groups (Skift, 2016). Some analysts estimate that in the next five years, Airbnb will rack up half a billion "room nights" per year with the potential to grow to a full billion annually by 2025 (Verhage, 2016).

Given its popularity and reach in the tourism and hospitality industry, researchers have begun undertaking systematic studies on the Airbnb phenomenon, shifting from a media portrayed paradigm to a research driven agenda. Existing research has examined Airbnb's potential disruption to the established accommodation sector (Guttentag, 2015), price strategies (Wang and Nicolau, 2017), advertising appeals (Liu and Mattila, 2017), potential discrimination (Edelman et al., 2016), impact on labour (Fang et al., 2016), and Airbnb user behaviour and experiences (Tussyadiah, 2016). A key attribute of the Airbnb user

experience is its ability to offer an authentic tourist-host encounter that cannot be replicated in conventional hotels (Tussyadiah, 2016). Yet, statistics reveal that many Airbnb users are likely to have limited interactions with their hosts, as many hosts simply rent out the entire apartment without their presence. For example, in Sydney, Australia, 61.9% of the 23,615 listings are for entire home/apartment (see Fig. 1, red). In addition, the attributes of the hosts such as 'friendliness' and 'attentiveness' might not always be identified as an important dimension of the Airbnb experience. Also the authentic tourist-host exchange is unlikely to represent an interaction between people of worldviews given that they generally occur between privileged like-minded people (Cheng and Foley, 2018; Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2015). Researchers are questioning the importance of the host-guest interaction by identifying other key attributes of Airbnb (Tussyadiah and Zach, 2016) and examining the differences between it and staying in a hotel (Belarmino et al., 2017; Guttentag and Smith, 2017). Yet, the existing research as yet to synthesise these two aspects in detail, although Belarmino et al. (2017) and Bridges and Vásquez (2016) have provided some initial comparative insights between Airbnb and hotels based on relatively small sample sizes. Also, existing studies focus mainly on identifying concepts at the macro level without sufficient attention been paid to the nuanced aspects of the Airbnb experience, such as what specific elements are involved with the attribute of "host" or "location", which can be ambiguous for researchers and practitioners to develop a coherent knowledge to conceptualize peer-to-peer accommodation experience and formulate relevant strategies.

This study investigates the attributes that influence Airbnb users' experiences by analysing a "big data" set of online review comments of

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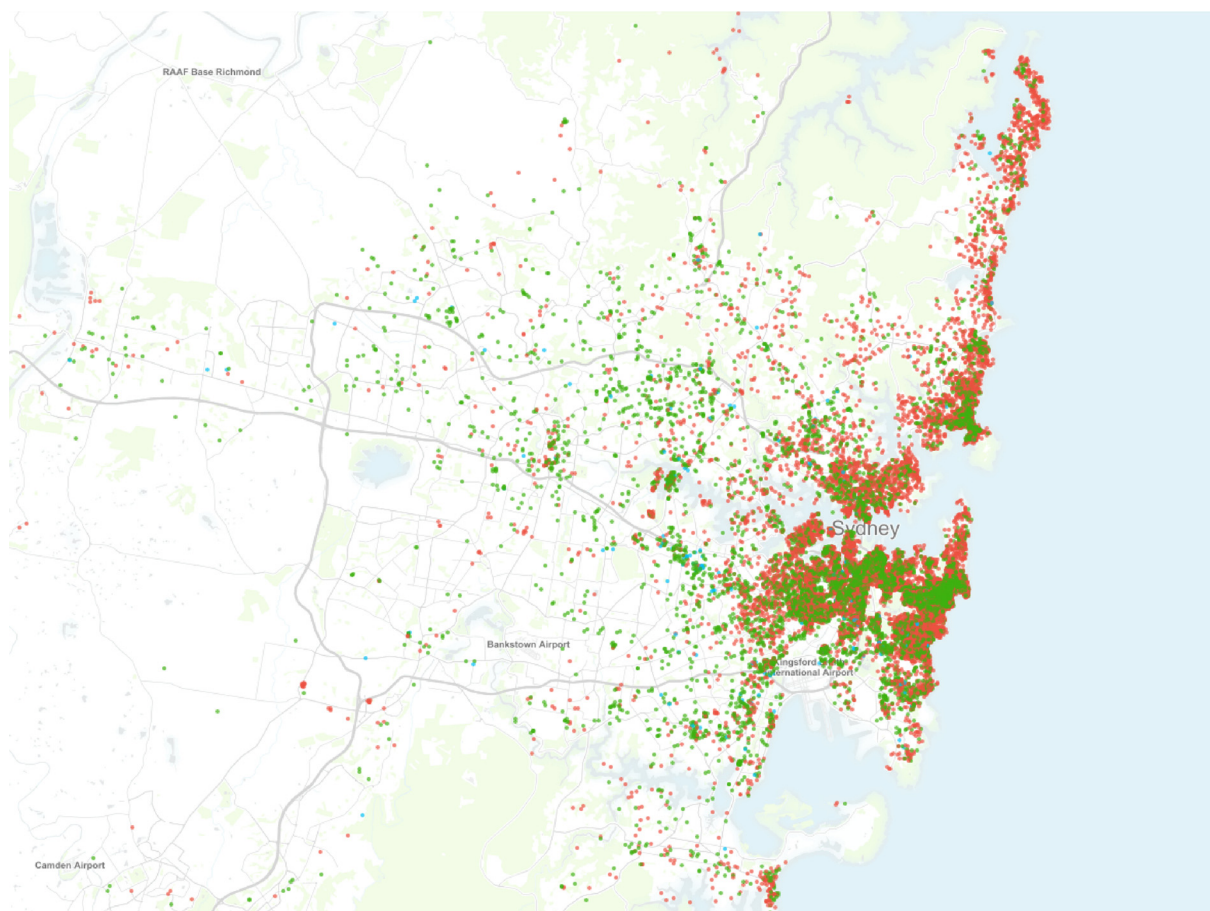


Fig. 1. The geo-location of each listing in Sydney.

*Red – entire home/apartment, green- private room.

*23,615 listings at the end 2016 with 61.9% of entire home/apartment (red) and with 181,263 reviews.

(Source: Insideairbnb.com)

users staying in Sydney. The study employs text mining and sentiment analysis to analyse the online reviews. It seeks to address the call by Tussyadiah and Zach (2016) to employ sentiment analysis to identify Airbnb users' positive and negative opinions in order to contribute to the debate on Airbnb user experiences. The study employed an inductive approach to text-mining (i.e., content analysis of Airbnb user review comments) to identify key attributes. Based on this logic, it builds from the data to identify a set of broad themes that characterise the attributes that influence Airbnb users' experiences. It therefore avoids where possible pre-figuring theories and hypotheses about the possible experience (Goddard and Melville, 2001). However, we summarised hotel attributes reported in the literature and used these as a frame of reference to generate additional insights on similarities and differences between Airbnb and hotel attributes, in order to better understand Airbnb's potential disruption to the established hotel and accommodation industry. The study contributes to the sharing economy and hospitality literature by providing a coherent and detailed understanding of the Airbnb user experience. Methodologically, it contributes by illustrating how big data can be used and visually interpreted in tourism and hospitality studies.

The paper is organized as follows. First, it reviews the existing literature on user experience of Airbnb, hotel attributes and big data. The research design follows with details on the four stages of data analysis. Findings and discussions are then presented with quotes from the review comments. The paper concludes with a summary of the main findings, contribution to theory and practice, and avenues for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. User experience of Airbnb

The rapid growth of Airbnb, with its distinct operation model, not only offers an alternative accommodation experience for its users, but it also challenges the theories and practices developed from the conventional hotel industry (Bridges and Vásquez, 2016; Cheng, 2016; Zervas et al., 2017). Airbnb refers to itself as a distinct internet platform by establishing “a trusted community marketplace for people to list, discover, and book unique accommodation around the world” and “connects people to unique travel experiences” (Airbnb, 2017). With Airbnb's promise to provide a unique human-to-human experience, researchers have embarked on investigations to identify the dimensions/attributes that form the basis of the Airbnb experience.

Existing empirical studies on the phenomenon have produced a variety of similar but sometimes contradictory evidence. The order of importance of each Airbnb experience dimension also varies in different studies. Earlier studies treated the social (guest-host) interactions as a core dimension of the Airbnb experience (Festila and Müller, 2017; Lampinen and Cheshire, 2016; Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2016; Yannopoulou, 2013). For example, Yannopoulou (2013) argues that Airbnb essentially entails “meaningful life enrichment, human contact, access and authenticity” (p. 89). Other researchers are less comfortable with such claims and suggest that, for some users, Airbnb is just a hotel-like experience at a relatively lower cost (Festila and Müller, 2017). Guttentag (2016) found that Airbnb users highly value practical attributes, and somewhat less so of its experiential attributes. Even with the

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