# When guests trust hosts for their words: Host description and trust in sharing economy

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Two self-presentation patterns were found from Airbnb host profiles.
- Hosts present themselves as well-traveled or those with certain professions.
- Consumers demonstrated higher trust in well-traveled hosts.
- Consumers' booking intention was higher for well-traveled hosts.
- Hosts are advised to project personal strength relevant to hosting in profiles.

## GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT
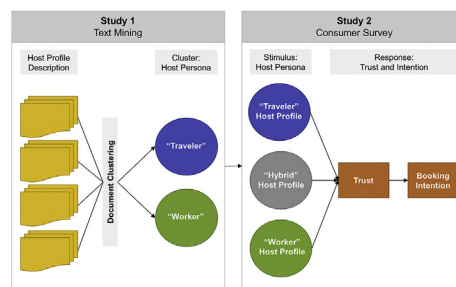


## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

In order to better understand the dynamics of user behavior in the sharing economy platform, a multi-stage study was conducted on how Airbnb hosts articulate themselves online and how consumers respond to different host self-presentation patterns. First, using text mining techniques on a large dataset consisting descriptions of Airbnb hosts in 14 major cities in the United States, two patterns of host self-presentation were identified. Hosts generally present themselves online as (1) a well-traveled individual, eager to meet new people or (2) an individual of a certain profession. This contributes to the conceptualization of profile as promise framework for online self-presentation in mixed-mode interactions involving peer-to-peer accommodation platform. Second, consumers respond to the two host self-presentation strategies differently, demonstrating higher levels of perceived trustworthiness in and intention to book from well-traveled hosts. This has direct strategic implications for effective self-marketing of "amateur" tourism players as well as for the role of residents as resources in tourism destinations.

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## 1. Introduction

Peer-to-peer accommodation business continues to grow significantly (eMarketer, 2017; Fortune, 2017; PWC, 2016) and generates substantial impacts in the tourism and hospitality industry (Skift, 2017; Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016), making it one of the top priorities for research in the field (Cheng, 2016a, 2016b; Guttentag, 2015; Heo, 2016; Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016; Tussyadiah, 2016). In order to provide a solid theoretical foundation for sharing economy as a consumption and exchange system, it is important to delineate its unique processes in comparison to that of conventional accommodation service. Therefore, a

thorough investigation into the dynamics of decision-making processes in peer-to-peer accommodation is necessary. Through peer-to-peer accommodation platforms such as Airbnb, hosts and guests find each other and transact online and then, to a certain extent, interact offline during the service delivery. In order to make a decision to start the booking process, be it by contacting the host for approval or doing so through the instant booking option, potential guests are faced with a problem of evaluating not only the various attributes of the property, but also the characteristics of the hosts. Previous studies show that trust in host plays an important role in booking decision in peer-to-peer accommodation platforms (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016; Hawlitschek, Teubner, & Weinhardt, 2016; Richardson, 2015). That is, the platform − peer-consumer − peer-provider triad in the sharing economy system generates additional layers of trust that shapes consumer choice: trust in platform and trust in host. A large body of research has examined the influence of trust in service providers on consumer choice in traditional service settings (e.g., Coulter & Coulter, 2002; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Johnson & Grayson, 2005), including that of tourism and hospitality (e.g., Liu & Zhang, 2014; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Wang, Law, Guillet, Hung, & Fong, 2015). In the context of platform economy, where buyers and sellers transact online using third-party platforms such as Amazon and eBay, the dynamics of buyer−seller trust and buyer−platform trust as well as their effects on purchase decision have also been researched widely (e.g., Chen, Zhang, & Xu, 2009; Hong & Cho, 2011; Pavlou & Gefen, 2002). It is suggested that trust in host, along with trust in platform, plays a critical role in guest decision to book a particular property through peer-to-peer accommodation platforms.

Potential guests are using various cues to arrive at the expectation of hosts' trustworthiness (Deng & Ravichandran, 2017; Ert et al., 2016). Due to the nature of the business model, some trust mechanism is built into the platform as online reputation system such that potential guests can derive information about the trustworthiness of the hosts from guest reviews (i.e., testaments to past performance, records of past deeds) and/or their responses to guest reviews (i.e., evidence of courtesy and/or service recovery strategies). Importantly, Airbnb hosts can craft an image about themselves through their online profiles. In that, they have the opportunity to shape consumer perception about their identity and character, create favorable impressions of themselves, and, thus, positively influence consumer choice. While the link between reviews and trust in the context of sharing economy has been explored in previous research (e.g., Deng & Ravichandran, 2017; Teubner, Saade, Hawlitschek, & Weinhardt, 2016; Yang, Lee, Lee, Chung, & Koo, 2016), research investigating the relationships between host self-presentation and trust is relatively scant. This study aims to investigate if and how the ways hosts express themselves by crafting and posting their profile online would generate trust among prospective guests.

Specifically, this study addresses two broad research questions: (1) how hosts of peer-to-peer accommodation articulate their identity online and (2) how prospective guests respond to host self-presentation practices. This study uses the theoretical foundation behind self-presentation strategies (e.g., Chen, 2013; Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011; Shepherd, 2005) as well as interpersonal trust (e.g., Raban, 2009) in the contexts of online interaction, social networks, and transaction or trading contexts. It follows a two-study approach by first conducting a series of text analyses on descriptions of Airbnb hosts to identify the underlying self-presentation practices and then assessing consumer perception of the trustworthiness of the hosts.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Online self-Presentation in mixed-mode interactions

The strategies people use to present themselves online, through personal web pages or social media platforms, have been explored in literature as a form of self-marketing (e.g., Chen, 2013; Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Labrecque et al., 2011; Shepherd, 2005). These studies suggested that consumers are applying the same marketing and branding principles originally developed for products and services to generate a favorable image of themselves online in order to achieve various goals (Chen, 2013; Schwabel, 2009). Personal branding refers to the process by which individuals differentiate themselves from others by expressing their unique value proposition and leveraging it with a consistent image across different communication platforms (Schwabel, 2009). Research on personal branding and self-marketing on the web has focused on public figures, such as in politics and entertainment (e.g., Marshall, 2010; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Stanyer, 2008). However, an increasing number of studies also deals with self-presentation among amateur individuals or everyday people for the purposes of seeking employment, establishing friendship, dating, or simply self-expression (Chen, 2013; Labrecque et al., 2011; Shepherd, 2005).

Self-presentation is not only associated with the process of packaging the self, but also editing it, which entails making decisions on what information regarding self to convey and what to conceal (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). Drawing largely from Goffman's (1990) theory of self, literature on self-presentation in technology-mediated communication has focused on social interactions that occur exclusively online. Research on online impression management focuses on how the absence of nonverbal communication cues and the potentially asynchronous communication online eventually led to the practice of selective self-presentation (Walther & Burgoon, 1992; Walther, 1992, 2007). In such cases, online personal identity is viewed as malleable and subject to self-censorship. This results in an optimized self-presentation opportunity for the message deliverers and idealized perception for the message receivers. Consequently, people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do (Rheingold, 1995). However, these strategies do not work well in areas of mixed-mode social relationships, when people first meet online and then move offline. Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino (2006) suggested that online self-presentation and personal branding strategies are entangled with anticipated future (face-to-face) interactions.

Peer-to-peer accommodation system provides a unique context for mixed-mode social relationships. Prospective hosts and guests communicate online using the platform to book accommodation and then interact offline during service delivery. The modality switch from online to offline communication shapes the degree of self-disclosure (e.g., Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006). For hosts, while it is important to highlight personal strength and uniqueness to attract prospective guests, it is more important to convey an online identity that is consistent with the expected offline impression. This will result in perception of authenticity (Labrecque et al., 2011). Authenticity can be said as a match between online and offline identity, which transforms a sense of authenticity in online environment to reflect offline believability or an authenticity to presented self (Orsatti & Riemer, 2012). Indeed, "feeling real" and free of psychological uncertainty between one's social roles/behaviours and one's true self is the crux of psychological component of authenticity (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). Social network (or sharing) sites such as online dating websites provide users with various features allowing people to share rich self-presentations (e.g., online profiles) (Ellison, 2007)