

Is Airbnb a good choice for family travel?

Abstract

This study investigates how sharing economy shapes family travel in accommodation service. This study draws on a data source composed of a literature review and in-depth interviews with family travelers. Interviews with Airbnb family users are transcribed and analyzed using NVivo. Coding enables the researcher to identify major dimensions of the effects of Airbnb on family travel. Result shows that special experience is the most important dimension of family travelers followed by facilities and space, online reviews, location, and recommendations of friends. This outcome serves as pointers for Airbnb hosts in addressing the needs and expectations in family travel.

Keywords: Airbnb, family travel, sharing economy, alternative accommodation, experience

Introduction

The family travel market is considered a robust growing sector among the various types of tourism business (Park, Lehto & Park, 2008). Accommodation in family travel is always a challenging task for family decision-makers. In terms of family budget, the choices of accommodation may vary from traditional bed and breakfast, budget hotel, upscale hotel, service apartment, resort, and informal accommodation, namely, Airbnb. The role of decision-makers in tourism may differ according to cultural background, demographics and socioeconomics, and knowledge of product (Kim, Choi, Agrusa, Wang & Kim, 2010). The stage of family life cycle is closely related with how family travelers manage their vacation expenditure (Lawson, 1991).

Technology development resulted in the transformation of social media into a powerful platform for the hospitality and tourism industries, particularly their online marketing strategies (Lin,

Tung, Qiu & Gu, 2018). Given the proliferation of social media and the continued growth of transportation services, travelers continuously redefine their modes of travel, the places they stay, and their discovery of new places. The surge of budget airlines and the recent development of the cruise industry enhance the motivation and frequency of travel in Asia and facilitated the emergence of unconventional accommodations and dining styles. The tourism industry provides significant economic benefits. The accommodation sector also plays a key role in overall travel experience.

Sharing economy raises the value and quality of businesses and individuals, affects tourism development, focuses on user needs, and increases employability (Roblek, Stok, & Mesko, 2016). Sharing economy also enables destinations to improve their response to peak demands by offering alternative services (Cheng, 2016). This development results in emerging issues and concerns that challenge tourism stakeholders because of the availability of informal accommodation services, such as Airbnb, in many urban cities, including Paris, New York, San Francisco, London, Sydney, Amsterdam, and Barcelona. The Airbnb platform influences the decision making of travelers toward room booking and affects stakeholders, including governments, tourism boards, hotels, and residents (Guttentag, 2013). The rapid expansion of Airbnb may also affect the hotel sector. This informal accommodation service has potential negative and positive effects that may directly influence the image of destinations and the direction of future tourism development of cities. Airbnb accommodation can also serve as supplemental hotel inventory in a mega event (Lehr, 2015). For example, over 600,000 foreign fans visited the 2014 FIFA world cup, but only 55,400 hotel beds were available in Rio, Brazil (Panja & Millard, 2014). Airbnb platform was able to assist with alternative accommodation to

support these needs during this event. Sharing economy solves market demand by offering users with large amounts of informative data (Nica & Potcovaru, 2015).

Accommodation occupies a major cost in a travel budget. In the past, finding reasonable accommodations only depends on hotel sources. For instance, a family of four members normally books two rooms, which can be costly. At present, Airbnb offers various types of accommodations and a great range of prices that family travelers can choose according to their budget and preference. By shaping the traditional business model, Airbnb creates an online market place that features social trust between hosts and guests, wherein users generate comments, identify photos, and create a personal profile using Facebook (Guttentag, 2013). Communication between hosts and guests enables them to share private space via online tools, thereby creating a new form of tourism. This new viral form of marketing through blogs, chatrooms, and portals demonstrate a strong implication to existing service providers (Roblek et al., 2016). This study aims to investigate the key factors of family travelers in using Airbnb accommodation for family travel.

Literature

“Leisure is a primary resource for familial development” (Lehto, Lin, Chen, & Choi, 2012, p. 838). This definition indicates the importance of leisure activities and family cohesion. Family travel is a major segment of travel and tourism industry (Kang, Hsu, and Wolfe, 2003). Lehto, Fu, Li, & Zhou (2017) used as basis the findings of four dimensions of vocation benefits from Chinese family travelers; they found that the first level of benefit, namely, experiential learning, pertains to children. The second and third level of benefits, namely, communication and togetherness and shared

exploration, pertain to family. The fourth level of benefit, namely, escape and relaxation, pertains to self (individual well-being). “Homely feelings and cultural meanings are fundamental to most family holidays” when finding a suitable accommodation service (Obrador, 2012, p. 409). Parents often sacrifice their wishes and interests for their children; these wishes include destinations, modes, and activities (Decrop, 2005). Nanda, Hu, and Bai (2007) found that families often visit places that are interesting to children. Many studies (Berey and Pollay, 1968; ~~Jenkins, 1978~~; Belch, Belch, and Geresino, 1985; Thornton, Shaw, Williams, 1997; ~~Labrecque and Richard, 2001~~; Wang, Hsieh, Yeh, and Tsai, 2004; Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, and Cheah, 2015; Nickerson and Jurowski, 2001; Flurry and Burns, 2005; Decrop, 2005; Nanada, Hu, and Bai, 2007; Flurry, 2007; Lehto, Choi, Lin, and MacDermind, 2009; Kozak, 2010) discussed the influential role of different ages of children in stimulating holiday choices. Parents often prioritize the needs of their children. Thus, accommodation is a key element of experience for family travel. Decisions on the place and format of accommodation service can be influenced by various factors. Hotels and Airbnb offer diverse experiences and services that are closely related to the budget plan of individuals.

Decision-Making Process in Family Travel Involving Young Children

Families with young children younger than age 11 tend to emphasize family coalition during decision making to ensure that all members have a good time (Lehto et al., 2012). Their ideal holiday is “going away from home than seeing new places and scenery” (Gram, 2005, p.18). Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, and Cheah (2015) studied Asian parents with young children on their process of selecting resort hotels and vacation needs. They identified the following essential factors: travel distance, interaction quality, child-friendly amenities, safety, and family-oriented programs. Rothenfluh, Germei, and Schulz (2016) noted that parents search for hotel location

and accessibility, hygiene standards, children-friendly rooms, and sleep quality. Wong, Ap and Li (2001) discussed the findings of family travel preferences in accommodation service. They noted that family travelers prefer lodging facilities that provide services and products, such as swimming pools with lifeguards and discounted packages for families. The demand for family travel in accommodation services has gained attention. Hotel chains started focusing on this market by offering children's programs, activities, and amenities to enrich their overall stay experience (Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001). Choi, Lehto, and Brey (2010, p. 135) found that families with young children "do not develop loyalty to a particular experience or that as they grow their propensity to develop loyalty increase." This finding enables practitioners to determine ways on how to increase loyalty given that young children are future spenders in the industry.

Previous studies that examined the process of selecting accommodation services emphasize that cleanliness is the most important factor for travelers from Mainland China and Western countries (Tsai, Yeung, & Yim, 2011). Chinese travelers tend to focus on prices, brand names, and prestigious statuses, whereas Western travelers focus on room size, security, distance, and location (Tsai et al., 2011). Three determining factors are considered by leisure travelers, namely, location, price, and service quality (Tsai et al., 2011). Room rate is often the most crucial factor in the hotel choices of international travelers (Wong, 2002). Despite the preferences and cultural differences of travelers in hotel selection criteria, previous studies did not explore the accommodation selection criteria of family travelers in informal accommodation service, such as Airbnb. By contrast, family travelers are involved in various stages of travel planning, wherein parents may not be the only decision makers. Their service needs may differ from those of other groups. Cost may be doubled when traveling with children based on their age

and number. This factor may lead parents to choose alternative accommodation services to meet their budget.

This study argues that alternative accommodation service platforms, such as Airbnb, may match the characteristics and preferences for family travel. What are the key factors that influence family travelers to choose Airbnb accommodations instead of hotels? What kind of experience with Airbnb do they value the most?

Value Determinant of Airbnb for Family Travel

Sharing economy increases consumer welfare and opens new market options (Sablik, 2014). Tourist behaviors, which include social behavior, are affected by sharing economy (Cheng, 2016). This new form of consumption is considered communal bonding that reduces the environmental effect of consumption because of consumer participation (Tussyadiah, 2016). Nica and Potcovaru (2015) found that this form of consumption is a way of sharing saved resources with others. Oskam and Boswijk (2016, p. 16) indicated the following three main factors when taking part in sharing economy: “convenience and price, the product or service itself, and word-of-mouth.”

First, price is identified as the major factor of Airbnb’s appeal to tourists (Guttentag, 2013). Airbnb accommodations are often cheaper than traditional hotels. Airbnb is a win-win option for users who can find low-cost accommodations and operators who can earn extra income (Dollberg, Shalev, & Chen, 2010; Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015; Oskam & Boswijk, 2016; Pizam, 2014). These accommodations offer discounts up to 40% off the price of a hotel room (Yung, 2014). Many studies (Guttentag, 2013; Heo, 2016; Lehr, 2015; Nica & Potcovaru, 2015;

OECD, 2016; Oskam & Boswijk, 2016; Tussyadiah, 2016; Weber, 2014; Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2016) also found that Airbnb is cheaper than hotels, which is an attractive factor to young people, families, and people with low travel budgets (Varma et al., 2016). However, Poon and Huang (2017, p. 2438) found that Airbnb is “less preferred when traveling with family,” which shows the need for further research from the perspective of family users.

Second, the product of Airbnb is distinct from standardized hotel experience. Mody, Suess, and Lehto (2017) identified serendipity, localness, *communitas*, and personalization as the new dimensions of experience economy. Airbnb platform emphasizes local advice and authentic experience with Airbnb hosts. Unique local experience (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016) and meaningful social encounter (Cheng, 2016) highlight the differences between Airbnb and traditional accommodation service. The present study argues that the different kinds of informal accommodations (staying with host or without a host) and the benefit of receiving local advice and authentic experience may not apply to all types of traveler needs.

Third, the real review system introduced word-of-mouth through this social platform. Varma et al. (2016) noted that Airbnb users are disloyal to Airbnb. Airbnb users will use the service in the future if they have satisfactory experiences, which demonstrate the importance of user reviews. This new consumption pattern offers increased value with low loyalty (Tussyadiah, 2016). Airbnb tourists/travelers tend to stay long and travel frequently, which can benefit the entire tourism industry (Cheng, 2016; Fang et al., 2016; Guttentag, 2013; Tussyadiah, 2016; Varma et al., 2016; Zervas et al., 2016). By contrast, family travelers have weak loyalty to a particular hotel brand (Choi et al., 2010). Thus, peer-to-peer review (P2P) offers valuable and informative data to users, which may be an ideal alternative for family travelers.

Travelers look for new and unique ways of traveling and sharing their experiences in social media (Yung, 2014). Mody et al. (2017) found that the positioning of Airbnb platform is an evidence of the experiential value of sharing economy. They noted that experience is the key element of the hospitality and tourism industry. Social interaction between tourists and hosts may be considered a key factor that determines the perceived value, enjoyment (Tussyadiah, 2016), and satisfaction of tourists (Heo, 2016). Their social interaction with local hosts may be an important channel that promotes their experiences to others. This authentic and unique experience can also generate new tourism products and enhance destination attributes (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). By contrast, staying in hotels tends to offer a standard service format for family travelers. Existing studies in family travel and hotel selections demonstrate a number of key factors. Only few recent studies discussed how Airbnb offers value to young and family travelers. These studies did not particularly focus on family travelers. Therefore, the present study aims to explore whether Airbnb is a good choice for family travel by answering the following questions.

1. What are the factors that influence the decision of booking Airbnb instead of a hotel?
2. How does Airbnb experience affect future travel patterns/behaviors?

Methodology

This study aims to investigate how sharing economy shapes family travel in accommodation service. This study adopts a qualitative approach given the limited understanding of family travelers' preference in Airbnb accommodation. This approach allows the researcher to investigate the phenomenon of Airbnb development by analyzing individual

feelings toward the use of an alternative accommodation service for family travel. The interview strategy enables the interviewer to probe into the views and rationale of participants in choosing Airbnb for family travel. Semi-structured questions are designed for one-on-one interviews to understand the experience of participants of their stay at an Airbnb accommodation.

Purposive sampling technique was applied in this study, which was designed to elicit a small number of cases and provide the most information about family travelers using Airbnb. Sampling size is based on the judgment of the researcher and is normally composed of 30 cases or less (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Participants were selected using snowball sampling. First, the researcher sent an interview invitation through a parents group in Hong Kong via the communication app WeChat. The group consists of 133 members who have children in primary and secondary schools. The researcher received nine potential parents who were willing to share their experiences. Eight interviews were successfully conducted through phone and face-to-face formats. Six referral cases in Mainland China and Australia were conducted through phone interviews, and two interviews from Taiwan were conducted by phone. All 16 one-on-one interviews were conducted in February 2017, which included phone and face-to-face interviews in Hong Kong, Mainland China, Taiwan, and Australia. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes using a digital recorder. Before the interview, each participant was briefed about the purpose of the study and confidentiality of personal data.

Participants consisted of 13 females and three males who have at least one child within the ages of 1 to 10 and who have experienced staying at an Airbnb within one year. They used Airbnb at least once for their family travel within the past year. One participant is under 25 years old, four participants are 26 to 35 years old, seven participants are 36 to 45 years old, and four participants are 46 years old and above. Fifteen participants are currently based in Hong Kong,

Mainland China, Taiwan, and Australia. Ten participants received a master's degree and higher, four participants received a bachelor's degree, one received an associate degree, and one received a senior high school degree (Table 1).

Insert Table 1. here

All participants chose Airbnb for the travel purpose of family leisure. Most participants learned about Airbnb through friends and family recommendations, and a few learned about Airbnb through the Internet while arranging accommodation. The average length of stay in Airbnb accommodation is 2.6 nights. Most participants stayed for at least once or twice a year, followed by three to four and five to six times. Only four participants experienced sharing accommodation with the host, whereas most stayed in independent flats, houses, or villas. All participants had experience of using Airbnb service overseas. Among the 16 participants, only three had experience of using in domestic Airbnb service.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo 11. All data were coded into three major themes, namely, demographic information, reasons for choosing Airbnb, and experience of using Airbnb for family travel. First, interviewees were asked about their demographic information, which includes age, family members, occupation, education level, and income. They were then asked about their previous experiences using Airbnb, which include finding the Airbnb service, travel purpose, accommodation type, and length of stay. Second, they were asked about their reasons for choosing Airbnb instead of a hotel. Third, they were asked how the Airbnb experience differed from hotel experience.

Findings and Discussions of Airbnb Experience

Interviewees were asked to share their first Airbnb experience, and most agreed that Airbnb has met or has gone beyond their expectations. Some interviewees had unpleasant experiences, which include differences in the photo uploaded in the website from the actual place and the difficulty of finding the place. Most unpleasant experiences are related to the former, such as old and dirty facilities (Interviewees 5, 7, 9, and 10). Interviewee (1) encountered difficulty finding the place and opening the door, which created an unpleasant experience. Not all Airbnb hosts would meet and open door for their guests. In fact, some of interviewees did not get a chance to meet the hosts during their stay. Interviewee (14) had difficulty finding the place in a local community in France because she does not speak the language. Other participants can speak the local language, which made their travel easy. Therefore, language competency also affects the smooth travel of family members.

Interviewee (3) availed a secret accommodation in Bangkok, where the apartment complex does not welcome Airbnb operation. *“Our first experience was an apartment in Bangkok. We were asked not to reveal the purpose of our stay. We could only mention to the security guard that we were there to meet friends. There was no contact with the host at all. We had to do it with all the instructions based on our previous communication. We felt like criminals staying in someone’s house.”* Staying in a city that does not welcome Airbnb can lead to an unsecure and unexpected experience. Two interviewees (3, 5) indicated that they may no longer use Airbnb for their family travel because of their unexpected and dissatisfying experiences.

Majority of interviewees who had a positive experience using Airbnb consider the platform their first choice. This finding extends the view of Varma et al. (2016) who suggested that satisfied Airbnb users may possibly use the platform again in the future. This finding also reveals that dissatisfied users may no longer choose Airbnb for their future family trips, which

involve children in various ages. Thus, each family prefers not to deal with unexpected situations. The present study finds that family travelers who are satisfied with Airbnb may likely use Airbnb for future family travels.

Dimension of Selecting Airbnb

What are the factors that influence the decision to book Airbnb instead of a hotel? Most family travelers need more than one room. A hotel may only serve one child to stay in an existing bed, which may not fit a family with two kids, but paying for an additional room is costly. Interviewee (5) said: *“When you have to spend the same amount for motel or Airbnb, I would choose Airbnb.”* Family travelers look for cost-efficient accommodation. Interviewees were asked of the percentage of hotel price that they would pay for Airbnb. Two-thirds of interviewees believed that price is the key indicator for their decision to choose Airbnb instead of a hotel. They agreed that Airbnb offers value for money. Thus, they can save money for other expenses. Six interviewees indicated that they would choose Airbnb if accommodation is 20% to 30% cheaper than hotel price. Nine interviewees would consider Airbnb if the price is 30% to 50% lower than a hotel. Three interviewees do not take price as a key factor in their choice of accommodation, but they look for quality accommodation and unique experience for their stay. Most family travelers support the finding of existing studies that price influences their choice of accommodation services (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016; Yung, 2014; Guttentag, 2013; Tsai et al., 2011; Wong, 2002). Other family travelers look for authentic and meaningful experiences rather than good price. The price of Airbnb is considered a key factor. This finding did not incorporate other factors in the following analysis.

Table 2 shows the factors that influence the decision of booking Airbnb rather than a hotel. A total of 222 text units were identified, which include special experience (120 text units, 46%), facilities and space (73 text units, 28%), and location (29 text units, 11%).

Insert Table 2. here

1.1 Special Experience

Most interviewees used Airbnb for various reasons. “Special experience” received the highest weight (120 text units, 46%) among all attributes. Special experience includes cultural exploration, local lifestyle, and interior and exterior of a house/building. Some interviewees purposely select a unique Airbnb accommodation to understand the local lifestyle and create a memorable experience (e.g., staying in a farmhouse, house of an artist, or a historical building). *“We love Japanese melon. We purposely went to a melon farm to purchase melons from the farmers. My son and I can speak Japanese. We interacted with local residents. I feel that we enjoyed our trip as more than just being tourists”* (Interviewee 1).

The interviewees engaged in cultural exploration and lifestyle for themselves and their children. Interviewee (7) likes to stay in unique structures, such as a castle in Europe. Unlike staying in a standard hotel, they gained unique experiences by staying in a castle. These informal accommodations enrich their sense of belongingness in a home. Interviewee 4 mentioned that their family experienced rich culture when they stayed in a unique accommodation. Feelings toward home and cultural meanings are consistent with Obrador’s (2012) finding on how families value these fundamental elements to enrich their well-being.

Interviewees 1 and 16 shared that they select their Airbnb accommodation to enrich their travel experience as a family. According to Interviewee (16), they stayed in an Airbnb for the

cultural exploration of their children. They selected a farm house where they were required to take care of animals and the entire house. They needed to milk cows and water plants in the morning and make sure the gate is closed at night. Their family gained the real experience of living in a farm and claimed that the experience cannot be replicated by hotels. This finding supports the unique selling points of sharing economy by sharing saved resources (Nica & Potcovaru, 2015) as products or services (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016) to create a win-win situation for hosts and users (Dollberg et al., 2010; Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015; Oskam & Boswijk, 2016; Pizam, 2014). Moreover, involvement by participation enhances the travel experience of families and can be applied to any children-oriented accommodation service.

This study also finds that families treasure travel experiences with their children. Pine and Gilmore (1998) classified experience into four dimensions, namely, education, entertainment, escapist, and esthetic (Atwal & Williams, 2012). The finding of this study was also categorized into four elements, namely, experience economy, 1.1.1 esthetic (38 text units, 15%), 1.1.2 educational (35 text units, 13%), 1.1.3 escapist (26 text units, 10%), and 1.1.4 entertainment experience (21 text units, 8%).

The esthetic realm involves immersing themselves in a sensual environment (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). Interviewees 12, 13, and 14 appreciated the distinctive culture of aesthetics of Airbnb accommodations. *“When I saw the collection of kitchenware, I felt that my host pays much attention to quality of life. I love to cook, and that immediately caught my eye”* (Interviewee 15). Many interviewees discussed how they enjoyed the decoration and taste of their Airbnb host.

The realm of education is commonly applied in the tourism and hospitality industry to enrich the experience of travelers by offering informal and educational activities (Williams,

2006). Education is highly cherished by the interviewees who frequently mentioned that they treat their stays as educational experiences for their kids. Interviewee 14 mentioned that their interaction with the hosts, children, and pets expanded her son's horizon and shared his reaction to a disabled dog adopted by the host. She believes that this educational experience cannot be gained from school. Certain interviewees also believe that allowing children to speak the local language and communicate with the host or local residents are considered a way of learning (Interviewees 1 and 10).

The escapist realm is a way to immerse themselves in a sensual environment (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). Staying in someone else's house through Airbnb allows family travelers to immerse themselves in a new culture and lifestyle. Each escapist experience is distinct for the family. Many interviewees shared that they felt they were residents. *"I feel I am at home and part of the locals. The host has a farm where you are welcome to pick your cucumbers and tomatoes for salad"* (Interviewee 11 in New Zealand).

The entertainment realm is a way to reflect engagement "in a personal, memorable way" (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 99). The interviewees enjoyed their stay because of the entertainment provided by local festivals, hosts, and surroundings. *"The Sapporo beer festival was being celebrated during our stay in Sapporo. We also joined the local festival where we received a warm welcome and had a great time"* (Interviewee 1). Many family travelers opted to stay on a farm where they can have a completely different experience from their daily life. *"In Australia, the host has a glasshouse where he plants many vegetables. At night, we can see wild rabbits and kangaroos in the forest. I felt that we did not need to spend extra time and money to add another activity in our trip"* (Interviewee 9).

These distinctive experiences highlight unique local and social interactions and differentiate Airbnb from hotel service, which support the findings of Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2016). Family travelers can also experience the authentic features of staying in local houses by interacting with residents and hosts (Varma et al., 2016). Family travelers value learning opportunities for their children that schools do not offer.

1.2 Facility and Space

Facility and space received the second highest weight (73 text units, 18%). This study identifies several key elements in the facilities category, which are highly relevant to the needs of traveling families (e.g., washing machine and kitchen). Kitchen is one of the key reasons for choosing an Airbnb accommodation. Participants agreed that washing machine and kitchen are the key facilities they consider for choosing Airbnb instead of a standard hotel service. Children who travel outside their homeland may not eat local meals from restaurants. This phenomenon occurs when they travel to Western countries. Certain interviewees travel with groups of families and share Airbnb accommodations and cook while their kids play. *“My daughter was sick during our recent family trip. I was glad that I was able to cook something for her. When searching for accommodation service, I would look for kitchen facilities, which allow me to prepare simple food for my family”* (Interviewee 5). Interviewee 3 frequently travels with kids and parents who often prefer to eat simply in the Airbnb accommodation and save money. Thus, having a kitchen is highly important because family travelers can prepare comfort food and save on dining expenses.

Family travel involves at least two members in the trip. The 16 interviewees mentioned that their family travels involved three to 10 members. A washing machine can reduce their packing and burden, and most interviewees mentioned the importance of having one. Children’s

clothes can easily get smelly and dirty when traveling the whole day, especially in the summer. Interviewee (1) stated: *“When staying in a hotel, you need to pay an unreasonable price for laundry service. Alternatively, if you are staying in an Airbnb, you can do it without any worry.”* Most interviewees tend to find accommodation that provides child-friendly facilities, such as swimming pools, BBQ facilities, and playrooms. Airbnb offers a variety of accommodations that allow family travelers to select those that fit their needs. Washing machines and kitchen facilities are not mentioned in previous studies of family travel for selecting hotel criteria. Most hotels do not offer kitchen facilities and washing machines.

All interviewees indicated that they normally book at least two rooms. The cost of hotel rooms is usually high. They cannot secure adjoining family rooms, which causes inconvenience. Many interviewees indicated that the size of hotel rooms is often limited, and children cannot run around or make much noise. Families in Airbnb accommodation do not have to worry about the noise. *“Most of the time, the hotel room is only around 40 m². However, the size of Airbnb accommodation is 400 m²”* (Interviewee 11). Other interviewees prefer renting a big house or villa, which they do not often experience, to enrich their holiday experience.

“We live in a very small apartment in Hong Kong. When we are traveling, we would choose a big house to satisfy our needs” (Interviewee 5). The benefit of staying in a house is having *“a living room where everyone can talk (communicate) and make the ambiance even better”* (Interviewee 6). Facilities and space provide family travelers with more convenient support than hotels. Compared with Tsai et al.’s (2011) study about selecting hotel criteria, the present study finds that Chinese family travelers value facilities and space, which is similar to Western travelers who focus on room size. Hotels can offer good value for laundry service for family travelers to reduce their burden.

1.3 Location

Location received the fifth highest weight among all attributes (27 text units). Most interviewees care about location for various reasons and purposes, such as being near tourist destinations, proximity to public transportation, supermarkets, shops, and restaurants, and a safe zone to stay in. Interviewees 1 and 14 mentioned that finding Airbnb accommodation creates problems, especially when traveling with kids. *“I would choose one near to railway station or a convenient transportation system”* (Interviewee 1). Others do not consider location as a key factor. They can rent a car and find the place easily. Family travelers who visit the city commonly look for convenient life function and location, where they can easily access public transportation. Those who visit the countryside commonly travel by car. Thus, the location may not be as important as other factors. Finding a safe area to stay is the key factor for them.

2.1 Word of Mouth

Word of mouth received a total of 39 text units, which include 2.1.1 host, 2.1.2 safety, 2.1.3 cleanliness, 2.1.4 service, and facilities.

Insert Table 3. Word of Mouth here

Interviewees depend on recommendations by friends and online reviews when making their final decisions. Some interviewees experienced their first Airbnb through recommendations of friends. Interviewees 5, 7, and 11 strongly trust the recommendations and shared experiences of their friends. *“I introduced my Airbnb hosts from Canada and New Zealand to my friends and many of them also had a great time”* (Interviewee 11). This outcome extends the findings of Kozak (2010) on the importance of word-of-mouth recommendations on hotel and Airbnb services. In terms of online review, interviewees first review host profiles, pictures of the place, and user

comments. *“My first Airbnb experience was not as good as I had expected mainly because I did not pay much attention to the reviews of users on the host”* (Interviewee 9). Interviewees 6 and 13 pay attention to host and family reviews and attitude toward children. This outcome supports the study of Ert, Fleischer, and Magen (2016) on how host profiles influence the decision-making of users.

Safety is also a crucial consideration for family travelers, which consists of area, accommodation, and host. *“When I was looking for a place to stay in New York City, I could not find a reasonable accommodation. Then I found one in Brooklyn. I checked the review about safety in the area and the apartment itself”* (Interviewee 6). Interviewee 2 believes that most guests leave moderate comments about their experience. However, this interviewee also stated: *“Sometimes you can spot some key points if you read carefully. The host has a very cute dog, but dog hair is everywhere. I would try to avoid this accommodation.”* An unfriendly host is the second keyword that should be avoided. Certain interviewees mentioned that unfriendly hosts can be related to unreasonable charges. Interviewee 7 was asked to pay an extra deposit when her family arrived at the destination, which created a negative perception of their travel experience.

Service and facility were the factors that were least considered in reviews. Service includes airport pick-up, local tour service, and meals. Interviewee 11 stays with the same host in New Zealand every year. Thus, she feels that she keeps going back to a second home in New Zealand. *“My host came to pick us up at the airport and assisted us to book a South Island tour.”* Most interviewees noted that facilities and space are essential to their choice of stay. Interviewee 14 often travels with a pet and has difficulty finding a hotel to host them. Other Airbnb hosts accommodate pets, which made her family travel easily.

Legal and Safety

Insert Table 4. Legal issue here

Safety is a key element from the perspective of family travelers. The interviewees shared their views about the legal issues in Airbnb operation, which most interviewees are not aware of. Interviewees 4 and 6 know that Airbnb in cities, such as San Francisco and Amsterdam, are required to pay taxes. All interviewees indicated that Airbnb should be legalized, which can benefit users, hosts, and the local tourism industry. Interviewee (16) mentioned the need for a certain type of insurance implementation, which can protect users and hosts. Approximately half of the interviewees stated that they will not choose Airbnb if they know its operation is illegal. However, half of the interviewees stated that they may still select Airbnb if a city has a good reputation based on safety and online reviews. Interviewee (1) mentioned that Japan has good reputation and he does not mind using Airbnb in this country even if Airbnb is not regulated. This outcome may relate to the previous positive experiences of interviewees who have stayed in an Airbnb. This outcome also reflects how family travelers value online reviews. The interviewees appreciate the safety of Airbnb and its regulated accommodation service for family travel. Governments and local authorities must handle the development of Airbnb.

Most interviewees believe that Airbnb development influences the patterns of family travel because they feel they are going to a second home in another city or country. Interviewee 10 stated: *“I used to plan our family trip to visit different places fully. Now, we slow down our plan and also take local host advice that enriches our travel experience.”* Other participants also took local host advice and ended up having an unexpected experience. Interviewees 1 and 13 mentioned: *“We feel we are part of the locals. Just like going to the market and buying some vegetables and meat for dinner.”* Interviewees 2, 4, and 15 shared that they do not plan their

trips in detail. Other participants mentioned that their travel pattern changed to “pack and go” from making a plan first. This outcome supports the commercial of Airbnb of “welcome home,” which makes users feel like everywhere is their home. They simply fly to a city to experience local authenticity and visit well-known sites.

Not all family members enjoy staying in an Airbnb accommodation. Interviewee 14 mentioned that her husband prefers to stay in a hotel where he can expect standard service and facilities. However, she plans to bring her kids to a boat house in Hong Kong with her friends. This finding demonstrates a unique experience of using Airbnb as something that is highly welcome by some family travelers compared with a standardized service and setting. Airbnb gradually changes the travel patterns of families and closes the distance between travelers and local hosts. Family travelers value their local experience and alternative accommodation choice. This outcome supports the finding of Varma et al. (2016) that Airbnb is suitable for family travel because it provides alternative accommodation services; however, the findings do not support Poon and Huang (2017). In addition, users who have positive experiences with Airbnb tend to use this service in the future, whereas users with negative experiences prefer not to select it again. However, hotel cost is sometimes still higher than Airbnb, which makes users take the risk again.

Conclusion

This study explores the key factors for families to choose Airbnb accommodation service. Previous studies discussed how children affect family decision-making for holidays, which does not include this new alternative accommodation service, namely, Airbnb. Price is often a major consideration for family travelers in selecting accommodation service, whereas other interviewees chose to stay in Airbnb for a unique experience. This study demonstrates that special experience is the most important factor, which is a way of learning new culture for family

members, followed by facilities and space, online reviews, location, and recommendations of friends.

Family travelers look for more than a hotel room and standard service. Airbnb can offer this service and other unique experiences, which cannot be duplicated by standard hotel accommodation services. For family travelers, staying in an Airbnb accommodation “corresponds to customer participation and describes the connection, or environmental relationship” within their stay (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p.101). This study finds that family travelers value the esthetic realm the most within their experience followed by education, escapist, and entertainment realms. This outcome can be further examined by quantitative approach in the future.

Airbnb offers flexible facilities and space, which can fulfill the needs of families; these facilities include a kitchen, washing machine, and additional space. Online reviews are also highly valued by family travelers, which indicate that Airbnb hosts should maintain positive reviews, especially regarding their image and presentation, accommodation safety, cleanliness, service, and facilities. Airbnb hosts can arrange activities to engage family members in enriching their holiday experience. Good quality accommodation can attract additional family travelers rather than low price. Location is not an important factor among the attributes as long as hosts provide clear directions to reach the accommodation location. Family travelers who use Airbnb slightly differ from family travelers who use resort hotels (Lattimore, Prayag, & Cheah, 2015; Kang et al., 2003).

Family travelers believe that Airbnb should be regulated and supervised by local authorities to ensure the quality of the tourism industry. The present study extends existing studies of Airbnb operation from the perspectives of family travelers. The outcome supports the

finding that Airbnb accommodation is an attractive accommodation service for family travelers (Varma, 2016), which contradicts Poon and Huang (2017).

This study identifies the key factors of how family travelers select Airbnb service as their accommodation. This finding is a practical contribution to hotels and Airbnb hosts. Hotel and Airbnb operators can provide family travelers with additional suitable facilities and experiences by understanding their needs. Family travelers look for a special participation experience that can enrich their travel. Besides offering good hygiene standard, this study suggests that Airbnb hosts, who have abundant natural resources and access to farms and gardens, should organize feasible programs for kids to enrich their stay. Certain interviewees found time to read reviews based on an existing view of an interviewee using P2P service. Despite the current smart surface of the Airbnb platform, this study suggests organizing a special group of kid-friendly hosts and services, which can easily guide family users to adopt this informal accommodation service. Airbnb is related to the trend of sharing economy that offers alternative accommodation service for family travel, which creates a new trend of travel behavior that influences hoteliers to rethink the promotion of a children-friendly stay and experience.

In terms of the legal issue in Airbnb operation, majority of participants do not know whether Airbnb is regulated by local authorities or not. This finding creates a concern to family travelers, especially when they travel with young children. Interestingly, certain participants use Airbnb based on online reviews and where they are traveling to. In certain cities, licensed guest house hosts also use Airbnb as a distribution channel to promote their business. This licensed guest house can also be a way of ensuring their quality and standard to users. Online review is still a key indicator to travelers that is closely related with guest experience. Providing a pleasant experience is also a task that Airbnb hosts should learn and offer.

Limitation and Future Study Direction

This study explores the factor that influences family travelers to select Airbnb as an alternative accommodation service. This study encounters unavoidable challenges, which can be served for future research opportunities and directions. First, this study applies one-on-one interviews to provide information filtered through the views of participants. Each participant experienced using Airbnb accommodation service at least once. During the interview process, participants shared their experiences of selecting Airbnb, which may also reflect in their overall experience. Interpreting the views of participants may result in biased responses and not all participants are articulate and perceptive (Creswell, 2009). All participants are of Chinese background. Their views can represent the Chinese family experience. The findings of this study set the foundation of family travelers who use Airbnb, which can be extended to different approaches to funnel down the needs and experiences of family users. Further research recommendations include: 1) applying quantitative method to guide the needs and experiences of family travelers in the Airbnb service and 2) replicating the study in different cultures.

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