Why are ratings so high in the sharing economy? Evidence based on guest perspectives

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One issue that has been identified in the literature is the relatively high average of guest client ratings that properties receive on sharing accommodation platforms. High ratings seem to be the norm in most online platforms that include consumer reviews, but the case of Airbnb seems more extreme than the others. Several reasons have been proposed to explain this apparently positively-biased eWOM. However, none of these proposals have taken into account the guests' perspective on the matter. In this study, we develop a two-step methodology to research and verify the reasons for this issue. First, with a sample of 391 Airbnb guests, we analyse the specific causes that explain these high ratings. Second, we carry out in-depth interviews with 20 additional guests who did not rate or who recognized that they were not fully accurate in their reviews. Not wanting to harm a reputed host that performed well in stays that did not involve serious problems was the main reason behind these behaviours. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

Introduction

The sharing economy (SE) has impacted a great number of economic sectors in the last few years. Currently, it is possible to find SE platforms in many sectors. One of the ones in which the SE has seen a significant growth is in tourism and, more specifically, in hospitality. Sharing or peer-to-peer accommodation options have become a natural alternative and a complement to traditional accommodation options such as hotels, camping and apartments. Platforms like Airbnb, Homeaway and others have become increasingly popular and, for many tourists, these services currently have as much name recognition as other housing options such as Booking.com or Expedia.

Due to this growth, sharing accommodation has received a great deal of attention from academia. Researchers have analysed a variety of issues within this topic. For example, the economic impact of sharing accommodation on hotels (Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2017), the motivations for using sharing accommodations (Guttentag, Smith, Potwarka, & Havitz, 2018), and how to attract more bookings (e.g., Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016), among others. In this sense, the literature has noticed the extremely high ratings that properties receive (Bridges & Vásquez, 2016; Teubner, Hawlitschek, & Dann, 2017; Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2015). In fact, in a large database of all the units in Spain that have been rated at least once (more than 98,000 units), we found that 98% of the units have 4.5 or 5 stars out of 5 (Airbnb shows average ratings rounded to the closest .5 decimal point). The other 2% have 3.5 or 4 stars, and a negligible amount of properties (20 out of more than 98,000) have less than 3.5 stars.

These results stand out when we compare them to the average rating of hotels listed on TripAdvisor, where several studies (Bulchand-Gidumal, Melián-González, & González López-Valcárcel, 2011; Pacheco, 2017; Xie, Chen, & Wu, 2016; Zervas et al., 2015; among others), have found average ratings for large samples of hotels to be rated below 4 points on the same five-point rating scale. All these studies have found that reviews skew towards the positive side, but much less than on Airbnb. Although hotels/TripAdvisor cannot be directly compared to sharing accommodation units/Airbnb, both types of accommodation have shared features and clients. So when large databases of hotels and units are used in research, the results seem somewhat surprising. However, Zervas et al. (2015) matched vacation rental properties on TripAdvisor with the same properties on Airbnb and found that the ratings for these properties were comparable on both platforms. Thus, it seems as if the type of rental has

more of an effect on the rating it receives than the site on which it is advertised. Comparable cases in which almost all reviews are extremely positive have been found in other digital markets as well, such as eBay (Nosko & Tadelis, 2015). Some authors have argued that this skew toward positive ratings seems to be typical of reputation in digital markets (Tadelis, 2016).

Several reasons have been proposed for the high ratings in sharing accommodations: initially, there was fear of revenge (Fradkin, Grewal, & Holtz, 2018), since not only do guests evaluate hosts, but hosts also evaluate guests (Airbnb uses a bilateral reputation system). However, this fear partly disappeared when Airbnb decided to make the reviews public once both parties had submitted their reviews to the system, or after 15 days had passed from the end of the stay (in this latter case, if one of the parties had not reviewed after 15 days, they would not be allowed to do so once the review of the other part was made public). Second, there is the fact that usually guests get to know their hosts or, at least, have a direct interaction with them before and during the accommodation experience. It is reasonable to assume that many hosts behave in a kind way in these encounters, because they want their guests to be satisfied and convey this in their reviews. Thus, guests could reciprocate this positive behaviour through favourable ratings. Third, because Airbnb guests consult property ratings, and because these ratings tend to be positive, a priming effect (Schacter, 1995) might influence guests' ratings. Fourth, there are causes related to the fact that the sharing accommodation is a new type of housing: a certain novelty effect; guests not wanting to be as demanding as when they stay at a hotel (Yannopoulou, Moufahim, & Bian, 2013); or even understanding that sharing accommodation is a different type of experience and should not be evaluated in the same way that hotels are. Fifth, there are also market-driven reasons: if a property gets low ratings, it can be removed from the platform, since

the number of bookings it will receive in the future will be lower. Sometimes, it is even possible to find the property listed again on the platform, thus presenting the opportunity of starting anew (Teubner & Glaser, 2018; Zervas et al., 2015). Sixth, some authors mention that guest expectations are more realistic in the case of peer-to-peer accommodations, since it is an individual who describes his or her own property instead of descriptions based on corporate marketing efforts (Yannopoulou et al., 2013). Lastly, it is possible that host behaviour can have an influence on guest ratings (Zervas et al., 2015).

Researchers have established that trust is one of the key drivers of the SE (Möhlmann, 2015), and that reviews are one of the most important pillars on which this trust is built (Tadelis, 2016). Reviews are thus essential for sharing accommodation (Guttentag, 2015). At the same time, and as Horton and Golden (2015) have argued, online reputation systems are essential since they reduce adverse selection. In fact, online review systems are key in the tourism sector, especially in online purchases. In these cases, information asymmetry is significant as a result of the intangible nature of both hospitality services and virtual purchases. In the sharing accommodation activities, information asymmetry is even higher since unlike with the case of hotels, there is no other source of information about the properties, such as the property's website. Ratings help to reduce information asymmetry. However, if ratings are "artificially" high (this is, ratings are high not because the listings are great, but because of other reasons), they will not be not helpful in reducing information asymmetry. Therefore, it is important to understand why ratings are so high in the SE. Understanding this would allow the platforms, in turn, to develop strategies and actions to correct the situation.

Thus, the objective of this research is to test whether guests faithfully convey their experiences and, if they do not do so, to identify the motivations behind this

behaviour. To this aim, we used a two-step methodology. First, we used a web-based survey; then we carried out a series of additional in-depth interviews. We directly asked people who have stayed at Airbnb properties if they rated the property after leaving and, if they did, whether their rating accurately reflected their experience. We found that a large number of guests recognized that they did not tell the whole truth when they reviewed, or that they did not review at all when their experience was not fully positive.

The paper unfolds as follows: In the next section, we present the main studies dealing with online reviews and, more specifically, with online reviews in sharing accommodation platforms. We then present the objective of our study and the methodology used. From there we derive the results, that are presented grouped in the two methodological steps that were carried out. We then discuss our results, and end with some conclusions and limitations that provide some directions for future research.

Literature review

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) research is quite abundant and has dealt with several topics. Many of the studies which have been conducted in the tourism industry are based on reviews that clients upload to the Internet (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Schuckert, Liu & Law, 2015).

Although many of these studies have used numeric review information (i.e., global rating and facet ratings), there is also an important body of research that has used the content of the review and that has derived conclusions by semantically processing this content (Stringam & Gerdes, 2010; Xiang, Du, Ma, & Fan, 2017; among others).

Recently, several studies have dealt with the issues related to ratings in the SE and, more specifically, the sharing accommodation and the Airbnb platform. Some of these studies have already highlighted Airbnb's relevance as one of the main platforms

in the sharing accommodation sector (Bridges & Vásquez, 2016; Teubner & Glaser, 2018).

One of the first studies on ratings in the SE was that of Zervas et al. (2015), who found that the vast majority of Airbnb properties had an average rating of 4.5 or 5 stars, with almost none below 3.5 stars. However, when they compared only the vacation rentals found in TripAdvisor to the same properties on Airbnb, the ratings in both platforms were similar, thus suggesting that ratings are more related to the type of property and host than to the Airbnb platform specifically. In fact, Bridges and Vásquez (2016) identified several studies in different online contexts that reveal what they call a J-shaped distribution of online reviews—that is, very few negative reviews and many positive ones. However, in their analysis, they found that positive reviews tend to skew higher on Airbnb than on any other platform.

Horton and Golden (2015) found a similar effect—what they call reputation inflation—in an analysis of the online labour marketplace oDesk. As they put it, although part of the inflation can be explained by the specific marketplace composition—bad sellers and hard-to-please buyers would exit the market over time—, that would account for only half of the inflation. The rest of the inflation can be attributed to two types of costs related to providing negative feedback. One of these costs, retaliation from the seller, should not be applicable to our case due to how Airbnb currently handles the bilateral reputation system (Fradkin et al., 2018). The other cost, possible market penalties associated with bad feedback, is important and will be considered in our analysis.

At Airbnb, guests check the ratings of listings before deciding on the property where they will stay. Therefore, a priming effect (Schacter, 1995) could take place when the guests rate their experience with the listing they chose. Because property ratings

tend to be mostly positive, guests are influenced by this valence. In a platform about technology products, Gao, Gu, and Lin (2006) found that both the aggregated ratings of products and recent consumer reviews influenced the new ratings. Muchnik, Aral, and Taylor (2013) named this phenomenon social influence bias and showed that previous positive ratings increased the probability of posting favourable reviews. Askalidis, Kim, and Malthouse (2017) also tested this phenomenon and found differences in ratings made by individuals who had read existing reviews and those who had not accessed this information.

Bridges and Vásquez (2016) have also identified a possible cause for positivity bias on Airbnb: the lack of anonymity. Although anonymous reviews can have several problems, they also have been found to enable users to express themselves more freely (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006; Wang, 2010). In this sense, platforms such as TripAdvisor make it possible to maintain reviewer anonymity. Maintaining the same level of anonymity on Airbnb is much more difficult. For example, users must scan and upload an ID with a picture to the platform, and hosts expect guests to match the pictures that appear on the website. We also understand that this lack of anonymity could be a relevant cause of high ratings, and we will thus include it in our analysis.

Regarding the type of experience provided in sharing accommodations, Yannopoulou et al. (2013) have argued that guests have lower expectations of accommodations provided by individuals than of those provided by hotels. That is, guests understand that a sharing accommodation property is a different experience than a hotel. However, a study by Cheng and Jin (2019) found a different result: that users tend to evaluate their experiences with sharing accommodation spaces using concepts derived from past hotel experiences.

Yannopoulou et al. (2013) mention that expectations in peer-to-peer accommodations can be more realistic, because guests get a better understanding of what they will get in the property than in the case of hotels due to the type of language that hosts use. We also believe that the much larger number of options available on Airbnb in comparison with the number of hotels available can also help users find what they are looking for, thus providing a better fit in characteristics, price, location, and services.

A key feature of sharing accommodation is the existence of direct communication between hosts and guests (Chen & Xie, 2017). As in any social interaction, this direct communication can involve reciprocal behaviours by the intervening parties. Gouldner's (1960) reciprocity norm posits that we have a tendency to return kindness or favours to people who do something positive for us. Because Airbnb acts as a marketplace, hosts must behave in a nice way in order to get clients, and those clients could reciprocate this positive conduct through their ratings. There are several ways in which hosts can perform nice behaviours. For example, Chen and Xie (2017) have showed the importance of the responsiveness of hosts to guests' requests. Fradkin et al. (2018) have mentioned that hosts can give advice to guests or offer to show guests around town. These authors show that the probability of getting a 5-star review is higher when guests have the opportunity for more social interaction with hosts. In addition, they found evidence that these host actions can induce reciprocity among guests.

Bridges and Vásquez (2016) identified another cause for this positivity bias—one that we believe is not significant. These authors indicate that since Airbnb manages the platform, it could be the case that not all reviews received are published. However, from our point of view, it would be very noticeable for users if they posted a review and

saw that the review was not published, especially given the lack of anonymity on the site. Thus, we believe that missing reviews would have been extensively reported if it happened frequently.

It could also be the case that hosts perform certain actions specifically aimed at achieving high ratings. This behaviour has not been analysed in the case of peer-to-peer accommodation, but there are studies (Gössling, Hall & Andersson, 2018; Gössling, Zeiss et al., 2018; Magno, Cassia, & Bruni, 2017) that have researched the case of hotel managers and their manipulation strategies of online reviews. The results show that hotel managers tend to engage in several strategies in order to obtain high ratings. Among them, the most significant for our research is asking guests to review.

Last, there can be two types of market reasons. On the one hand, Teubner and Glaser (2018) analysed a longitudinal sample and found that, as expected, properties with lower ratings tend to disappear from Airbnb. On the other, it is possible that host behaviour can impact ratings (Zervas et al., 2015), since hosts can reject guests that seem to be potentially very demanding.

However, all these factors do not mean that the ratings uploaded to the sites cannot also provide interesting information to future guests. For example, Bridges and Vásquez (2016) indicate that while evaluating properties by star ratings only can make it difficult to get a good idea of what a property is like, the comments that appear along with the review are more relevant. They state that what they call lukewarm comments can hide potentially negative experiences. More specifically, Gutt and Kundisch (2016) analysed not only overall ratings, but also the role of one of the facets that guests assess. They found that while overall ratings are generally high, specific facets, such as value, cleanliness or location, can be more realistic. In this same line of research, Guttentag

and Smith (2017) found that, for example, check-in/out are valued worse in the case of Airbnb properties than in the case of hotels.

Objective

The current literature has identified a concern that in SE platforms, and particularly Airbnb, guest reviews can be artificially high. Based on guest reviews from the most important platform for sharing accommodation, Airbnb, our research objective is twofold: first, to test whether guests faithfully convey their experiences; and second, if the reviews do not accurately reflect their experiences, to identify guests' motivations for completing this kind of unreliable review.

Methodology and data

The methodology for this study had two steps. First, we followed a quantitative approach through a web-based questionnaire. Then, we conducted qualitative research based on in-depth interviews.

In the first step, the study sample was comprised to individuals who had booked a property using the Airbnb platform. We gathered the data via the web by means of a self-administered questionnaire that respondents completed themselves. The data-gathering process took place via multiple channels appropriate for the target public, including social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, as well as blogs, and travellers' communities. In all cases, we posted the objective of the study together with a link to the webpage that hosted the questionnaire. The questionnaire used can be found in Annex I.

We collected data during February and March of 2018 and received a total of 712 answers. Forty-three of these answers were discarded, leaving a total sample of 669 guests. Of these, 278 (41.55%) had not stayed at an Airbnb accommodation or had not

been in charge of the booking process. Thus, their responses were not useful for our research objective. As a result, our final sample was comprised of 391 (58.45% of the 669) guests who had previously stayed at an Airbnb property after booking it personally.

A limitation of the study is the fact that respondents were self-selected; these problems are difficult to avoid in online studies since the members cannot be ''forced'' to fill out a survey questionnaire and the characteristics of the individuals have not been documented (Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2003). Thus, this study was not able to address the question of whether respondents and non-respondents differ in important characteristics.

The questions in the survey addressed several topics, including: the reasons for using Airbnb; satisfaction with their experience; communication with the host before, during, and after the stay; whether their review was fully coincident with their experience in the case they had posted a rating; and, if they had not posted a rating, the reasons for not having done so.

Table 1 includes some basic descriptive statistics of the sample group for this first step.

Table 1 here

In order to obtain a clearer picture of the results of the first step of the study, we carried out a series of in-depth interviews to better understand the specific reasons that Airbnb ratings are so high. We also believed that in-depth interviews would allow us to identify other possible causes of high ratings that the questionnaire missed.

To this aim, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with users who had booked an Airbnb listing and that fit the following situations in one or more of their stays: (1) they had not placed a review after their stay, or (2) they had reviewed the property but without being fully accurate in their review. In order to conduct these 20 interviews, we

had to contact a total of 27 Airbnb users. The other 7 users had not experienced either of the two situations, and thus were not interviewed. The average duration of the interviews, which were conducted in October 2018, was 20 minutes. The sample was comprised almost equally of men and women (11 men, 9 women). The interviewees had different level of expertise using the platform, from users with just one booking to users with more than ten bookings.

Out of the 20 users who were interviewed, eight had not reviewed one of their stays; ten had not been fully accurate in the review they had provided; and two had experienced both situations. Interviewees were asked to remember the specific stays that had led to either of the behaviours (i.e., no review and/or not conveying their true perceptions) and were then asked a series of questions regarding those stays. The questions addressed many topics, including the main reason for not rating or being fully accurate; the interactions they had had with hosts (when, how, and intensity); the kind of reviews that the property had; their evaluation of host behaviour; and their evaluation of their stay. Interviewees were asked to suggest possible actions that the Airbnb platform could carry out in order to avoid a similar case from happening in the future— that is, not reviewing or not being totally accurate when reviewing. Because we reached saturation after the 20 interviews, we decided to not look for more interviewees.

We performed in-depth analysis of the interview content following the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Both researchers performed the open coding process independently, and then identified the definitive categories by consensus. The subsequent axial coding process (i.e., identifying and proposing relationships between the identified categories) was performed jointly by the researchers.

Results

Step 1. Questionnaire

Of the 391 respondents who had booked Airbnb properties and stayed in them, 80.05% (313) had rated their last stay while 19.95% (78) had not. Out of the 313 guests who rated, 63.58% (199) stated that their rating coincided completely with their experience. In these group of 199 guests, there were cases that stated that their global rating had been 2, 3, 4 or 5 stars. A summary of the sample can be found in Table 2.

Table 2 here

The other 114 guests rated their last stay in an Airbnb property, but recognized that their rating did not fully coincide with their experience. The reasons the interviewees provided for this behaviour can be found in Table 3. The most common causes were that the reviewers thought that the negative aspects of their experiences were not really relevant; that they did not want to harm the host; that they did not want a negative review to appear on their profile; that they encountered problems in describing the exact situation or feeling they had had; and that they had received a specific request from the host.

Table 3 here

We were especially interested in establishing whether the intensity of communication with the host (before, during and after the stay) had an impact on the accuracy of the reviews. We defined intensity of communication by the number of channels—including email, phone, instant messaging, and face-to-face—that hosts and guests used to interact with one another. We found that none of the analysed communications had an impact on the coincidence between perception and the uploaded review rate (in all cases, X^2 p>0.05 using Cramer's V test, with Cramer's V<0.18). That is, a user's willingness to

report their true experience is not dependent upon the amount of communication with the host. We also found that there were no significant differences by age, education, professional occupation, number of annual trips, or the number of times the interviewees had previously used Airbnb (in all cases, X^2 p>0.05 using Cramer's V test, with Cramer's V<0.19). Instead, we found significant differences by gender (X^2 p=0.02 with Fisher's exact test), with a higher percentage of men reporting that their rating coincided with their experience in comparison to women (68.75% vs. 56.30%, respectively).

We also analysed the other 78 cases—that is, those respondents who did not rate their last stay. The main reasons that these participants gave for their behaviour were that they did not feel like rating the stay (48, or 61.5%, of the 78 cases); or that they had missed the deadline (15 cases, or 19.2%). Other reasons were mentioned by less than 10 subjects: that the negative experiences were not relevant (8 cases); that they did not want the review to appear in their public profile (5 cases); that they did not want to harm the host (3 cases); that they had trouble expressing how they felt (2 cases); and that they had received a specific request from the host (1 case). The 78 guests who did not rate their stays did not show significant differences by age, gender, education, professional occupation, number of annual trips, or the number of times they had previously used Airbnb (X^2 p>0.05 using Cramer's V test, with Cramer's V<0.19 for all variables except gender; X^2 p>0.05 with Fisher's exact test for the case of gender).

Step 2. In-depth interviews

According to our in-depth interviews, the most common reason for not being fully accurate in the review or for not reviewing was not wanting to harm the host. Guests understand that telling the truth could damage the reputation of the host and they did not want to do so. We must consider that all the interviewees interacted with the host

beyond the communications facilitated by the platform (e.g., email, instant messaging, face-to-face interaction). Therefore, as many participants mentioned, they established a personal relationship with their host, at least to a certain degree, especially if the host was an individual and not a firm (the most common situation). In fact, almost all interviewees were satisfied or very satisfied with how their hosts behaved. Complementing this was the fact that very few guests experienced serious problems. Thus, in cases where small problems occurred, the positive aspects of the stay compensated for the negatives. Only in one case was the behaviour of the host cited as the source of a bad experience. In the rest of the cases, the failures experienced were due to the unit (e.g., damages) or to the environment (e.g., noise). Moreover, guests stated that they checked the reviews of the property before booking. In all cases, these reviews were positive and did not mention the problems that they experienced. The reviews uploaded were thus consistent with previous ratings. Therefore, the host was not the source of a bad experience, nor did the guests want to harm someone who had a favourable reputation and with whom they interacted on several occasions, many times in person.

However, some interviewees made stipulations about this general scenario of not wanting to harm the host. Some specifically mentioned that the host was an elderly person and that the rental was clearly perceived as supplementary income. In these cases, the interviewee's desire not to harm the host was even greater. Additionally, some interviewees who were not totally faithful in their evaluations gave the reason that they thought that the problems they experienced were not the direct responsibility of the host: noises, bad smells, or bad weather, among other things. Finally, all the guests who were also Airbnb hosts mentioned that their evaluations had not been too negative or

that they had not wanted to review because they empathized with the host. That is, they understood the work involved to rent a unit and the complexity that comes with it.

In addition to the core motive of not wanting to harm the host and the particular context that surrounded that motive, other less frequent reasons for not rating or providing inaccurate reviews were provided. These are described below.

Some guests, who were reviewing after making their first reservations on the platform, acknowledged that they did not review a stay due to their lack of experience with the process. Others stated they had not rated negative experiences because they did not clearly understand the consequences that the negative evaluation would have, in the sense of knowing whether it was really going to be useful or whether the platform would take any actions.

In some cases, the specific behaviours of the host led to reviews that were not fully accurate or led guests not to review. There were hosts that explained the reasons for the incidents that took place to the guests and compensated them financially for those incidents. There was also a case in which the host communicated with the guest directly after the stay, saying that he had already rated the guest in the platform before the guest had had the opportunity to make her assessment. In another case, a guest did not express her negative experience for fear of an equal evaluation by the host. Although Airbnb has a mechanism to protect against this type of behaviour (evaluations are not made public until both sides have rated), not all users perceive this clearly or do not trust fully this mechanism, especially in the case of less experienced users.

In the case of those who did not review, other reasons were also mentioned. One user stated that he did not want to review since he did not want a trace of where he had been to appear in his profile (he usually asked the hosts of the units in which he stayed not to evaluate him and specified that he would not evaluate the hosts either). Another

user mentioned that she did not review to avoid possible questions from the host about what she had not liked about the stay, since the host and the guest had been in communication before and during the stay. Lastly, two users mentioned that since the host was not an individual but an agency, they understood that the rental could not be considered as a peer-to-peer exchange, and thus that it did not make sense to leave a review. There were also several interviewees who cited the difficulty of expressing the negative aspects of their stays.

Exceptionally, two of the interviewees found serious negative situations in the houses upon their arrival. In both cases, the interviewees chose not to stay and requested a refund of payment from the platform. Thus, the property did not receive what would have been a negative review.

Finally, as solutions to the problem of not reviewing or not being fully accurate in the reviews, three proposals were made by the interviewees. The first is to offer the possibility of providing an anonymous review and thus guaranteeing anonymity. The second is to separate the evaluation of the host from the evaluation of the unit. With this mechanism, it would in some cases be possible to report failures of the unit without harming the performance rating of the host; in others, it would be possible to report the inappropriate behaviour of the host (e.g., check-in via a professional firm) even when the listing is adequate. The third option, for specific cases of guests who did not evaluate, is that the platform offered incentives for future reservations.

Discussion

The present study aims to understand why ratings on SE platforms, and Airbnb specifically, are so high. To this point, most research has drawn on data downloaded from the platforms themselves. This approach hampers efforts to find answers to the research question. In this sense, previous research has provided some explanations that

do not involve the guest behaviour directly. For example, there is the possibility that a property that receives bad reviews has to start from scratch by taking down the property listing and creating a new profile. To the best of our knowledge, there are no actions taken by the platforms in order to prevent this type of behaviour.

We adopted a different approach in our research by focusing on objectives based on guests' information. Before now, there has been no research that draws on users' opinions. Our focus on data provide by users allowed us to identify several new results. First, our quantitative research revealed that a significant number of users who review recognize that sometimes their reviews are not fully accurate. There are also a significant number of users who do not review after their stays, mainly because they did not feel like doing so or because they thought that a negative review could harm the host.

The main two reasons for not being completely sincere in the reviews were that the negative aspects were not really relevant and that guests did not want to harm the hosts. These results suggest that a motivated reasoning strategy (Kunda, 1990) might explain the behaviour of users who inflated their ratings (i.e., guests recognize that they did not tell the truth and justify it by arguing that the problems they experienced were not serious). In-depth interviews further helped us to clarify this issue and to provide a better understanding of the results.

The content analysis of our interviews revealed that several of the users' motives were intrinsically related. The general picture that emerged from our results was that interviewees mainly did not want to harm the hosts in cases where negative experiences with rentals were not serious, the guest had personally met the host, the host had performed well, and had a good reputation.

Quantitative results and in-depth interviews also revealed other reasons for non-reviews that were less frequent. Nevertheless, it is not hard to imagine that these also occur in the day-to-day Airbnb environment. One reason for non-reviews is related to cases of hosts that proactively try to influence guests' reviews. Both the survey results and the in-depth interviews revealed that hosts sometimes make polite requests for guests to not review without offering any compensation for the non-review. In other cases, hosts make polite requests and offer some kind of associated compensation. In other cases, hosts threaten the guest if he or she posts a negative comment. There was even a case in which a host let the guest know that he had already reviewed the guest positively as a way to encourage the guest to also post a positive review. Therefore, hosts can perform behaviours that directly influence the reviews their guests provide. Some of these behaviours coincide with what previous research has found for the hospitality industry (Gössling, Zeiss et al., 2018; Magno et al., 2017). We believe that, although they are rare, these types of situations should be more thoroughly researched by the platforms. Unfortunately, these undesirable behaviours are to be expected in reputation systems due to the importance they place on user decisions (Horton & Golden, 2015).

Another different reason for a hesitance in reviewing is related to guests' difficulty in expressing what they felt or what happened to them. A tourist experience is a complex process, and trying to explain all of those nuances can be complicated. In order to ease this process, platforms could provide a series of pre-set texts that guests could then use to explain their experiences. However, it is true that it is not in the best interest of platforms to help users express their negative experiences. Nevertheless, we believe that the more realistic the reviews are, the more transparent the market becomes,

and thus the better it becomes for all the operators. The current situation, with the limited variability of reviews, does not seem to be helpful for anyone.

From our point of view, not wanting to harm reputation of the hosts that show a strong client orientation is probably the most relevant and important result of our work, both because of its omnipresence in the in-depth interviews and because we think that it is intrinsic to the sharing accommodation sector. When guests stay in a hotel and have a bad experience, they can review the hotel on a web platform such as TripAdvisor. When they leave their reviews, they probably consider that they are directing their complaint at the general manager or the C-level of the hotel. In other words, they are reviewing people who they probably did not meet or communicate with during their stay. However, in the sharing economy, guests usually have a direct contact with their hosts, thus making it more difficult to negatively review the host (Bridges & Vásquez, 2016). On this point, two comments are worth noting. On one hand, it is clear that Airbnb has tried to address this difficulty of reviewing negatively after meeting the host, since the review process provides a specific field in which guests can make private comments to guests. These comments are not published and are thus an easy and seamless way to provide feedback about requested improvements without making them public and permanent. This model has previously been used on other platforms like oDesk (Horton & Golden, 2015). On the other, it is important to note that in the booking process, guests do not have direct contact with hosts, but instead must communicate through the platform. However, once a booking is finalized, and although it is not encouraged by the platform, direct contact through email and messaging, among other things, is possible and common. It is also usual that during the check-in process, the host provides a contact number to the guest for any incidents that may occur. This means that there is a

direct connection between host and guest, thus making it more difficult to post a negative review due to socially-induced reciprocity (Fradkin et al., 2018).

There is another reason for not wanting to review negatively that is also specific to the sharing accommodation option: some guests do not want a negative review to appear in their public profile. This effect has already been mentioned in the extant literature (Bridges & Vásquez, 2016), and our study confirms its relevance. Three motives were mentioned for this concern that guests have. On one hand, in future booking processes, hosts could see a guest's profile and see that they had posted a negative review. Thus, potential future hosts could decide to not accept the booking request if they thought that the guest could be too demanding (a hard-to-please buyer). On the other hand, it is also possible that if a guest posts a negative review, some people may think badly about him or her believing that the bad experience was the guest's fault for not having chosen properly. Finally, there was one case from the in-depth interviews of a user that explained that he did not review because he did not want a trace of all the places that he had stayed to appear in his profile.

Finally, we would like to highlight that interviewees identified a fear of retaliation in the in-depth interviews. Although Airbnb implements a bilateral reputational system in which comments are not made public until both parties (host and guest) have uploaded their reviews, our research shows that not all users (especially the least experienced ones) are aware of the exact operation of this mechanism.

Conclusions

Previous scholarship has noted that reviews on online platforms are generally positive. However, the case of Airbnb stands out, with over 95% of properties having very positive ratings. The present study draws on quantitative and qualitative data in an attempt to understand this phenomenon from the guest's perspective.

We found that a significant number of users do not rate when their experience is not positive and who confess to not being fully accurate in their reviews. The most prominent reasons for these behaviours include not wanting to harm the host with whom they have had personal contact, not wanting a negative review to appear on their own profile, having difficulty expressing what happened, and believing that the negative aspects of a stay were not really relevant. We also found that the platforms could take actions in order to guarantee that users review and that when they do, their reviews are fully accurate. These actions include providing a greater level of anonymity, providing a series of pre-set texts that guests can use to explain their experiences, separating the review of the space from the review of the host, and offering some type of reward to users who post their reviews.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study is a first attempt to identify the reasons that guests rate their experiences so highly in the sharing accommodation sector. As such, it is not exempt of certain limitations. First, we only asked globally about ratings, and not about differences between the numeric ratings and the accompanying texts. That is, it does not evaluate the impact of users who provide a good global rating, but then express a different opinion in the comments, mentioning specific negative aspects of the stay. Additionally, we cannot be sure that all of our participants told the truth. We were asking users to recognize whether in a previous process they had been fully honest. It is possible that not all users recognized that they did so. Last, and has been already been mentioned, there are two limitations regarding the samples used: in the questionnaire, respondents were self-selected, and thus are maybe non-representative of the overall population; in the in-depth interviews, and even if we reached the saturation point before stopping, the total number of interviewees is relatively small and most of the results are based on

anecdotal evidence.

These limitations provide some possibilities for future research in the area. One is to analyse the correlation between the numeric rating and the accompanying text of a review. Another possible research direction is to analyse in further depth how the demographics of hosts affects the ratings that they receive. This is, how guests bias their reviews depending on certain characteristics of the hosts. Last, we believe it would also be interesting to better understand the relation between specific host behaviours and guest satisfaction and guests' willingness to review.

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Annex I. Questionnaire

Reasons for choosing to use sharing accommodation (each on a Likert scale 1-5)

- It was a cheaper option

- I wanted to meet people during my stay

- The characteristics of the unit (size, aesthetics, etc.)

- I believe sharing accommodation is a more sustainable option that other lodging alternatives

- Equipment of the unit: cookware, toys for kids, washer, dryer, etc.

- Location of the unit

- Other reasons (please specify)

How satisfied were you with your experience? (Likert 1-5)

Did you communicate with your host during, before, and after your stay using the following means (multiple choice – did not use this type of communication/used it before the stay/during/after):

- Messages in the platform or email

- Phone conversation

- Chat, text messages (WhatsApp or similar)

- Face-to-face conversation

Did you post a rating after your stay? (Yes/No)

If you posted a rating, was it fully coincident with your experience? (Yes, totally/Yes, quite a lot/More or less/Not really/Not at all)

If your review was not fully coincident with your experience, which were the reasons? (multiple choice, tick all that apply)

- I did not want to harm the host

- The negative aspects were not really relevant

- I did not want a negative review to appear in my public profile

- I found it difficult to express in writing what I had felt

- I received a specific request from the host without any further compensation

- I received a specific request from the host with some type of compensation

- Other reasons (please specify)

If you did not post a rating, why didn't you do so? (multiple choice, tick all that apply)

- My review was not going to be positive and I did not want to harm the host

- I missed the deadline

- I did not feel like rating my stay

- The negative aspects were not really relevant

- I found it difficult to express in writing what I had felt

- I did not want a negative review to appear in my public profile

- I received a specific request from the host without any further compensation

- I received a specific request from the host with some type of compensation

- Other reasons (please specify)

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the sample in the first step

Rating of last stay	
Yes	80.05%
No	19.95%
Gender	
Male	57.03%
Female	42.97%
Age	
18-24	26.85%
25-34	29.16%
35-44	23.02%
45-54	15.35%
54-65	4.86%
More than 65	0.77%
Education	
No degree completed	1.02%
Primary	5.37%
Secondary	14.83%
University	78.77%

n = 391

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2. Rating behaviours of users in the sample

Rating of last stay	n	Percentage
No	78	19.95%
Yes	313	80.05%
Rating coincided with their experience	199	63.58%
Rating did not coincide with their experience	114	36.42%
Total	391	

Source: Own elaboration

Table 3. Reasons for awarding ratings that did not fully coincide with experience

Reason	% of the those who did not rate what they felt (n=114)
Negative aspects not really relevant	42.11%
Did not want to harm the host	21.05%
Did not want negative review in profile	17.54%
Found it difficult to write what they felt	15.79%
Request from the host	9.65%

Source: Own elaboration